

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 62: Between the Wolf and the Lion, Part Two.

Shadowbolt Tower. Somewhere in here were Lighthooves, his biological weapons, and a couple dozen unicorns I had to get out of harm's way. First, though, I had to find some stairs or an elevator. The tower hummed softly around me as I moved further into the building, Boo following warily behind. I didn't know what defenses it might have inside, but I imagined that I was going to find out relatively quickly. I hurried down the hall I'd found behind the door; if this was going to work, then every second counted.

I reached another sealed door. Well, it'd worked for the last one... I cut a long slice, and a shrill scream split the air as wind blasted at me through the slit I'd carved. Boo covered her ears as I grimaced. Okay, this was unexpected! I made two more cuts, and the triangular slab of door blasted past me, bouncing off the floor as it flew back the way I'd come, spinning through the outer door and into open air. A gale blew through the hole it'd left, and even I had difficulty fighting the force of air. I moved in, braced myself against the hole, and extended a hoof to Boo. The pale mare took it and struggled to climb over me and into the large open space beyond.

I gave her one last push ahead and then pulled myself the rest of the way through. Boo worked her mouth, rubbing her ears, her mane and tail tangled about her head and haunches. We struggled farther away from the hole I'd sliced and the screaming air gusting out through it. "Yeah, I wasn't expecting that either," I said once we were clear, glad synthetic ears could handle the shriek.

On the other side of the door was a catwalk; the interior of the tower was hollow, a massive empty shaft with the catwalk running around the outer wall. Conduits ran along the walls from the distant bottom to the top far above. Dim blue lights provided cold illumination throughout the shaft. A few terminals lay against the wall, but I didn't have time to try and hack my way through them. Made me wish that I'd brought P-21 along. I trotted to the edge of the catwalk and looked down. Below me I could see some kind of colossal weight suspended in the middle of the shaft. The weight blocked my view further down, but from the green glow, I could only imagine it was bad; the shaft must go all the way to the Core. Looking up, I saw more catwalks at regular intervals and another house-sized weight. Occasionally, crisscrossing bars reinforced the shaft.

Then I spotted, curled up against the wall by the terminals, three desiccated pegasus corpses. From their clothes, they appeared to have been civilians. I supposed that meant that nopony had come down this far in a very, very long time.

"So... stairs. Stairs. Where are the..." I glanced at Boo and saw her examining an odd platform against the wall with a set of up and down buttons beside it. "Or, we can take the elevator. That's good too." I trotted over to her and stepped on, kicking the up button with a rear hoof. The platform hissed, whirled, and began to climb. "Good. We'll get up there in no time. Easy peasy."

Wait, I didn't just say that, did I?

"Warning! Unauthorized pony detected. Warning! Unauthorized pony detected," an automated mare's voice called out as crimson lights set in the walls began to flash bright red. Red bars appeared in my vision, and I drew Duty and Sacrifice, glad that Lighthooves had left them with Stratus. Suddenly, a crackling blue beam lanced down from above, the energy burning a hole in my barding and hide and searing the metal reinforcements beneath that. I nearly rolled right off the elevator platform as I got out of the path of the energy and spotted the hemispherical beam turret on the underside of a catwalk. Slipping into S.A.T.S., I put four rounds into it before something within exploded with a cloud of crackling blue

smoke.

One down, a whole lot more to go. The elevator was constantly carrying me closer to the targeting ranges of the turrets above, and I couldn't take my time to pick them off at my leisure. Blue beams burned hotter than red, that was for sure. My spine ached, the burn plucking pain with my every movement, but I couldn't stop. The elevator continued to rise, and on the bottom of every catwalk waited more beam turrets. I moved around as best I could in the limited space, pulling Boo out of the sizzling paths of the beams while blasting turrets as soon as I was able. Far too soon, Duty and Sacrifice's hammers fell on spent casings, and my inventory said I was out of spare rounds. I switched to the markspony carbine, but the lighter bullets weren't nearly as effective at chewing through the turrets' plating.

One magazine emptied, and I slapped another home without taking my eyes off those damned turrets. Every time we passed one catwalk, the ones above began to open fire on us. "It's times like this that I really wish you could use a gun, Boo!" The blank covered her face as she cowered at the edge of the platform.

Crack crack crack click click! went the carbine as I worked through my supply of 5.56mm ammunition. I could see the top of the shaft, but there were still a half dozen turrets between me and it. I drew Vigilance and braced myself. Vigilance was a fine weapon, but not at long range. I hissed as blue lines burned my body, trying to make each shot count before I got too close. One by one, the heavy rounds blew apart the blue beam turrets. Five. Four. Three. I became nervously aware that my supply of ammo was rapidly diminishing. I dropped into S.A.T.S. to pop the third turret. Two...

Boo cried out as one of the beams hit near her, the mere heat of its passage scoring her pale hide and peppering her with flecks of melted lift platform. I immediately blasted the turret. One, but Vigilance was dry now, too. As the last turret swung its searing beam towards us, I focused my will and fired magic bullets. It was a hundred feet away. Seventy-five. Fifty.

Finally, the blue hemisphere popped in a shower of sparks just as the elevator began to slow. I collapsed next to Boo. Psalm's operative barding had gotten a few new holes in it. I examined Boo, checking her burns. "I *really* need a healing spell," I muttered, digging through my inventory for some healing potions. The contents appeared more brown than purple, and I didn't know what they'd do to her. Frowning, I tossed them over the edge. "Hopefully we'll find something, okay Boo?"

She sniffed and wiped her teary eyes with a hoof. I sighed and looked around; we'd reached the top of the shaft, and there was a solid dome above us with a single flight of stairs leading up to it. I drew my sword and advanced up the dimly lit, curving steps. We came to another door and another two desiccated bodies lying at the base of it, their coats and feathers marred by hideous burns. The barding that remained suggested that they were surfacers. Celestia only knew where they'd come from or how they'd gotten this far only to die alone and in pain before a locked door with a terminal beside it. 'System Locked; Contact Sysadmin' glowed coldly beside the portal.

Fortunately, I had a skeleton key. Cutting through the locks, I struggled to heave and shove against idle motors. They gave grudgingly but opened enough that Boo could squeeze through, followed by myself. Soon as I was through, the door, locks or no, slid closed once more. On the far side of the door was a hall filled with musty air and covered with a delicate layer of dust. I walked carefully along; there were no red bars on my E.F.S., but turrets didn't appear until they decided to start shooting.

Someday, I was going to have to find a PipBuck technician and sit on them till they explained slowly enough for me to understand how E.F.S. threat detection worked.

There were a few blue bars in sight, too, so I kept my clanking and clunking as silent as possible. My heavier hooves weren't exactly made for stealth. Next time I saw Rover, I needed to find a way to

make my legs interchangeable. When I had stealth augments, I got into combat. When I had combat legs, I needed stealth. That, or he just needed to come up with strong, silent legs. That wasn't asking too much, was it? Okay, maybe a little...

I really could have used a map or an indication of where the next set of stairs was. These rooms seemed used mostly for storage and were linked with identical, crisscrossing hallways. Filing cabinets filled with old paperwork, shelves with arcane and forgotten equipment, chemistry sets coated in dust... I never really was much of a scavenger. P-21 could have swept through in no time and had everything of value without disturbing the dust. Glory might have been able to actually use those chemistry sets to whip up something for Boo's bad burns. Which Lacunae could have just healed. And Rampage wouldn't have been any help with the salvage or the burn, but she would have said something obnoxious and funny. I sighed and leaned over, nuzzling Boo's cheek. "I'm glad you're here. I really miss my friends. Rampage was right about splitting up. Nothing good comes from it."

Boo blinked, then gave a little baffled smile and nuzzled back. Then she sneezed. That simply stirred up more dust, causing more sneezes from both of us. Oh yeah, master of stealth, that was me.

When we stopped, I saw that the dust covering of some papers tacked to the wall had fallen away enough that I could read some of them. 'Support the Enclave. Support your own kind.' I magically brushed more of the dust off the poster, covering my muzzle with a hoof, and revealed a teal pegasus with blazing yellow mane and eyes. Her gaze and smile were the kind of hard smirk I'd come to loathe: arrogant, intolerant, and cruel. Beneath her was printed 'Support Lightning Dust for Councilor.'

There were other clippings beside it, and I exposed them one after the next. 'Rainbow Dash storms out of emergency meeting after failure to obtain aid for surface.' Another read 'Has Rainbow Dash spit her bit? Experts fear for former Ministry Mare's psychological health.' Another read 'Doctor Mephitis confirms surface unfit for pony survival, advocates quarantine of surface for pegasus health.' That name rang a bell. I brushed off more papers with my magic. 'Pound Cake named Councilor of Thunderhead. Promises to serve the pegasus people and lead proudly.' 'Princess Celestia sightings at S.P.P. hub dismissed as hoax.' and 'Doctor Mephitis appointed director of Shadowbolt Tower, named Pony of the Year.'

That title came with the picture of a yellow pegasus stallion, smiling confidently as he eyed the camera in a decidedly smarmy manner. 'Smart, rich, and single: the most eligible bachelor in the skies.' and 'Doctor Mephitis: returning to the surface risks countless pegasus lives. Rainbow Dash's plans threaten to expose pegasus population to foreign diseases introduced by zebrakind.' Zebras. *That* was why the name was familiar.

"You mother fucker!" I shouted, rearing up and slamming the wall with my hooves, all thoughts of silence forgotten. "You got away with it! You actually fucking got away with it!" My kick had disturbed more dust and exposed other articles. Given my propensity to run into ponies who should have been dead two centuries ago, I *really* hoped I ran into an undead or robotic Mephitis. Anypony who left thousands of zebras to starve in their camps deserved what I'd do to them. I glanced at the rest of the headlines but didn't take the time to read them. Apparently, the doctor was named some kind of expert in diseases, claimed to be the Ministry of Peace's finest virologist, and backed up the Enclave's every word that the surface was rife with zebra and pony plagues. He'd been given awards. He'd been rich! One article named him one of the top five most pivotal figures of the Enclave's founding. He'd provided grotesque pictures of horrific zebra diseases for the public to ingest right as Rainbow Dash attempted to get the pegasi to clear the skies.

"You were nothing more than a two-bit murderer," I snarled at his image.

Boo whined and nudged my shoulder. I blinked at her and relaxed a little. "Right. Right. He's

not worth the time, and I don't have any to waste." I forced myself into the hall again, looking left and right and wondering which way would take me up. Then I glanced at Boo. "Say, Boo, which way do you think we should go?"

She blinked at me, and I waited, then she blinked again, and still I waited. I smiled. She smiled. Then, for a moment, I was sure she was going to understand me and pick a direction... but she only gave another soft little sneeze. I deflated a little. "Never mind, Boo. I guess we'll go..." I trailed off as she started to sniff and then limped away. "That way."

The stairs were located behind an old maneframe casing and a bookcase that'd fallen at an angle against it. Boo disappeared through the gap, and I frowned, carefully pushed the bookcase aside, and followed her up. This floor wasn't quite as dusty as the one below, and the dim blue lights were a little brighter on this level. There was less garbage and more stuff... okay, the stuff was still garbage to *me*, but it was clearly important enough to *somepony* that they came down here to dust. There were mostly file cabinets and powered-down terminals. I found one sign that read 'archives' painted against the wall. Boo made a beeline down the hall and nuzzled at a door.

"Mmm... there has to be one of them somewhere around here," I muttered, following more slowly and checking one crate after another for the last thing I needed for my plan. No luck...

I opened the door slowly to a room that showed signs of habitation. There was more clutter here, books lying around unshelved and papers arranged on tables. There were more pictures of the yellow 'doctor' on the walls, and better-preserved clippings of his life. I avoided reading them, as I was nauseated enough already. I really didn't need to read his claims about surface parasite transmission, which apparently would contaminate the clouds. From my glances, he was wealthy, influential, and useful to an Enclave trying to find every excuse not to return to the surface... and I was getting *really* sick of constantly seeing him in front of me everywhere.

There were also Fancy Buck Cakes on the table, and a few empty wrappers along with some bottles of Sparkle-Cola. Boo, with all the swagger of a Wasteland scavenger, whipped one of the cakes off the table with her tail, caught the package in her teeth, ripped it open with a swing of her head, and set the ovoid snack cake flipping through the air. It fell into her open mouth, where it was masticated with pride. I myself had a bottle of Sparkle-Cola as I surveyed the rest of the room. Maybe it was the tent fort made out of a tarp in the corner, or the foalish drawings on the walls, but this struck me as a kid's den. It'd happened all the time in 99; some fillies would take it upon themselves to claim some corner of the utility or storage level and make a name for themselves. In 99, we'd been the 'Card Club'.

I was just about to head on when I heard a snore from the fort, and not the snore of a colt or filly, either. My magic nudged the flaps of the tarp aside, and I was instantly hit by an uncoltish reek of Wild Pegasus. I saw a pale rump bearing a cutie mark of a camera and attached to a stallion curled up with a bottle of whiskey. I tugged it from his grasp... he could use it as a weapon, after all.

Okay. Maybe I took a long pull off it as well, to steady my nerves.

Unfortunately, my action had awoken the inebriate. He opened two bleary eyes, took one look at me, and shouted, "Don't kill me! I didn't know what the fuck he was going to do! Honest! Hail Neighvarro!" Then he focused somewhat, and I realized that I recognized his wrinkled, slept-in suit and his face, despite the stubble covering his chin. "Oh... hey, Babe."

I knelt before him. "Chicanery? What are you doing here?" His eyes suddenly bulged. "What is it?" I imagined murder implants going off inside him... maybe a bomb. Then he blew, all right. He lurched forward and vomited down my front with impressive force.

Wasn't this such a lovely day?

* * *

"I think he's gone completely nuts," the pale pegasus said hollowly, no longer suave with his brown mane slicked back. He'd had a taste of the real Wasteland, and it wasn't fun anymore. "When he sprang me, he just butchered his way through everypony right up to Stratus. Said that Stratus robbed him of something that he deserved. Then he pinned him to his own desk like a butterfly. Said either Neighvarro would kill you or you'd get killed by Neighvarro. Either way, it worked for him."

"Did he mention Stargazer?" I asked, finishing cleaning off my barding with articles on the medical bastard.

Chicanery nodded, holding a bottle of Sparkle-Cola between his hooves. "After we got back here. Said he'd worked it all out, but with her dead it was ruined. But then he got even crazier. Not in the way I always thought, you know? I thought crazy was some villain going 'bwa ha ha' while blowing up the world. He said he wanted everypony to get exactly what they deserve. Then he kicked my ass out of... urp... out of Fabrication. That's where he was getting the missiles ready before the power links to the Core blew up." He gestured to the room. "End of the world stuff makes me nostalgic. Who knew?" he said mirthlessly.

I looked around the room. "Is this your base?" Maybe there was one of them around... nope...

That brought a sad smile to his face as he gazed around at the scattered paper. "Yeah. Back when we were colts. Us and a few unicorns our age formed the Butt Brand Buckaneers, to help us find our... ah... well, that's what we called our cutie marks. Anyway, seemed as good a place as any to wait and see who kills off whom first."

I closed my eyes and scribbled something on a piece of paper. "Do you have any of these lying around?" He narrowed his eyes, peered at it, and started to speak. "Don't say it!" I blurted, now baffling the white stallion. "Lighthooves might be listening with your perceptithingy."

Chicanery wore a skeptical expression, "That's either paranoid or genius. Either way, no, I don't have one. They'd keep something like that on the fabrication level." Figures. His eyes ran over my metal legs. "You don't have a jamming device in all that?"

I frowned. "My augmentations aren't exactly the same that Lighthooves is using. Mine are cobbled together with a repair talisman, two other sets of cyberpony parts, and a suit of power armor. His are... I don't know what. But they're a damned bit better than mine."

"Sounds like you need an upgrade," he joked. It'd been a joke. I should have taken it like a joke.

Instead, I turned and slammed him into the wall with enough force to wipe that smile off his face. A little harder... "Don't say that," I growled as I glared. "Don't even think it. I don't want an upgrade. If there was a way I could have less metal and more me, I'd take it in a heartbeat... if I had one."

He seemed to get my meaning, and I backed off a little. He rubbed his shoulder with a hoof. "Okay. Sorry. Really. I just... from the way Lighthooves made it sound, cyberponies are all 'more is better'. More strength, more speed, more armor, bigger weapons... isn't that the way of things?"

"It's different," I replied, shaking my head. "You can collect all the guns, armor, and stuff you want. At the end of the day, you can set them aside, if you're lucky enough to be able to relax. I don't ever get to stop being a cyberpony, though. You have no idea what it's like to walk all day and not have a sore hoof. I once ran fifteen miles, and I wasn't even winded. Awesome? Sure, it was in one respect. But I don't feel normal. I have trouble remembering what being tired feels like. What I have is an illusion

of being a pony. Without that, I am so much less.”

Chicanery stared at me with a new understanding. “The lies we tell ourselves to get through the day, I suppose.” He gave a little half smile. “So no way you’d ever take on more metal? Not even to be a big hero?”

I sighed, really wanting to lie. “Only if the lives of thousands hung in the balance. Even then, I’d want to find another way. Any other way,” I said. I had to be honest; I’d take that next step. “I wonder if Lighthooves realizes how much he’s given up, augmenting himself.”

“Doubtful.” He stood, swayed, and looked at the papers. “If he did, he’d rationalize it. He was always a little too smart for us. I wanted to see if I could get a ‘farts lighting’ butt brand. He did research papers on the heroes of the Enclave and how they got their cutie marks.”

He gestured over to the table. “That’s all research he did for a dissertation for his commission.” My gaze was drawn to some of the neatly arranged articles and clippings and picked out some prominent names in the headlines and captions. Lightning Dust. Rainbow Dash. Soarin. Spitfire. Pound Cake. Borealis. Zephyr. Touchdown, Dumbell, and Hoops. Mephitis. The name stuck like a thorn and I levitated one page and scanned the biography. It touted his charitable work with zebra POWs due to his childhood growing up in zebra lands. Well, that explained the name, at least. From the article, he sounded like a saint warning the pegasi that due to radiation and disease, the surface would be uninhabitable for generations. But I knew what he’d done at Yellow River. This article made the camp sound like the Society’s country club.

Well, no time to waste on ponies long dead. “Wow. Sounds like he and Glory would have gotten along great as kids,” I said sarcastically. “Where is he setting up the missiles?” I guessed the answer was ‘up there’ and got that confirmed when he pointed up with a hoof.

“He converted the old Raptor arming and reloading facilities to launch them. It’s up past the living quarters, the barracks, and fabrication,” he said as he ran his hoof through his tangled mane. “I don’t know how he convinced the others to follow him, but they’re all cyborgs like you. The ponies in medical were taken up to the barracks to make the conversion, and they’ve been making them for the last twenty-four hours.”

“Cyberponies might buy them some time, but not forever. Can he launch with the power from the Core cut off?” I asked, chewing my lip.

“No. The launchers he’s made have too much draw for the tower’s auxiliary power supplies,” Chicanery replied, and I let out the breath in relief as he went on, “He could probably fire them one at a time, but to do that they’d have to do everything manually; it’d take forever.” Finally, some good news. Storm Chaser would be glad to hear that. “You see, he wants to fire them all at once,” he rambled, and my good news feeling started going away. “That takes a lot of power to open all the doors and run the pumps and hydraulics and stuff...”

That other horseshoe dropping feeling was getting much too strong for me. “But without the power supply from the Core, there’s no way he can launch them all like that, right? Right?” I demanded, grinning hard to try and force the universe to make it so through the power of desperate thinking.

“No no. No chance at all,” he said and I relaxed. “That’s why he’s connecting them to the stable’s reactor.”

“Stable?” I blinked, felt my eye twitch and my mane crawl. “What stable?”

* * *

"Welcome to Stable 96," he said as he led me through the heavy, rolling door and into the clean, familiar, comfortably claustrophobic halls of a stable. "Current population two hundred and sixteen unicorns, ninety-two earth ponies, and sixty pegasi." All of the *living, still-there* stable dwellers wore achingly familiar stable barding, midnight blue PipBucks on their forehooves, and a glow of cleanliness. If I only had more time to talk and take in the stable. The occupants also seemed to completely ignore me save for curious glances when my attention was elsewhere.

I'd anticipated a few dozen unicorns, perhaps a hundred at the absolute most, living in slave-like conditions under pegasus overseers. I hadn't expected families, elderly, and young all going through their lives. Worse, this was a stable gone right. There were no males being kept as breeding equipment in the back rooms of Medical. No life support systems barely holding together. Posters hung stating, 'Respect diversity, genetic and personal.' and showing a unicorn with a glowing horn, a pegasus with wings outstretched, and an earth pony with a wrench: 'We are strongest when we work together.'

Sadly, it seemed as if the demands of the Enclave had encouraged unicorns over the other pony races, but everywhere I looked I saw signs that this stable had been devoted to unity rather than population control. Most ponies wore sober expressions, talking in worried tones, and everypony except the foals seemed to realize something was very amiss. "I imagine that the Enervation hit you bad," I said in low tones.

"Enerwut?" he asked blearily as he led me through the crowd, getting a few greetings from ponies as he passed.

"The flesh-liquefying psychic scream that went off about half an hour ago?" I asked.

"Um, I was passed out," he pointed out. "But I don't see any liquefaction."

"You're right..." I muttered, frowning. From simple proximity, everypony in here must have heard the scream, and I heard a few talking about how they had been sickened by it... but this was the closest point to the Core without being *in* the Core; shaken nerves or no, none of them seemed dead.

Now was hardly the time, but I couldn't help my interest. There were lots of places around the Core that weren't affected by Enervation, even when they were right next door to it. I'd thought that it'd been due to the placement of the silver pest control rings, but it seemed to be more than that. All the places with vibrancy and life seemed resistant to the life-sapping energy, and they had more than just an absence of silver rings.

These ponies were working together, not just cohabitating a space. Every settlement that cooperated and didn't exclude seemed far more resistant to the effects of Enervation than those focused merely on survival. The Reapers, with their bright field of grass, brought together gangs from all across the Hoof to focus aggression and conflict into relatively harmless competition. The Collegiate worked together to protect and share knowledge. Even the Society had serfs and nobles working together; it wasn't ideal, but it was better than out-and-out slavery. Megamart had the Finders working together in trade. Meatlocker's ghouls banded together to maintain their sanity. Riverside, when I first saw it, had been a dying town, as had Rover's people. Then, when they worked together, life had returned. It'd be easy to simply count that to economics, but it seemed like there was more to it. Even Chapel, which had nothing 'special' about it at all, kept the Enervation back with its inhabitants' hope. The silver rings were a part of it, but it seemed like resistance to Enervation wasn't simple cyberponification or a lucky lack of pest control talismans. It was something more... elusive. Something stronger. It was... It was...

It was something a smarter pony than me could have figured out.

I had a vague impression of a very disappointed little purple unicorn in my brain banging her head repeatedly against my skull, but I put it out of my mind as we moved to the social areas. The café off the

arboretum could have been taken straight out of 99. I wondered if they had similar schools and activities. Did they have a food recycler, or were they dependent on food from outside the stable? How had they avoided the mistakes of 99? Did they follow the same three-shift protocol for their security or go with a day and night two-shift structure or an even crazier four-shift system? Ugh, if only the lives of tens of thousands weren't on the line!

Boo shied away from the others at first, but as we crossed the arboretum, the blank's head snapped around to focus on a plate of freshly-made snack cakes. She trotted up to the table and extended her mouth towards one. The heavyset mare who'd sat down with the plate growled, "Hey you! Stay away from my cakes." Boo blinked, and her eyes widened as the mare began to chow down on the plateful and gradually ate more and more slowly. "Stop that, you freak," she grumbled. Boo didn't move an inch. She just stared, her eyes growing moist as her lip started to quiver. "Don't make me call the soldiers," she warned, then chanced a look around and saw half the room glaring at her. "Um... Please?"

A moment later, with a plate of snack cakes balanced on her rump and one in her mouth, Boo followed after us. She'd somehow been able to weaponize cute.

I walked through the unfamiliar stable, continually taken aback by the bright lights and clean air, till we came to a door that read 'Overpony'. Swallowing, I frowned, knowing that this wouldn't be pretty. In the Overmare's office, a half dozen ponies stood watching some monitors set in the wall. The things on the screens weren't good at all. I saw Thunderhead, the smooth torus now lumpy and distorted from the impacts of the disintegration cannons. Hoarfrost was keeping her ships close to the tower and using her long range guns. Good. So long as she kept doing that... On other screens were images of cyberponies fighting off three times their number of normal Enclave troopers in the halls of the Tower.

The six ponies turned and stared at me, most with bafflement and one with curious indifference, but from their expressions I picked out the Overmare. Her features were less 'what the fuck' and more 'this isn't good'. I approached the tan unicorn mare with the short, no-nonsense brown mane. "Overmare?"

"Yes?" a distracted-looking unicorn mare said from the corner of the room.

"No, this is the Overmare, Blackjack. Overmare Farsight," Chicanery said as he trotted up to the pale butter-yellow unicorn mare with a dark brown mane spilling messily over her shoulders. She'd been the one with an indifferent expression, but, as I looked closer, I saw that her brown eyes were completely clouded over. "Mother, this is Blackjack. She's a cyberpony from the surface."

Her vapid expression turned more serious, adopting the troubled aspect I'd expected. "Ah. I see. She didn't sound familiar." She rose to her hooves, her PipBuck making little clicks as she walked around the gathered ponies and took her seat behind the desk. "And I take it that this is something serious with regards to the goings on in Thunderhead and up above in the Tower?"

"Yes. And your son, Legerdemain," I said with as much gravity as I could put in my voice. I sounded almost like Mom, actually.

She sighed and closed her eyes. "Please excuse us," she said in quiet but firm tones. Without argument, the other ponies left. I felt myself straighten a bit, even if she couldn't see me. When they'd left and the door had closed, she said, "So. Tell me. What do you have to do with my son and my stable?"

"Well, I'm out to stop Lighthooves. He's developed a biological weapon and a delivery system that can disperse it all across Equestria. Now Neighvarro is here to take it from him. I'm here to destroy both the plague and the means to spread it," I said grimly. "If he tries to stop me, or tries to launch the

plague, then I'll have to stop him, too." Probably the fatal sort of stopping.

"Lighthooves?" the mare asked in confusion.

Chicanery spoke up. "She means Legerdemain, Mother. That's his code name. He's... she's telling the truth. He's made a real mess of things."

Her face fell, but from the solemn resignation on it, I suspected that she knew something like this was coming. "I'm sorry to hear that," she replied quietly. She took a moment to be a mom, then returned to being the Overmare as she asked, "And your plans for my stable?"

"I'm... not sure." I sighed. "Honestly, I didn't even know there was a stable here. I'd thought there'd be a few dozen unicorn workers here. Maybe even a hundred. I had no idea that there was a *stable*." I looked at the screens. "I'd planned to evacuate all of you on a Raptor." Now I could hear the cracks appearing in my own plan.

"I see. Well, Apple Bloom did what she did best: build a safe and secure living place for the residents of the tower," the Overmare said evenly. "We are not, however, a *true* stable. A stable is meant to be an independent, self-sustaining community and habitat. We lack that independence. We are beholden to the Enclave, no matter which settlement manages us or what shape our door is."

"So you're prisoners?" I asked with a frown.

"In a very pleasant prison, but a prison none the less," she said with a nod. "We've never been allowed to train with weapons, only to repair them in the fabrication labs. Fighting is strictly forbidden." Which meant that they'd be easy pickings out in the Wasteland. Maybe I could put them with the Society, but I was already putting a burden on Grace with potential Thunderhead refugees. "The actual conditions under which we work vary from generation to generation. The current head of the tower lives in and works out of Neighvarro, so we've been fortunate to enjoy greater liberties than we've had in generations."

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. "Now I don't know what to do."

"Did you think that by taking us away, you'd remove something that Thunderhead and the rest of the Enclave fight over?" she asked.

"No. Actually, I had a different idea for that. A way to stop Lighthooves and save Thunderhead from the Enclave. But I need to get up to where he's holding the missiles," I said, trying not to give specifics as I fidgeted, glad she couldn't see me.

She cocked her head, then smiled. "Oh. I see. Your plan involves doing something to the Tower itself. Something that might damage or even destroy our home."

I took a deep breath and then sagged. "Something like that. Now... I'm not sure. I just didn't expect there to be so many ponies here."

"So now you have a hard choice: do you take the homes of hundreds of ponies to save the lives of thousands, even when we did not do anything to deserve our loss?" Farsight asked with a cock of her head and a sad smile. "I don't envy you the weight of such a decision, Blackjack."

I closed my eyes. I didn't have a second plan. Not one that would take care of the plague and those Raptors. "I'm sorry," was all I could say.

"Mmmm," she said, then ran her hooves along her desk and pulled open a drawer with her magic. "I was not born blind, you know. When I was young, I had some of the sharpest eyes in the tower, and I was always peeking in on the soldiers in the barracks. But some of them decided, perhaps as a lesson,

that they would give me a flashbang grenade. I suppose they thought it would startle me, or that I would get in trouble. They didn't understand that I had no idea what a grenade was or that, after the stem was pulled, you must throw it away. I never saw again after that. It was hard, losing my sight. Unfair. Wrong. Even when the pair were dishonorably discharged, it didn't bring my eyes back." She pressed her lips together a moment. "I could have given up or turned bitter. Instead, I learned to listen and to see things through the perceptions of others. I became so adept at it that I was made Overmare when the last retired."

"I am so sorry," was all I could say, feeling lame and wrong. "I wish there was another way, but I can't think of one. I have to save as many as I possibly can."

"That is some small comfort," she replied grimly as she pressed her lips together, then shook her head. "I do not know where we can go. Thunderhead, I'm told, is under attack. We know nothing of the surface. I fear stable ponies won't last long out in the wilderness. This stable is all we know."

"Yeah. I didn't last long when I'd stepped out of my sta..." I paused as a tiny purple mare pulled out a chalkboard, wrote 96 -> 99, and then smiled hopefully at me as she waved her hoof in vague encouragement. "I came from a stable whose population was... almost wiped out." By me, I omitted. "There's a hoofful of survivors left. It's not nearly as nice as your stable is, but it is a standard Stable-Tec Stable. You'd have to share it with a group calling themselves the Steel Rangers, but I have a feeling that you two would have a lot to offer each other. They need ponies to run the stable and fix their weapons. You need a place to stay and ponies with experience fighting the Wasteland. The survivors there could show you all the ins and outs of the place, and you'd keep it alive."

Her milky eyes widened in surprise, but then her face turned cautious. "And we would be free there? Not workers nor slaves?"

"You'd have to work that out with Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof and the survivors, but I know Stronghoof would want a fair deal," I assured her. "He's that kind of pony."

"I see. It seems I have a choice. Do I trust you, hope that you are correct, and hope my people will be willing and able to evacuate quickly, or try and stop you, throw my lot in with whoever is the victor in the tower, and maintain the status quo, at best?" she said evenly. She closed her filmy eyes and was quiet a moment. I really did not want to kill another stable. I really, really didn't want that. Finally, she said, "It is better to dare and die for something better than it is to live a life prescribed by another. I'll need a few minutes to contact section heads. How much time do we have?"

"An hour. After that... I don't know." I couldn't press the envelope past that. "You contact your heads. I need to check in and make some calls."

She nodded and clicked her way to the door, talking in urgent and low tones. For a second, I worried she might be trying something, but my augmented hearing heard instructions being given for them to start preparing the population for evacuation.

First, via EC-1101 bouncing through the Enclave's communication network like a pinball, I contacted Crumpets. Not that I doubted Paladin Stronghoof, but she seemed a little more grounded than the overenthusiastic stallion. It took me three tries before I made the connection and informed her that she should expect a few hundred new residents for Stable 99. She expressed doubt for a moment, saying that Wastelanders didn't want to live and die in a metal hole in the ground under Steel Ranger supervision. When I filled her in on just who was moving in, she gave a soft 'oh' of surprise.

"I'll pass it along. Thanks, Blackjack. I was starting to doubt if we'd ever have the numbers to run this place properly," she answered before cutting the connection. Destination check. Now for

transportation.

Storm Chaser answered immediately. "So, General, how many passengers can you carry on those Raptors of yours?" I asked.

"A hundred give or take. These are warships, not passenger cargo carriers," she said. "We might be able to go over that, but it would be hazardous."

"Right. Well, I have about four hundred ponies needing evacuation," I replied. "I have a spot on the surface we can take them where they'll be safe."

"Four *hundred*?" the general asked surprise. "I always thought it was a few dozen unicorns. The reports never said they were in the hundreds."

"There's a whole stable here. Can you get them clear in an hour?" I asked.

"Not with the original plan," she replied. "Taking the *Castellanus* down to one small door would be fine for a few dozen ponies. Trying to evacuate hundreds would take too long and be far too obvious. We're going to need another ship, and a landing on the fabrication level to get them all on, all at once."

"Any others joined the cause?"

"The *Sleet* is with us, but most of her fliers are fighting to get to Lighthooves. They're bogged down. We're trained for exterior operations, not room-to-room combat. Lighthooves's cyberponies are pushing them back," she said grimly.

I closed my eyes and asked the question I dreaded. "What about Thunderhead?"

She hesitated several seconds. "It could be much worse. Hoarfrost is keeping close to the tower, so her precision is off, and she's cut power twenty five percent to keep her guns from overheating. Once the tower is secure, though, and she moves closer to the city, it's going to get ugly. She hasn't seemed to notice our movements, but that won't last."

"And her fliers?"

"Dispatched to the city. I have no idea how much resistance they're facing," she answered.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know. "Be ready to extract the tower ponies in an hour. I'll find some way to clear them for you." I was admittedly a little iffy on the how at the moment, but I *would* figure something out.

"Acknowledged."

"Keep to the plan and try to figure some way to get another Raptor," I instructed her. With everything going on, I hoped there still was a plan to keep to. I knew what I had to do, but if I messed up or failed, a lot of ponies were going to die. I'd be the biggest mass murderer in two centuries.

"Hey!" came a distant shout over the speaker, and then Rampage blurted, "Did I hear right? You need another Raptor?"

"Get away from the microphone you maniacal--" Storm Chaser began.

"Hello? One should not interrupt maniacal monsters. It's rude," Rampage said indignantly. "You need a Raptor?"

"Yeah. One would be nice," I said warily. "For an evacuation."

"Can I crash it into something afterwards?"

"Blackjack," the general warned ominously.

"Sure. You get one, and it's all yours once this stable is evacuated," I replied. I swore I could hear Storm Chaser facehoof.

"Sweet! No problem. I'm on it," she said, squealing in delight.

"Blackjack, you heard me say that Raptors are rare, didn't you?" Storm Chaser sighed.

"She needs incentives in her life. Besides, I don't have a clue how she can actually get one, but if she can, then it's one less Raptor to shoot at the *Castellanus*, right?" I replied.

She stammered a moment. "I... but... you... you're insane. All of you surfacers are insane! Balefire bombs! Plagues! Madponies, the lot of you! You can't just... just... crash a Raptor because it's cool," she whined plaintively.

"I guarantee you that Rampage will accomplish two things: she will get her hooves on a Raptor, and she will crash it into something. My suggestion is point her at the *Blizzard* or *Sirocco* and watch the show. In fact, film it so that I can watch too."

Storm Chaser was silent for a second, then muttered, "'Go to the surface,' he said. 'They're savage primitives,' he said. 'What could they *possibly* throw at us?' Harbinger, you idiot." She growled scornfully, then said, "I'll be ready in an hour. Storm Chaser out." Then she cut the connection.

She was a good pony, but she needed to be a little more practical. The last thing I did was send a message to Glory. "In the Tower. Fireworks in an hour. Stay safe. Boo's okay. Hugs for P-21 and Scotch Tape." My voice cracked a moment. "Love you," I said. The knowledge that the bombardment wasn't 'as bad as it could be' didn't help in the slightest with the worry bubbling up inside me. We'd split up to keep each other safe, but safety proved the least sure thing of all right now.

Overmare Farsight was waiting for me to finish, so I cut the connection before I started blubbing, opened that dusty closet in the back of my mind, threw all my anxiety and worry inside, and applied the Stable 99 motto. Not thinking about it, I faced her. "Sorry about that."

"You say that frequently. I'm not very sure it's healthy," she answered, making me flush. "I've contacted the department heads, and I'll announce the evacuation soon as you leave. Ponies will be upset enough as is, and I don't want there to be trouble between you and them. Is there anything else?" She asked it calmly but with that serious authority that reminded me that time was wasting.

I thought but only came up with three things. "Chicanery said that Lighthooves was using the stable's reactor for power? Is there any way to cut it off?"

She frowned. "The emergency reroute goes up the tower's main conduit line. It would take hours to cut through the plating. We could just do an emergency shutdown of the reactor, but that would make meeting your evacuation deadline of an hour impossible and imperil the lives of the stable's inhabitants. I don't know if you noticed, but our tower lacks for windows."

"I saw," I admitted. My eyes switched over to Chicanery, then back to her. "You're Lighthooves's mother. Why do you think he's doing this?"

The question made her slump. "I don't know why you're asking me this now of all times, but I also don't know the answer. If you'd asked me a year ago, I would have told you he was a loyal and true member of the Enclave. That he wanted Thunderhead safe and independent but also recognized the need for Neighvarro. But over the last year, my son's become... different. More driven. More intense

and zealous for Thunderhead's independence and what he called the 'redemption' of the Enclave."

"It was after he went down to the surface for the first time," Chicanery added. "When he came back, he had a look in his eyes. I thought it was just the harsh environment down there, but when we met after he returned, I didn't recognize him. He looked hollow inside. Of course, then he smiled and made his normal smug comments, and I was sure I was mistaken. Now... He's always been a bit off, but this is too much, even for him."

"Whatever happened to my son down there changed him forever, but as to just what it was, you would have to ask him. I don't know," Farsight said solemnly.

It was something to think about. Like with Dawn, I felt there was a similarity between the two of us that I wasn't quite comfortable with. He was every bit as driven as I was, in his own way, but where the heck was he driving this train wreck to? "Well, you have your people to get ready, and I need to clear a path between here and that landing dock."

"You'll have to go through the barracks," she said solemnly. "And my son has quite a few followers holed up in there."

Hmm. I drew Duty and Sacrifice. "I don't suppose you have any bullets, do you?"

"Bullets?" she asked with a baffled look.

Too much to hope for. Well, I could always just hit them with my sword. A lot. "How about..." I started, but, really, if they weren't allowed weapons, they probably wouldn't have them either. They'd be above with the hardware. "I don't suppose you have any spark grenades, then?" I asked with a lame smile.

The blind mare smiled.

* * *

"I'm telling you, those hornheads are doing something down there!" a green stallion with white cyberaugmentation muttered. "There's some kind of activity going on, and we should go check it out." Without their augments matching their hide and with no hint of a seam or impression that the armor could come off, the transition from one to the other was a bit disturbing. Three of them were clustered at a junction, giving watchful looks down the side halls.

"Orders are orders. Next time those Neighvarro jackasses try and move up, we hit them from below. When they come at us, Fabrication will hit them from above," a blue mare said sharply, then moved as if to touch an earbloom, but halted. She glanced over at a yellow stallion who pawed at his crotch. "What is wrong with you?"

"I'm not sure if I still have a penis," he muttered.

"It's under the armor plates," she replied, rolling her eyes.

He poked down there some more. "I know that's what he said, but how do I know it's still there? I can't feel it. I can't feel anything!"

The mare balked a moment. "Just... focus on the job at hand. We've got to keep those Neighvarro busy till the weapon systems are back on line," she said in a huff.

"I'm telling you, it's too quiet back there! They're up to something!" the green stallion snapped. "It's too quiet! Everything's too quiet." Then he suddenly jumped. "Halt! Show yourself or I'll fucking dust you!" he screamed as he whirled and his integrated beam guns started strafing wildly down the

hall for several seconds. He halted firing, then snapped, "I told you to show yourself!"

A feather poked out into the hall, waving back and forth a second before Chicanery moved his pale head out. "Whoa. Peace, Babe. I'm unarmed."

"I should dust you to be sure," the green stallion said, his eyelid twitching.

"I'm telling you, it's gone!" the yellow stallion wailed. "That box frigging gelded me!"

The mare snapped, "Will both of you shut up? You, stop looking for your balls and keep an eye for an enemy. And you, can't you see he's yellow on the E.F.S.? Go join Tempest." She waited till the two turned away, then waved Chicanery forward. "You. What do you want?"

"Fame and fortune, Babe," Chicanery replied as he trotted forward, wearing a ridiculous helmet with a camera in the middle and a microphone on a little wand jutting out to the side. "I'm a documentarian in Thunderhead. A bit of a film buff. I wondered if I could have a few words. Some embedded journalism, you might say."

"Now is a really bad time," she said as she glanced at the two stallions. "In case you missed it, we're under attack."

"Do you have your penis?" the yellow stallion asked the green one. "Are you *sure* you still have it?"

"And some of us aren't handling it all that well," she finished loudly. Chicanery walked closer, the embodiment of pony pleasantries.

"Yeah. I could tell. The last few ponies I've seen like you... well... I wanted to find out what it's like from your point of view," he said as he trotted right up to her, all smiles and confidence.

"Me? I feel..." she blinked. "I shouldn't be talking about this. I should be focusing on the fighting. I..." She rubbed her face. "I think I made a big mistake. I think... I don't think I should have been made into this... this thing. I mean, I can smash power armor and kill with a thought... but I feel dead inside. It feels wrong."

"Yeah. I can kill you dead with a thought!" the belligerent stallion sneered. "I can kill all of you! Fuck you if you think I can't!"

That got a lot of flat looks before Chicanery said dryly, "Yeah. Sure you can. I noticed a lot of you have this little problem," he said, making all three frown as he nodded his head behind him. "I mean, all of you seem to be a lot more stressed than usual."

"Wait," the yellow stallion suddenly frowned at Chicanery. "How'd you get this far up? Somepony down below should have stopped you before you got here."

"That is very true. And they did," he said with a smile as he gave his tail a flick. Two bits of metal tied to the end glittered. Then the hallway filled with crackling energy that made Chicanery's mane stand on end as two blue spheres of electricity expanded around him. The three cyberponies spasmed, then collapsed in heaps as Chicanery looked down, spreading his wings and letting the expended spark grenades thunk to the deck. "And that's what happened to them."

"It's somewhat depressing that that's the tenth time that's worked," I said as I approached from down the hall where Boo and I'd been watching. "I never get this far without shooting somepony or somepony shooting me."

"I told you, Babe. I have no interest in harming them, these 'overcharged spark capacitors in

apple grenade housings' aren't gonna harm 'em, and we're not gonna harm 'em now that they're out. Why should they see me as a threat?" I snorted, levitated out some more cable I'd collected from below, and trussed them up like all the others we'd encountered. Just like the last nine, these three didn't have a single weapon on them that didn't go 'zap zap'.

"Still, I would have expected one of them to be a little more difficult," I said with a scowl. "Getting past them just because you're a smooth talker seems like... cheating."

"You're just sore because the first time you tried to magic a grenade under them, they gusted it right back in your face," he replied with a smirk.

"Maybe," I admitted, stepping past them. Only a quick teleport spared me from being knocked out myself. The barracks looked like they were taken right out of Stable-Tec residential housing, only with a security checkpoint at both ends. Chicanery's grin and silver tongue had dispatched more cyberponies than a whole flight of power-armored pegasi. I glanced at the knocked-out yellow stallion. "I'm guessing Lighthooves didn't read them the fine print on becoming augmented."

"No. He just said it was a vital edge over Neighvarro," Chicanery responded, then gestured to the unconscious trio. "Is this a normal cyberpony thing? Not being knocked out. I mean... more than half the cyberponies we've come across have been a few clouds short of a rainstorm."

"I think it might be," I replied with a small frown. "I've only been like this for a month, but another one I knew, Deus, wasn't much better. Maybe it'd be different if it was just a hoof or even just a leg, but transforming a pony's whole body all at once into a cyberpony seems to have some nasty side effects." Like me trying to kill myself running all over the Hoof alone, or going into a balefire-burning prison. "Focus them on a fight and they can take it apart. Without that distraction..." Why did I get the feeling that, in a few weeks, Lighthooves's cyberponies were going to be a big problem?

Whatever would a problem-free life be like? Was there really a time when my biggest problems were being stuck on the C shift and not getting laid?

"You seem pretty well-adjusted," he commented.

"I'm a masochist, and I had help. A lot of it. From my friends, strangers, and a computer designed to help crazy ponies," I replied irritably, scanning for red bars; there were far too many for it to be of much help to me. "The raw physical power it gives me is great, and I'd be dead without it, but it's not life. I don't have a heartbeat, Chicanery. Sometimes, I imagine that this is what it feels like to be a ghoul. If I could have my old body back, I'd take it in an instant, no matter how much weaker it was."

"I wonder if..." he began, but then he trailed off. His eyes met mine and he averted his first.

"You wonder if your brother's cybernetics made him do this," I finished for him. He gave the smallest of nods, and I sighed. "It'd be a nice explanation, but he started this before I even left Stable 99. Something else prompted all this, and it doesn't smell like your garden variety of crazy." Understanding why wasn't nearly as important as stopping him, but understanding why was what made it matter. I blinked and lowered my voice. "More red bars."

"Showtime," he said as he spread his wings wide, allowed me to tie two more grenade pins to the end of his tail, then hid the blue-banded grenades under his wings. "Make sure my hat is straight, Babe," he purred with a grin, making me scowl as I gave it a little nudge.

"Stop that," I replied sourly, which only made him smile even more.

"Stop what?" he replied with a naughty smirk I'd worn far too many times myself. "Am I making

you nervous?"

"No, you're making me horny, and I have a stable to evacuate, a city to save, a marefriend to reunite with, and your brother to stop before tens of thousands die. I do not have time for a quickie," I said before pointing down the hall. "Now go do your thing, oh silver-tongued one."

"Right. Right. That 'real life' thing," he said with a sigh. "This is why I prefer pictures." And he turned and started back down the hall while I waited with Boo.

"That stallion is either going to rut me or die trying," I said, frowning and looking myself over. Something definitely felt off, but then, feeling off was normal for me right now. The blank tilted her head as I pursed my lips. "Do I smell funny to you, Boo?" I couldn't really tell. My own sense of smell wasn't exactly as sharp as it used to be. Boo blinked, then sneezed cutely, and I sighed and ruffled her mane. "That's what I thought, Boo. That's what I thought."

A second later there came a crackle, and then silence, and then the air down the hall was filled with the zing of rapid-fire beams. I jumped to my hooves and started to peek around the corner when Chicanery raced past me. His tail smoked and his helmet blazed as he raced by, "Not chatty! Not chatty at all!" Boo, infinitely and sublimely practical, took off with him.

I peeked and spotted at least eight very pissed off cyberponies charging down the hall after him, and I reacted by following suit. Only, instead of simply fleeing, I levitated up the box of grenades, snagged two, and flicked off a half dozen stems all at once; *then* I raced after my friends. As the cyberponies came around the corner, some leaped, turned, and launched sideways off the wall after me; others stopped and poured on the beams and disintegration bolts. Only one of them happened to notice the little box I'd left behind.

Spark grenades were only supposed to be dangerous to cyborgs and robots, but a dozen of them going off at once sounded less like an electrical spark and more like lightning striking everywhere at once. My own eyes, ears, and legs failed, sending me skidding across the floor, but I stayed conscious. While my systems rebooted, I felt somepony shaking me. "I'm fine. My systems crashed." At least, that's what I hoped I said. I could feel my mouth moving at least.

When things were back up and running, I looked back at the heap of twitching, groaning cyberponies. None of them were dead, but I had the feeling that all of them were regretting hooking computers to their brains. I stepped over the scorched forms, selected the closest room, and, without hesitation, levitated and bucked them one by one till the room was packed full. Once the doors closed, I Wonderglued the last two grenades to the floor and wired them to give the occupants an encore when they stepped out or if somepony stepped in to help.

Chicanery mourned his scorched camera hat for a moment before tossing it aside. "Well, so much for that. I guess I can pretend to be searching for the bathroom while you club them over the head or something."

Well, it was a plan. "What did you say to them?" I asked.

"I think I ran into where they were augmenting them," he replied, then trotted back down the hall. "This way!"

He led me to a much smaller cafeteria where six bemused unicorns stood around a machine that looked like Triage's medical booth on Buck, Rage, and maybe a little Hydra. The normally pony-sized casing appeared almost Princess Celestia-sized. A pair of large rings in the middle sprouted four articulated mechanical claws. Hanging from rails overhead was a panoply of spare cyberpony parts. Legs. Wings. Eyes. Hearts. Rolls of synthetic hide. *It's a damned assembly line*, I thought grimly.

Most disturbing of all were the bloody bins in the back corner. I didn't look closely, but the smell... the very idea... sickened me. Augmenting a crippled pony was one thing, but mutilating a perfectly healthy pony under the belief that 'stronger and faster' was 'better' disturbed and angered me on a fundamental level. There was doing better, trying harder, and not giving up, and then there was hacking off a perfectly good limb to make a pony a more efficient killing machine.

I picked through rows of talismans. Healing talismans. Levitation talismans. Beam talismans... ugh... where were the--

"What's going on out there?" one of the unicorns controlling the machine asked in a trembling voice. A pair of monitors glowed in the corner; one showed Thunderhead filled with swooping and shooting ponies, holes ripped in the wall of the city and smoke casting a haze. The other showed Raptors fighting with Raptors as pegasi swirled and looped around the tower. I guessed that the augmented weren't the only ponies needing therapy after this. "We heard shooting and explosions and... who are you?"

"Security. We're getting ready to evacuate the stable. You're not safe here anymore," I said, and then I heard hoofsteps clomping behind me and turned; at the sight of three red-barred power-armored ponies, I raised my sword and prepared to teleport. "*Blizzard* or *Sleet*?" I shouted.

The power-armored ponies took one look at me, and the officer in front snapped immediately, "Power down your weapons! It's Blackjack! Power down! Now!" I relaxed as I saw bars turn blue. The officer reviewed her soldiers, then turned and faced me, pulling off her helmet. Twister's lavender features came into view, and she gave a crooked smile. "I'd wondered why their reinforcements suddenly dried up." Really, they needed name tags or something.

"Credit goes to Chicanery here and the stable's supply of spark grenades," I said with a wave of my hoof to the stallion.

"Actually, they were 'overcharged spark capacitors' in conspicuously apple-shaped casings," Chicanery said with an easy smile.

"Is this area secure?" Twister asked.

"I might have missed a few, but every pegasus we neutralized should be tied up with cable behind us."

"Sweet. That'll make shooting them in the head easy," one of the pegasi laughed.

Before I could take his head off, Twister snapped, "Ground that talk, soldier. Just because Hoarfrost and Afterburner have lost their minds doesn't mean we stopped being ponies. Disarm and evacuate them as POWs. Understood, soldier?" Instantly, the ranks stiffened and saluted. "Good. Go round them up and get them to the loading dock in groups of no more than six. Last thing we want is a daring rescue."

Well, that was one way to keep me from thumping a pony. I warned them about the spark grenade traps we'd left behind, then told Twister, "Overmare Farsight is getting the stable ready for evacuation. Are the Raptors ready for extraction?"

Twister answered, "They can be here in five minutes, but the second we start to move, Hoarfrost is going to be all over us. Most of the fleet is either loyal or neutral. The former she's keeping close to the Tower. The latter is spread out to stop any more missiles being fired, but they're spread way too thinly. Lighthooves has at least ten times more fighters between here and Fabrication than he kept in the barracks, and he's using them for something."

"He's using the stable's reactor to power the launchers," I said. "As soon as the stable is empty, we can shut it down. That'll put everything on emergency power. Problem is, I really don't think we have enough time. Lighthooves is desperate. If Neighvarro drags him down, he wants to go down bloody and to take as many of you with him as he can." I glanced at Chicanery as his gaze dropped.

"It'll take days to fight up the central shaft to the fabrication level," Twister replied, then looked at the machine. "Maybe if some of us hop in there..."

"No," I replied sharply. "You don't want to do that."

"If it'll even the odds..." Twister began.

I nearly jumped to my hooves. "Didn't you hear me? You don't want to become what that machine will make you! Sure, you'll be faster. Sure, you'll be tougher and stronger, too. You'll also be that much less a pony. Ponies aren't machines! You aren't... things! Things to be butchered and replaced with metal. That device will take your heart and put a pump in its place!" That wasn't adding the fact that this was something made by Lighthooves. Who knew what kinds of nasty things might be lurking in his designs?

"But the things they've let you do..." she said, as if amazed that I objected.

"You don't get it, Twister. I'm the freak. I'm the odd cyberpony out." I pointed to the side with a hoof. "Those ponies are the norm. I've met the original. Deus. He went through every moment of his life in agony and turned into a rapist just to feel normal. Another cyberpony is now a brain in a jar. A third is a pegasus who wants to kill everypony under the fucked-up premise of saving them. The fourth is a madpony with a biological weapon. The thing that let me do what I've done wasn't some talisman, hunk of metal, or armored legs. It was my friends and my refusal to quit, no matter what, that kept me going."

"Blackjack, maybe some of us are willing to pay that price. If it means saving my home, I'd happily give up half my body," Twister replied, her face sober and serious. "I'd give my whole body."

"I know you would, Twister." I put my hooves on her shoulders, looked her dead in the eyes, and said, with as much sincerity and emphasis as I could, "*I know*. And you might be able to at that. But what about afterwards? Is it worth your sanity? Would your loved ones really want you to become a half-mechanical monster just to stop him?" I dropped my gaze first. "I know you want to do everything to save your home. There's nothing worse than seeing your home burn and being powerless to stop it. But this device was made during the war by ponies trying to do everything to save *their* home. In the end, they created monsters, and Equestria blew up anyway." I pulled away from her, not daring to look her in the eye again, knowing she'd see my guilt. "I can't make that call for you, though. All I ask is... if you do, please wait for me to leave the room."

Twister didn't reply for a second. Then she asked tersely, "Do you have an alternative?"

First things first. "Do you have one of these?" I asked, showing her the note and being careful not to see the words myself. When she opened her mouth to answer, I quickly interjected, "Don't say what it is. Just yes or no."

She balked a moment, looking at me oddly, then shook her head. "There's a half dozen of them on a Raptor, but I'm pretty sure they're all in use. Those are pretty rigidly controlled, and scarce to boot."

I deflated. "Yeah. Delicate, too. I smashed all the ones I might have salvaged below," I said with a sigh, putting the note away. No doubt Scotch Tape could have gotten one for me, even if she'd needed Glory's help. I thought a bit. Storm Front had said that there were two unofficial ways of getting in the tower. I'd used one... "Can you fly me up to the roof?"

She considered me for a long, sober minute. "Not in anything like a wagon, or carrying you. Lighthooves's fliers are all over. We can barely handle them in the open air with superior numbers, and it's dicey. We might be able to fight our way to the roof, but carrying the two of you would make us a huge fat target."

I hissed softly through my teeth. If only I could teleport more than a dozen feet! There had to be a way, though. I stepped away and let my eyes pass over the racks of synthetic eyeballs, legs, lungs, hearts, wings, beam guns, hide...

Wings. My eyes stared at the dozens of metal-feathered wings dangling from their rack, each with a red talisman in the center joint, and I felt my blood run cold.

No. I'd find another way. I wasn't about to lose my other half. "Let me get a better look at the shaft between here and fabrication. Maybe I can fight through," I said, trying to dredge up whatever optimism I had left. As we walked out, the pod's doors lay wide open as if patiently waiting.

* * *

The vertical shaft rose up a thousand feet above the top of the barracks, ringed every hundred by a catwalk bristling with not just turrets but also cyberpony defenders. The base of the shaft was a nightmare landscape of twisted metal, heaps of glowing dust, and piles of luminescent slime. The air was filled with so many bolts and beams that I'd have been blinded if I had normal eyes. Boo cringed back, hiding behind me as the air crackled and snapped. Plates of armor fallen from above or brought in from outside provided some cover, but this was a killing field nonetheless. Beam guns scorched the air, bolts fell in a rain of death, and one after the next, Enclave fell to their own.

As I stared at the chaos, I could see the major weakness in the attackers. This was a fight that called for Steel Ranger armor emplaced and dug in. A squad of missile launchers and grenade machine guns would have accomplished what a hundred magical-energy-weapon-armed ponies could not. Even Persuasion and a crate of grenades would be more useful. Instead, assaulting from below, all the attackers' advantages were against them. Flight was suicide. What few magic and spark grenades they wielded had to be thrown, exposing the attacker to deadly fire. If any cyberponies were wounded or damaged, they flew higher up till they regenerated.

Along one wall lay a conduit twice as large as my body and running straight up the tower. Its surface was scorched and blackened, but otherwise it was untouched. We didn't even have the firepower to cut the electricity to the upper tower. My sword could probably cut through the plating, but in my head danced images of me exploding like the Core's substations.

I watched in horror as ponies fell. Orders were shouted into the hurricane of chaos around us. Cries of pain and for help were lost on the winds of war. I stood there at a loss. In a battle of hundreds, what difference could one pony make?

Out of any lines of fire in the stairwell, I sank down to my haunches and covered my face in my hooves, listening to the screaming. Boo curled up tight against me, and I put a hoof around her shoulders simply for somepony to hold on to. Finally, unable to bear the screams in the shaft any longer, I ran away into S.A.T.S. and sat there.

"Not pretty, is it?" rasped a voice. In my vision, the Dealer appeared amid the frozen beams and bolts. He pushed back his battered cowpony hat and approached, walking through the glowing energy like a ghost. "My first fight, I was just like you are now. Just wanting to curl up and hide. 'Course, that doesn't help much, does it?"

Desperately hoping that the magic of my PipBuck would carry my thoughts to him in S.A.T.S., I

thought the words, "I don't know what to do."

His tired eyes narrowed a bit. "Bullshit. You know exactly what you need to do. Precisely what you have to do." He raised his foreleg, two cards wedged between hoof and pad by the corner. "You have to make a choice."

"What are my choices?" I whispered mentally.

"Option one... you lose. You get the hell out of here. Get your friends, leave the skies, and let the bodies fall where they may. Rest. Heal. Focus on another day," he said before biting the card and turning it. I saw me, surrounded by the others, all holding on to each other as the skies burned above us and flaming pegasi tumbled down.

I didn't answer. I didn't want to hear option two, and he knew it. "Option two..." and all he did was turn the card. On the far side was exactly what I knew would be. I wanted to look away, but I was frozen, staring at the thing I was terrified of.

"I don't want to," I whispered, a foal's protest. His eyes narrowed scornfully.

"Pick, or let somepony else pick for you. Lighthooves, Hoarfrost, or Dawn, probably. Only I doubt you'll like their choice," he replied tossing the cards in my face. "Either way, stop sitting here whimpering. You don't have time to waste. Forty-five minutes, maybe less."

"I don't know if it will work. I don't even know if it's possible!" I protested, grasping at anything that'd make my choice easier.

"Steelpony is in your PipBuck, as am I. I can interface with it and help smooth things along," he replied quietly. "I've been there when you've been worked on in the past. I know which files to use."

I left S.A.T.S. and stared out into the hazy chamber. I'd already given a few pounds of flesh. What were a few pounds more?

Only all that I had left.

"Ante up," I whispered hollowly, not sure how many chips I had left to bet.

* * *

"Talk to me," I said tensely, eyes clenched shut as I stood trapped inside a humming, whirring nightmare. Apparently the machine wasn't used to having a cyberpony already inside, and the technicians were doing something to compensate. "That's your talent. Talk! Tell me something. Anything." The restraints around my neck, feet, torso, and tail didn't help matters.

They'd had to pick the original Project Steelpony from my PipBuck in order to access 'Shadowbolt Schematics'. The mechanical monster banged and buzzed for several minutes as it retooled itself for the changes. All I could hope was that the Dealer was able to guide the process so that I didn't end up some kind of double-augmented freak. Apparently, there was quite a bit more stuff in the original file than the mass-produced units, not to mention that I had parts in me that weren't in any file.

"Are you sure you don't want us to put you under?" the technicians asked for the third time. "The process is automated and only takes a few minutes, usually, but in your case it might be quite a bit longer. There's an anesthetic field on, but all the others were fully unconscious for this."

I *really* wanted it, or maybe a nice memory orb to hide in till it was all over. The problem was that I was on limited time, and I had to get going and soon as I was finished. "I'm fine. Just get it done." I took a deep breath. "Talk to me, Chicanery. Tell me something. Anything." I felt the vaguest tugging on

my hide between my shoulders and clenched my eyes shut. "Tell me about the founding of the Enclave."

"Well, Babe, it's not a pretty story. Bombs fell, everypony died. Even Cloudsdale. Heck, Cloudsdale got hit *first*. Don't think that didn't hurt," he said grimly, then sighed. "Fact is, surface forces were annihilated, but since our cities are mobile, most escaped the initial carnage. We were still in big trouble, though, mostly due to a lack of food. There wasn't much in the way of aeroculture back then. Most of the food was emergency military rations while everypony waited for the other horseshoe to drop and finish us off. But it never came. In those years, we had Rainbow Dash constantly trying to get help down below. She and Scootaloo were the loudest voices for that. There were lots of others, though, who wanted to take care of our own first." He paused. "You okay?"

I could feel things dripping along my sides; it didn't hurt... but that didn't make it anywhere close to okay. "Don't ask that. Keep going! Why didn't folks listen to Rainbow Dash?" Only a few minutes. Only a few... I could handle a few minutes. I could. I could!

So why did it feel like I was nailed to a floor right now?

"Well, part of it was that she was a Ministry Mare, not a general. She was always seen as Princess Luna's mascot for the pegasi. Hell of a flyer and the only Ministry Mare with even a sliver of military background, but she wasn't a soldier in many pegasi's eyes. Just a glory hound and a dirt-kisser. So when Cloudsdale was wiped out, the same thing happened that happened now when Maripony blew up. Command structures were shattered. There was doubt and confusion. And along comes Rainbow Dash telling everypony we had to risk radiation and worse to help the surface. I think the military fliers resented it. They rallied together in opposition to her simply because she was a reminder of everything that had gone wrong--" He stopped as my body let out a wet and meaty crunch.

"Keep talking!" I nearly screamed. If they put me out, then there was no telling if I'd wake before the evacuation took place. He didn't, and I could feel things being done to my shoulders that felt as though pieces were being drilled in place. "Please!"

"Stress hormones are through the roof," a technician said.

Chicanery's voice cracked a moment as he went on. "The public was more on her side though, so the military ran nonstop propaganda to undermine her. They claimed that the surface was contaminated with diseases and radiation. Sent down probes to show mutated life and fields of dead bodies. Anything and everything they could to discredit her. Then the eclipse happened. Folks thought it was the end of the world. Sun and moon coming together like they were going to hit. Kinda quaint now," he said mirthlessly as the machine hummed. "With the social disruption following that... well... Finally it came down to a vote of all the settlements whether to cut off the surface permanently or open the skies up and help the surface. All kinds of experts gave their testimony about pros and cons... mostly cons. Most damning was Doctor Mephitis. He showed footage of diseased zebras eating each other. Sickened the whole room. Rainbow Dash told them all to go buck themselves, though, and took off on her own. The Enclave got its start there, based on the military."

At least it was working; listening to him was keeping my mind where it should be: not panicking. "Son of a mule," I shouted. "Sick bastard probably accessed the cameras in his own prison camp!"

"Hey. That's my ancestor you're talking about there," Chicanery said in mock seriousness, "And by all accounts, he was a pretty serious doctor. I don't know what you mean by prison camp. Yellow River was a hospital."

"Wait. He was your--" I started to say when I opened my eyes... oh, that was wrong. In front of me, I saw two bloody metal hands reaching for my face, the ends tipped in hooked blades, tiny pincers, and a panoply of needles. The restraints about my neck stopped me cold as I clenched my eyes shut and

did all I could not to teleport away. I really did NOT want to leave this midway. But then I felt the tugging around my ears and cheeks, and it was all I could do to do nothing as I felt the rubbing that made me want to scratch and scream all at once. When those hands pulled, nothing could stop me from seeing the bloody hide dangling from the steel fingers, because my eyelids were attached to it.

"How is she still conscious? She should be having a heart attack right now," I heard one technician say to another. I didn't want to answer; I could feel my own blood dripping over my face. Then a clean hand returned with a plate of metal and pressed it to my face. "Alicorn modification. Seriously? Somepony decided to make augmentation designs for Celestia and Luna?"

Not them, but for whatever alicorns were created by Twilight's potion, I suspected. After all, what was better than a flying magical pony but a flying magical bulletproof pony with beam guns? Or who knew, maybe there was a plot for cyberpony Princesses! At this point, I put nothing past Goldenblood. The metal plate was being fixed to my face, covering my muzzle and head before being screwed in place. I couldn't blink. I had a disturbing realization that I wouldn't ever blink again. Waves of magic rolled over me as the machine whirled and banged, augmenting me for the last time. Any more, and I'd be Dawn.

"Whoa! Foreign biological material detected!" one of the technicians shouted.

"Don't worry. The pod will flush it," replied the other.

"It's in her uterus," the first snapped. "Dear skies above, I think she's pregnant!"

What? I ignored the cutting, the whirring, the dripping, and the part of my brain that imagined what I'd look like when this was over and focused on that word. Pregnant. "That's impossible! I have a contraceptive implant!" I shouted.

"Check again!" a technician snapped.

"Not from what my systems are showing. Looks like it implanted in the uterine wall recently. Hormone levels confirm," the mare technician said. "I might be able to override. Do you want to keep it?"

Oh Celestia, she was asking me this now? Now?! I had parts of my body being rearranged, a weapon to destroy, an enemy to stop, a city to save, and... and... crazy would be easier than reality! Did I want to keep it? Was she serious?

Did I? With everything going on, it really boiled down to a yes or no question. I had every reason to say no. Off the top of my head, I could think of six or seven good arguments as to why I shouldn't have a foal, both now and ever. They were reasonable, smart reasons, but then, I never was a smart pony.

"Yes," I muttered, then shouted, "Yes! Please, yes!"

"Attempting to override purge," the mare said as I started to focus my magic to teleport out. It didn't matter if I wasn't completely put together. My priorities had been smashed in the knee with this new knowledge. If I had to, I'd tell Twister what to do, crawl to Thunderhead, and travel in any direction away from danger I could. Maybe see what LittlePip was up to. "There! It's moving on to finishing up."

"Thank you," I said, wishing I could cry... but I didn't have tears any more.

"What's this? 'Echo Cleanup Protocol'?" another technician asked as there was more hissing and whirring and doing something to my body. "Seriously? The parts are installed. What more is there to do?"

"Don't ask me. It'd take me a year to get through all these designs and files. I think something in her PipBuck is guiding these, because I sure ain't. Lighthooves used the pegasus production model. I have no clue what this 'Eclipse' model is supposed to be." The pod around me whirled, then fell silent. A

hiss of water blew over me, followed by a blast of warm air. Then the front of the pod opened with a hot, wet roll of steam, and I slowly stepped out.

The half dozen Enclave soldiers, unicorn technicians, Twister, Chicanery, and Boo all gaped at me as I walked forward. My E.F.S. was installing drivers in the periphery of my vision. The only parts of me that could feel open air were my mouth and under my tail. Every inch of me that remained was covered. I wanted to go to the technicians and find out for sure if they were certain I was pregnant, but I also needed to get to the roof, but I also... I also needed...

I felt everything slipping away from me. This was wrong. All wrong! I'd given up enough of myself, hadn't I? Was there anything left of me? Anything at all? "Mirror..." I croaked. It was the least of the things I wanted, but the easiest to supply. Baby steps.

Chicanery, naturally, spoke first as he trotted over to a mirror set up against the wall. Somepony had cracked it, clearly not happy with the results. "Are you sure?" Chicanery asked as he stood in front of it. "Don't you want to know more about the ba--"

"Just give me the fucking mirror!" I shouted, reaching out with a hoof and throwing him aside. Then I saw the reflection and froze.

The mare in the mirror wasn't me. She was coated head to hoof in black armor. The only sign that a flesh and blood pony lay within was a small opening around her mouth and two more for her red and black mane and tail. Angular red plates glowed softly where eyes should be. Black plates covered every other inch of her body, including her cutie mark. Even her horn had been plated in black steel. Between the plates, black cables ran like sinews under the plating. At her sides, a pair of black beam rifles pointed at her own reflection. Mentally, numbly, I toggled through the new commands on my E.F.S. and selected flight.

Two wings, black as night itself and set with large red talismans in the middle of the wing joints, spread from her sides. The control planes resembled feathers, glimmering with tiny motes of red light along the metallic pinions. As the talismans powered up, I felt a sensation of levitation wash over me. I bowed my head, a dozen different reactions mixing and crashing through me. Slow laughter began to fill the room, low and tense and more than a little mad. Too late, I realized it was coming from me.

I screamed and whirled on the idling booth. I didn't know if they read my intent or if I mentally smashed buttons in my rage, but the beam guns on my side cracked again and again as they blasted the booth. My sword swung wildly in great arcs before me. Metal parted, hoses sprayed, wires sparked, and I laughed. I howled as I ripped the machine apart, and then, when there was nothing left of that horrid device to destroy, I sprayed and slashed and smashed my way through the rest of the room, pegasi and unicorns running for the exit or diving for cover.

I'd just keep shooting and slashing till there was nothing left. That seemed like the right thing to do. Yeah. And I whirled, ready to continue my rampage till something finished me off, when I came face to face with Boo. The terrified mare hadn't fled or jumped for cover. Her pale eyes were wide as she sat there, frozen before me. A part of me, the Reaper part of me, wanted to blast her to ash and cut down everypony else just because they were there. Boo should have been the first to run and hide. She deserved to die! They all did! / did!

Then the blank stretched out a hoof and touched the side of my mouth. My cheek and lips were all I had left that weren't covered in steel. I trembled, not sure what I'd do next, when she smiled, leaned in, and gave a little nuzzle. She tilted her head, scratched at an ear with her hoof, and then looked to me with her bright ivory eyes. "B... Buh...Baaa..." She paused, and then, "Bwackjack!" she said, her voice light and bright and everything I needed right now.

I was Blackjack, and her reminding me of it was like cold Hoofington rain on my fury. I trembled as the rage that had given me power and action was robbed from me by simple kindness. That Boo had talked at all was a marvel that I'd ponder when the most important half hour of my life was past. Chicanery, Twister, and the others rose from behind crates and doors. Thankfully, I hadn't killed anypony.

"Are you... okay?" Chicanery asked, in lieu of 'sane', 'safe', or their opposites.

I shook my head. "I look like a comic book villain. All I need are spikes," I muttered. Then I lifted my sword and brought it down where the beam guns met my body, cutting the weapons from me. Maybe it was stupid -- after all, I was out of bullets -- but I had to reclaim *something* of myself. Some small inch that wasn't a replacement or addition. I turned to the spooked mare technician. "You're sure I'm pregnant?" The mare gave a hesitant nod. "Is the baby okay?"

She gave a little half smile. "Right now it's a microscopic collection of cells implanted in your uterine wall. Hardly a foal." Her smile disappeared. "I have no idea if you'll be able to carry it to term, let alone give birth. You might be better off aborting it now. Odds of a miscarriage are high anyhow."

That would have been the safe, sane, and smart thing to do, certainly. It happened from time to time in 99. No pony would know if I did it... except for me.

I'd taken so much out of this world. What would it be like to bring something into it?

"If that happens, it happens," I muttered, not meeting anypony's eyes. Right now I felt so close to Twilight that it hurt. When the pressure was off, would I change my mind? I couldn't think straight about something so monumental. "How'd it happen? I thought I had a copper implant to prevent that."

"I can only guess that your healing and repair talisman treated it like any other bit of shrapnel or bullet and digested it," the mare answered, then sighed. "If we had the magic and a candidate, I'd suggest a surrogacy spell. You should be fine for a few months, but when the foal starts pressing against your reinforcements, it's going to get really uncomfortable for both of you."

I nodded. Something to keep in mind. I stood and tried to take a more objective assessment of myself, examining at my legs and peering back. Somepony had laser-etched my cutie mark on to my flanks. It brought the ghost of a smile to my lips. I had no idea if I still had my cutie mark under that metal, but I could pretend that I did. "I don't look like any cyberpony I've seen," I said.

"Talk to your PipBuck. It was running the show," the mare technician said, clearly disgruntled. "The pod only used our stuff for parts. I'm not even sure what those are," she said, pointing a wing at the glowing spots of energy on my wings. "Some sort of micro arcane energy repeaters or something. Levitation ruby talismans were incorporated to get you off the ground. And then somepony laminated it all black to make it match your legs. And I have no clue where that came from," she said as she gestured towards my back.

"What?" I asked as I stretched around to see, and failing miserably. "What is it?"

Twister gave a concerned smile. "It says 'Security' along your back. And there's this little caped pony icon etched on your shoulder."

"Really?" I wanted to blink in surprise. At least I could smile still. Now I just had to get the memories of being in the pod scoured from my memor--... nope. Better to not think about it for now. I needed to get my head together, and something that the white stallion had said stuck with me. I pointed a hoof at Chicanery. "You said you're related to that Doctor Mephitis guy?"

"Sure. He never married, but he had liaisons with some unicorns in the tower," Chicanery

answered, then rolled his eyes a little, "I mean, he was a great stallion. His biography is required reading for every schoolpony. But he did have a few little personal problems."

Right. Like leaving thousands of zebras locked up with turrets keeping them penned up while they starved and cannibalized each other. "You should visit this little place called Yellow River down on the surface. Might make you appreciate your ancestor in a whole new... light..."

Oh shit. It couldn't be that simple, could it?

Okay. Thoughts organized. It was now time for some movement. "I need to get up to the top of the tower," I said in a rush. I glanced at my wings, but for now I'd rely on four-legged locomotion till I didn't have ceilings to smash into. I pointed a hoof at Twister. "You get that stable evacuated."

"On it," Twister replied, then pressed the side of her head. "Blackjack is coming up. Big black-and-red cyberpony... alicorn... Look, you just can't miss her. Don't dust her." Then she frowned at me and gestured behind her with a wing. "There're stairs back that way. Pass the barricade and watch your head. They've got a lot more above us." She paused, then turned to a soldier. "Flame Pinion? Could you escort her? Just in case? I really don't want anypony shooting at her or her shooting at anypony she shouldn't."

"Great. A chaperone," I said with a huff as I shook my head. Worst of all, it was probably a good idea. How depressing was that? "Let's go."

Every second that passed, I could feel things flying further and further apart. Returning to the battle in the shaft, I looked around at the fighting and imagined the nightmare of trying to evacuate four hundred civilians through this battlefield.

"Can you do anything about this?" Pinion shouted as he joined the others in blasting away at the attackers above us. "You're supposed to be some kind of cyber supermare!"

There had to be at least a hundred above me. Maybe more! It'd take far more time than I had to shoot my way through, provided I didn't get dusted or gooped in the process. But a part of me wanted to help, badly. I pulled out my sword and levitated a half dozen plates of scrap metal. "Cover me and watch for falling catwalks." Biting on the blade's handle, I searched my E.F.S. for the new commands and toggled on flight. My wings hummed as the talismans charged up, and I felt as light as a weightless five-hundred-pound feather.

"All right, all of you," I bellowed. "I'm Blackjack, and I'm giving you this one chance to give up, get the hell out of here, and save me a lot of frigging annoyance! Don't make me come up there! I mean it!" Then I raised the plates so the crimson beams and disintegration bolts sparked and spattered away above me.

Having a little experience as a cyberpony, I knew better than to try flapping my wings. My augmentations were smarter than I was and would handle the movement far more effectively than I could. Given just how much was whirring and working inside those two complex wing assemblies, I counted this as a blessing. I focused on a direction... up there... and a speed... fast... and trusted my wings to get me there. What I didn't know was just how fast 'fast' was.

This would have been a very good thing to know before I hurtled my way towards the underside of a catwalk. My plan had been to use the plates as shields and whatnot, but the fact was that I was moving much too fast for that. Faster... much faster than I'd anticipated... I found myself greeting the underside of the catwalk with my face, impacting with a resounding clang and a shower of sparks as I bounced and tumbled wildly, my 'shield' banging and flying every which way. I wasn't exactly sure how many surfaces I bounced off... four, at least, one of which was a very surprised cyberpony, before I cut

out my wings and let gravity take me to land in a heap on the floor with a great cloud of dust billowing around me. Just when I'd thought I was done, my shields clanged off my body, with the last spinning slowly atop my steel-clad horn.

A tiny blue pegasus in my head bit her hoof to keep from laughing at me as the unicorn with the chalkboard was trying to figure out how the plates had landed on me. At least the little pink pony gave me a 9. Flying was for pegasi. I saw at least a dozen ponies staring at me, and above me the defenders burst out laughing. "That's Blackjack?! What a joke!" was bellowed.

"My baby brother can fly better than you!" called another.

"Hey Blackjack! When this is over, me and the boys can give you a real flying lesson!" howled a third.

That lasted for all of a second, and then the Neighvarro pegasi stormed the catwalks in a blaze of gunfire, catching the defenders off guard so they were forced to retreat to the next ring of metal. I watched with surreal amazement as the power-armored ponies stood upside down on the catwalks, using the floor as cover as they drove the defenders back. The defenders' gunfire was now far less concentrated and deadly, and the attackers had solid metal floor between them and the cyberponies rather than plates of scrap armor.

"Brilliant! I never seen a distraction technique so well pulled off! I mean, you were spinning on all three axes at once. And the crying for your mommy? Wonderful," Chicanery said as he trotted up with his camera helmet back on.

"Did you fix that?" I asked sourly as I rose to my hooves, one plate still perched on the end of my horn, rotating briskly.

"Oh yeah. No way I'm missing footage like this! I plan to live through this, and when I do--" there was a flash of silver, and I sheathed my sword before I turned and trotted for the exit. "Wait, what--" he began. Then the hat came apart and tumbled into his hooves. "My footage..." he whimpered. "Not cool."

Outside, on the landing dock, the larger battle hit me like a storm. Raptors now maneuvered around the tower like great swooping birds of prey while wings of power armor battled teams of cyberponies swarming about the tower like angry bees and killer wasps. Only two Raptors fired at the city now, the rest busy battling Storm Chaser's followers. As I stood there, the first wave of stable ponies began to rush out. Thankfully, property was light in stables, and most carried little more than a bundle of personal knickknacks. "This way into the *Sleet!* Hurry!" shouted a pegasus as he sought to direct the flow towards the landing hatch of the idling Raptor.

Above us extended the six large shield plates, and above that, where Raptors had once tied up for repairs, were service gantries and bays hanging like the branches of a dead tree. A ring of large, heavy doors ran about the tower by the branches, likely so that fabricated parts could be brought out to the ships. When the Enclave tried to shell them, they fell shut with booms I could hear even from down here. As soon as the Enclave flew past, swarms of cyberponies would pop out and harass the soldiers from behind only to retreat when the greater numbers of soldiers rallied against them. If the doors were working, that was a bad sign. How long until the launchers were working again too?

"Would you look at that?" Chicanery said as he trotted out with his camera hat duct taped back together in a sticky gray cap. He caught me glaring at it and at once took it off and hugged it to his chest like he was protecting his foal. "No! I fixed it, Blackjack."

"Tape my flight attempts, and I'll *unfix* it," I warned as I peered way up at the top of the tower. "That's a long way up," I muttered.

"Only three thousand feet," he replied as he carefully put the hat on, smacked the wires with his wing, and then panned the battle. "Oh no..." he breathed.

I turned, saw which way he was looking, and then thought the exact same thing. Thunderhead rotated like an immense, ragged holey wheel of cheese that had been attacked by furious bloatsprites. The smooth, pristine torus was now mottled, twisted, and uneven. As I watched, a great swath of it began to sag. Like rainbow sherbet left out too long, it began to pull away from the rest of the city towards the cloud layer below. The metal supporting structure gave way with a shriek and plunged far below. I could now see into the smoke-filled structure; see the buildings within grotesquely elongated, holed, or melted.

"I have to end this. Now. Help get that stable evacuated," I said sharply as I stared up.

"Oh, come on! I know you're badass, but how can you end this?" Chicanery asked incredulously.

I whirled on him, levitated out a piece of paper, and snapped it open in front of his face. On it were the fifteen letters in four words that I was keeping away from Lighthooves. If he knew, he'd never let me get off this deck. Chicanery's eyes widened as he scanned them again and again. "Brown rain," he muttered, eyelid twitching, then turned to the stable ponies and rushed to where an elderly stallion was taking his time. "Quickly, Grandpa! Quickly! Get on the nice Raptor." He rushed over, scooped the old stallion on his back, and trotted to the Raptor. "Let's go. Trot lively! In we go!"

I tucked the paper away. Amazing what those four words could do. I turned to Boo. "You need to get on too, Boo. I don't think I can fly you safely up there. I'm not sure I can fly *me* safely up there."

The mare cocked her head with a listening look that gave me a moment of hope, then smiled. "Bwackjack?"

"Raptor. Go. Get in, Boo!" I pointed at the open door with a wing. "Please?"

She smiled and nuzzled my cheek again. "Bwackjack!"

"Yes! Blackjack! Blackjack wants Boo into the Raptor. Blackjack wants Boo safe! Please do what Blackjack asks, Boo," I tried plaintively.

"Bwackjack! Bwackjack! Bwackjack!" Boo began to sing as she skipped around me. What in Equestria had gotten into her? She was acting like... well... like I did when I was a little filly.

I blinked at her and slumped a little, then showed her the paper. "Look! See? Go in the Raptor, Boo!" Boo leaned in, tilted her head far to the right, narrowed her eyes and stuck her tongue out the side of her mouth. "They have snack cakes in there!" I lied desperately.

Her eyes widened in comprehension as she looked from the paper to me, back to the paper, back to me, then at the Raptor. Then she pointed her hoof at the paper and declared in glee, "Bwackjack!"

I slumped in defeat. "I'm not going to win this, am I?"

She grinned up at me and gave me a hug and a cheek nuzzle. "Bwaaackjack..." Nope. Defeated. And she hadn't even broken out the big eyes or pouty lip.

At the very least, though, I could protect her better. In a few minutes, I had my operative armor on her and repaired to cover her. The respirator hissed as she stared at me, and I imagined her baffled expression. "Don't look at me like that. If you're coming with me, I don't want you burned again. Burning bad. Owwie," I said, trying to give her a smile. The *Sleet* lifted off and moved away as another ship arrived. For a moment, I felt a thrill of panic as I saw it was the *Galeforce*.

Then the door opened up, and it became clear that somepony had made a mess of the crew. A

terrified Captain Crosswinds came galloping out of the carnage. The green stallion, clearly battered and with one eye swelling shut, was being ridden by a striped, bloodied, and cackling filly I knew quite well. "Hiyas, Blackjack!" she said to Boo, and then looked at me. "Who's your badass friend?"

Great. Now my friends didn't even recognize me. "Hello, Rampage."

She blinked in shock, then burst into laughter atop the green stallion. "Blackjack? Is that... fuck me with a lollypop, it is you! What the fuck happened?"

"Upgrades," I muttered. "I don't wanna talk about it. Today sucks."

"Damn. I think Big Daddy should give you leadership of the Reapers on looks alone," she laughed, then regarded Boo. "And here we have Boojack," Rampage said gaily. "Well, now my day is officially awesome." She kept her hooves pressed firmly against the sides of the captain's head as she stood on his back. "Do you like her?" she said, gesturing at the Raptor with her head. "I'm thinking of renaming her the *Rampage*, loading her up with beer and hookers, and becoming an earth pony sky pirate. Then, when I've had my fun, loading it up with all the explosives, balefire bombs, and magical waste I can and flying it right into this great big magic ball the Enclave say is unbreachable. What do you think?"

"Get these unicorns to Stable 99 and have fun," I replied, relatively sure the mare would grow bored with that idea, eventually. "How'd you get on board the *Galeforce* in the first place?"

"Stormy loaded me up in their big cannon, and I got to play 'Fun with Ballistics'. I owe their gunner some oral sex for making that shot. Once I was on board, I cut, stomped, and smashed my way to the captain here. I might not be able to fly a Raptor, but he can. Isn't that right, Breakwind?" Rampage asked, squeezing her hooves. The battered green stallion cried out in pain.

"She can't die! I disintegrated her myself, and she came back!" Crosswinds shouted wildly. "Twice!"

"Yeah yeah. Blackjack is supposed to be helping me with that, but she's got that whole 'life is good' shit going on," Rampage said with a disdainful roll of her eyes. "He's tried to sell out just about everypony he can to get me off his back. Pansy..."

"Please. I'll be a good captain. I'll go on the straight and narrow. I'll feed orphans and widows. I'll stop cheating on my mare and my mistress and my girlfriend if you'll please get her off my back!" he begged.

"Rampage," I began.

She snapped immediately, "Oh, don't you 'Rampage' me, Blackjack. This shit lies like I regenerate. Trust me. I gave him a chance to play along with the 'good pony' routine. Twice. I got disintegrated for it. Twice. It hurt." She growled between her teeth. "And he warned Hoarfrost what you're doing, so now there's a whole lot more shooting going on."

I frowned at the battered captain. "I'll pay my taxes!" he pleaded. "I'll resign my commission. I'll acknowledge all those bast...er... um... those 'potentially illegitimate offspring' I've sired! I'll fly to the surface and wash the hooves of poor wastelanders personally. Just please get her off me!"

"I might be able to do that," I began, levitating out a slip of paper, making his eyes widen in hope, "If you can get me one of these inside a minute."

"I... you... that..." he stammered. "I can get you one! Half an hour, tops. We'll yank 'em right out of the turrets. You can have all six. Just get her off me."

"Sorry. Not quick enough. Rampage, he's all yours," I said.

"Nooo!" he wailed.

"Oh, shut your mouth," Rampage said as her hooves gave another squeeze. Then she turned to me. "So, Blackjack. Are you really... I mean, you said you had one..."

"If I can get what I need to make it work, sure." I sighed, looking up. "At this rate, I might have to just cut one off a missile."

"Do you think that, if I'm fast, I could get back and be here for it?" she asked.

"Probably not. I'm using it just as soon as I find one," I replied with a smile. "You could come with me, but that'd require you to leave your ship in the hooves of somepony who probably doesn't care about becoming a sky pirate."

Rampage screwed up her face with indecision. "Ehhh... decisions, decisions. Stay and do the right thing and become a sky pirate, or snap his neck and get what I want." She let out a huff. "Boo? What do you think?"

The blank pointed a hoof at me. "Bwackjack!"

"She can talk?" Rampage goggled. "Quick! Say 'booger!' 'Shit!' 'Harlot!' 'Batsuawa!' 'Trickle down economics!' 'Pink!'"

"Bwa?" Boo tilted her head.

"Rampage, we don't have time for this," I said flatly. "Are you coming or not?"

"But... but... I have a Raptor now! Sky pirates! But a good chance of me getting killed," she whined as she gestured from the ship to the top of the tower, clearly torn. Finally, she blurted, "That's not fair, Blackjack!"

Given everything that had happened to me, I couldn't help but laugh a little. "Today isn't a fair day for anypony, Rampage. See to your ship. Sky piracy sounds better than dying to me, any day," I said as I peered up again.

"That's because dying for you is actually easy," she sulked, but there was a hint of doubt in her voice as well. She kicked Crosswinds in the ribs with her hindhooves. "Yah mule. Back to my ship. We'll need to paint it bright red to make it go faster. Give it some extra guns. And spikes. It definitely needs some more spikes."

I shook my head and looked at Boo, hoping she'd follow. Boo, however, waited patiently at my side. Finally I sighed and scooped her onto my back, positioned her, and activated my wings. Thankfully, she was no heavier than the rest of me. "Cover me," I said to Flame Pinion before snapping my wings and taking flight.

I'd been mistaken on my speed in the tower. I was no faster than Morning Glory, and there were plenty of other pegasi wheeling and darting twice as fast as me. Maybe it was the fact that they were pegasi and I, even with my augmentations, was still a unicorn. The levitation field remained steady, but I watched as my power supply dropped slowly before my eyes.

In the air, the view of chaos was now complete. Raptor fought with Raptor as they moved in a deadly dance of maneuver and counter maneuver. I watched as the *Castellanus*, still trailing smoke from multiple holes in her plates, dove vertically towards the red-accented *Sirocco*. For a terrifying moment, I was certain that the *Castellanus* was in freefall as the ship blasted the spinning props atop the *Sirocco*.

with its front cannons. Then the *Castellanus* tumbled to the side, turned ninety degrees, and opened fire with its remaining ventral turrets, tearing great green gashes in the side of the *Sirocco*. As it plunged beneath its enemy, the *Castellanus*'s propellers blurred to life to slow its descent, its nose swinging up as it hovered in place and fired at the underside of its enemy. I had no idea how much damage it did, but, as I watched the *Castellanus* fall back into a horizontal position and pull away and the *Sirocco* return fire, I felt it was a little surreal to watch a giant war machine pirouetting so.

All around me, pegasi wheeled, clashed, and wheeled again. The more maneuverable cyberponies did all they could to attack their enemies from any direction but the front. The power armor, on the other hoof, would move in paired formations flying towards each other, each blasting any cyberpony harassing the other wing. Then the two wings would veer off seconds before collision. As soon as they pulled apart from each other, the cyberponies reengaged, harassing their backs and wings. I saw what Twister meant about an open-air advantage. Out here, the cyberponies really had to work to pick off an enemy before another formation pulled in and blasted them out of the sky.

Only now there were power-armored ponies fighting other power armor too. I had no idea how they identified each other. E.F.S.? But in this case, they did all they could to fight two-on-one. One would engage the enemy and the second would fly up from behind and rip open their wings with those cruel scorpion tails. It was a daring display of teamwork; if one's partner fell too far away or behind, they were dead... or their partner was dead and they were next.

When we reached the branches with gantries and fabrication doors, one immediately lifted enough to expel a cloud of fliers at me, Boo, and the dozen or so power-armored fliers with us. "Hold on, Boo," I shouted as I tried to go as fast up as I could. It would have been nice to know exactly how my flight worked. The levitation field was easy enough to understand. I'd seen robots with similar. But what was pushing me along? Did the wings have some sort of thrust talismans? Was it telekinesis? I had to flap my wings, so--

Two cyberponies darted up behind me like I'd observed before, only we weren't their usual cup of tea; they'd never before encountered another cyberpony with a hysterical pony flailing her rear hooves wildly and crushing the cyberpony's throat in terror, nor had they had to deal with a flying unicorn cyberpony with a glowing sword flashing around behind her. They actually paced me for a little while, staring in bafflement as if unsure if I was an actual threat or not. Three seconds later, with agility I could only dream of, they flipped in the air and pointed their very deadly weapons right at the pair of us. I knew exact--

Then four Enclave power armor streaked past horizontally while precisely planting crimson beams at the pair. A second later, they were past and I was left spinning around wildly in their wake. When I came to a stop, Boo clung to my back like she was Wonderglued, and I was left with hundreds of ponies zipping and blasting around me. "Slow down!" I shouted, waving my sword in their general direction while a tiny blue pegasus in my head laughed at me. Pegasi moved, thought, and in general *were* too damned fast for me. Pegasuses and their cheating wings.

Still, time to get while the getting was good. I continued to climb, leaving the fight far below me. This high, I discovered several things: the air was growing thin and increasingly cold and windy. Every second I flew, my power supply dropped down bit by bit. As badass as I might have appeared, these wings gobbled up juice like crazy. There wasn't an altimeter on my E.F.S., and I was so damn high that, as I looked about, I could see the horizon curving ever so slightly. The battle below became little flickering dots and larger flashing ovals. As I climbed, I watched the percentage of my power supply falling away: 50%. 40%. 30%... For once, I began to feel cold and struggled to breathe. Metal wasn't the most insulative material, and I was covered in it. 20%. I could see the top of Shadowbolt Tower. I just had to fly a little further. 10%... A hundred feet. Fifty.

3%... The talismans on the wings pushing me through the air began to flicker. "No..." I groaned as I felt gravity start to pull me back down. I needed a few more feet. Just a few... it was so cold. So hard to focus. My metal limbs and wings flailed as the red light died.

The wings froze, and I began to fall.

Teleporting me was hard. Teleporting me with even more metal was challenging. Teleporting all that and Boo all at once was like trying to magically smooch both of us simultaneously through a hoof-wide pipe a dozen feet long. Only the knowledge I was about to fall *miles* to the earth below, and the primal and fundamental terror that accompanied that knowledge, allowed me to force a teleportation spell that got me to the top edge of the tower, and even then it was still so far that I was only able to hook my forehooves over the edge. My horn popped like a blown bulb, and I watched as my magic failed all at once. My sword, hovering beside me, tumbled away to the green Core far below. I saw it glitter for a moment in the sun, and then it was gone.

Boo scrambled off my back and onto the icy roof. The blank bit my mane and hauled me over the lip, and I felt a phenomenal appreciation for earth ponies. My power supply flickered at 1%, and then my vision went dark. The howling wind fell silent. All I could feel was cold wind and cold metal. "Boo. Gems, Boo," I rasped. "Gems. Please. I need power." I started to shiver in the cold air.

Something warm nudged my cheek, then draped itself over me. "I'm sorry, Boo," I muttered, gasping for breath. The air was so thin here that I wondered if I was just going to pass out. I wasn't even sure I had any gems left. Maybe way down in the bottom of my saddlebags, next to any other junk I happened to be carrying. My life support systems operated on a separate circuit, powered by my chest generator, but how long could I be up here before Boo or I perished?

I tried to move what muscle I had, but it was futile. I was more machine than meat now. I needed arcane energy to keep going. All I could do was lie here in the absolute silence. Well. At least I wasn't here alone. No matter how hard or fast I tried to breathe, I couldn't quite get enough air. I could only imagine what it was like for Boo. Even my sense of feeling began to fall away.

I could almost imagine I could hear singing.

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I lay in a proper dungeon. Stone walls on all sides. Heavy barred gate blocking the exit. My body ached with cold and wet as I sniffed and shivered. The only thing to mar the effect was an arcane camera set in the upper corner of the cell and the light that'd been on since I'd arrived.

"Goldenblood is dead," a mare said, cold and hard and terrible. I shivered, turning to look up at the gate as a cold blue glow enveloped it and, after several clicks in the lock, opened it wide. There stood Princess Luna, though not the Princess I had seen before. This mare, older and harder and more imperious than that playful and kind mare, glared down at me with contempt. "Goldenblood is dead, but I suspect his conspiracies are not," she said in cold rage, eyes narrowed like blades.

"I don't know anything about Horizons," I whispered. "I told you and Pinkie. I don't..."

"I'm not just talking about Horizons. Everything he has done... everything he has touched... is suspect. Tainted. Poisoned. The secret projects. The liaisons in the O.I.A. The government itself. Everything!" she said, her last word bellowing like thunder and knocking me to my face. As I lay there, groveling on the cold hard stone floor, she continued, "I will not rest until everything he has ever done is laid open and bare. His association with the Ministry Mares. His work with the Ministry. His 'back channels' with the zebras. Nothing is certain anymore! Do you understand? Nothing!"

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," I whispered.

"Sorry?" Luna said in contemptuous tones. "Do you understand what is happening as we speak? The zebras have made the preposterous claim that we detonated a megaspell in their capital. That we dispatched an agent to Roam and committed an atrocity on their soil. They have produced doctored film of ravaged cities, deftly edited to appear to be their capital, and are broadcasting them throughout their empire, but why? Why tell such a blatant lie, given that our military reports all our megaspells accounted for, primed, and ready to be cast?" Her furious eyes glared down at me as she continued, cold as the winter sky, "Whence sprang this deceit? Is it a plot of Goldenblood? A ploy of the Caesar? The lives of tens of millions of my subjects are at stake, and the one pony I trusted more than any other has betrayed me!"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," I repeated, averting my eyes to the silver glittering on her hooves. "I would do anything to... to take it all back!"

"Anything?" she asked in a lovely, soft voice. Then, for a minute, she remained silent. When she spoke again, her voice was gentle. "Well, then. Do you wish a chance to redeem yourself?" she asked.

"Yes, my Princess. Anything."

The white moon on her chest plate flashed, then detached and in a burst of light transformed into a geometric, glowing white crystal the size of a pony's eye. "Do you know what this is?"

"That's... that's the EC-1101 megaspell matrix, Your Majesty."

"A megaspell *you* worked on. A megaspell that *he* may have compromised," she said as she contemplated it with disgust. "Goldenblood could have conspired with any one of the ponies it is intended for. Twilight. Fluttershy. That judge. Even my sister. He could have orchestrated a coup quite easily with this." Her teeth bared in frustration. "I should have it destroyed, but what if *that* is his plan? I cannot know for certain." Then she lowered her eyes to me. "Therefore, I think we shall try something less predictable."

"What do you wish, my Princess?" I rasped weakly.

"We shall bond your mind and soul to this megaspell. Your body shall be taken away for safekeeping. If for some reason this spell should ever be released, it will search out its intended, but *you* shall ensure that it returns to *me*. If you do not, your mind and soul shall evaporate slowly and steadily till they are no more. But!" she said sharply, and then smiled. "But if you are loyal, if you are true, and it returns to me, then I shall reunite your body, mind, and soul. And if no plot emerges and EC-1101 remains safe, my land and my people secure, then... then you shall be pardoned."

Slowly, I pulled myself to my aching hooves and bowed my head to the floor. "I accept, Your Majesty. I accept," I said, utterly sincere.

Slowly, she backed away, and two stallions in dark purple robes entered, one short and stout, the other tall and thin. "Do it. I have to prepare for the Gala tonight. I'd cancel the damned thing, but it's important to keep the pretense while we ferret out his conspirators. Once Pinkie is finished rounding up that Four Stars trash, she can scour the O.I.A. with my blessing." Their hoods drew back as the unicorns, one blue and the other orange, stared at me with eyes full of stars. Then their horns flared and the world became white pain, and then nothing at all but white.

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When thought returned, a few things had become apparent to me. One, I could breathe without feeling as if I were drowning. Two, I was being carried along by somepony. Three, I was doomed to

constantly experience the memories and experiences of other ponies any time I closed my eyes. Really, why couldn't I have dreamed about a normal Equestrian life again?

Still, I didn't have time to waste. If anything, I might be too late. "Who's there? Who is it? Boo? Pinion? Twister? Glory? Dusk? Boomer? Rainbow?" I then frowned. "It's Lighthooves, isn't it? You were watching through the Perceptitron. You sick monster! I'll bite you to death!" I shouted, then snapped wildly against whoever carried me before they flung me off the top of the tower. I'd hit an artery! Maybe infection would finish him off!

A wing smacked me hard across the face. "Oh, you want to make this hard, do ya?" Wiggling as much as I could, I thumped my face against a metal flank. I thought I felt my steel-shod horn dig into something. "Take that! I'll stop you, you bastard!"

Then I was dumped to a floor and felt something spicy press against my mouth. I immediately closed my mouth around it, feeling it melt away and its magical goodness spreading throughout my body. My vision flickered, and my ears crackled as power returned and I blinked up at Mare Do Well. "Oh. It is you. Hi."

"I could say the same thing, Blackjack," she said in her low, synthetic voice. "You were right about Lighthooves spotting you on the Perceptitron, but he was going to leave you up here to freeze to death before finding out what's on that damned piece of paper you keep showing ponies." She frowned, withdrew another gemstone from a bag she had in wing, then shoved it in my mouth. "Bite me to death?" she asked wryly.

I masticated furiously, absorbing the energy before swallowing. "Don't laugh. I could probably do it," I said with a smile. She offered me the bag, but when I tried to levitate it, my horn told me to fuck off. It was taking a vacation after that last port. A very long vacation. And it'd left me with a throbbing headache. "What's going on? How long was I out?" Then, without further ado, I popped the bag over my mouth, hooked the drawstrings to my ears, and began to munch munch munch as I looked around.

We were in some kind of fancy office, but it had the impression of being used by a rather sloppy occupant. There were old posters of the Wonderbolts tacked to the wood paneling. A large map of Equestria and the Zebra lands was spread out on a large table. On a different wall were some sort of complicated schematics of a huge mechanical sphere and a mushroom-shaped building, and a mouthwritten note 'Don't let Goldie lay one hoof on this project, Apple Bloom. I don't care how much he claims he can help.' A large list next to the desk read 'Awesome Targets' along with names and locations. Most of them sounded zebraish to me. Boo, with a tilt to her head, regarded several photographs of Ministry Mares arranged around the desk.

"You've only been unconscious a few minutes. Soon as you were sighted outside the tower, Lighthooves was talking about you, watching you on that Perceptitron. When he said you passed out up here, I nipped up the shaft and got you inside my office as fast as I could. Ascending several thousand feet in a few minutes is not a smart thing to do, Blackjack. The air pressure's less than half what you're used to."

"I'm a super badass cyberpony, laid low by cold, air pressure, and dead batteries. There's something reassuring about that," I said around a mouthful of slobbery gemstones. "Lighthooves?"

"Planning to launch every single missile in one go," Rainbow Dash said, then grinned. "But I have a plan. All the power is being drawn up through an emergency conduit. You take your magical super-sharp sword and, in two swipes, he won't be able to open a single door. What do you think?"

I thought it still sounded like a quick route to electrocution. Odd; I normally wasn't the cautious mare. Not that it mattered here. "Yeah. About my magical super-sharp sword..." I muttered, looking

away. "I kind of dropped it."

"You dropped it?" Rainbow Dash rasped. "You... dropped... it? How do you drop something like that?"

"Well, when I teleported, I burned out my horn. My sword was being held out in case some cyberpony nipped in at me or Boo, and when my power ran out... well... I dropped it!" I replied defensively. "Haven't you ever just dropped something before?"

Rainbow sighed and shook her head. "That's just sad," she said as she lifted off and started to hover and pace in the air. "Okay. So we need a way to prevent forty missiles from launching. We could blow one up; that'd cause one heck of a mess, but there's no guarantee that he couldn't get the rest off. And he still has containers just full of his plague." She tapped her chin. "Plus, we have to do something to help Thunderhead--"

"Actually, I have a plan to deal with all those, too," I said around a mouthful of gems. Boo pulled out a rainbow-colored wig and, after chewing on it a little, popped it on her head. As I continued to gorge myself like a hungry baby dragon, I fumbled with my bags and passed her the piece of paper. "Don't read it out loud. No clue who might be watching."

Rainbow Dash stared at it skeptically. "Blackjack, are you crazy? This is never going to work. Where the hell did you find one of these?"

"In my adventures around Hoofington," I said with a smile.

"But you can't just use one! You have to have the authority to--" I silenced her as I raised my forehoof, jerked it to flip open the housing, and showed her my PipBuck. EC-1101 glowed obligingly on the screen. She stared a moment. "Oh, horseapples... but... Blackjack, do you know what it actually *does*?"

"No idea," I admitted, putting the leg down. "I saw how a pony tried to get one to work, so I'll do what she did. But whatever it is, I doubt plagues or Raptors will be a problem afterwards, right?"

"Maybe..." Rainbow Dash shook her head a little. "You still don't have any way to target it."

"I'll need a talisman from one of his missiles, or maybe we can yank one from a turret," I replied, extending my tongue to lap up the gems in the very bottom of the bag. That whole bag only got me about half charged; I'd definitely have to avoid long periods of flight if I could help it. I became aware that Rainbow had stopped pacing. "What?"

"You're a scary pony, you know that?" Rainbow Dash said with a shake of her head.

I pulled the bag off my face, my mouth coated in a layer of glittery sweet gem dust. "Who? Me?" She sighed and shook her head as I licked the residue away, then I dropped my eyes. "Hope I'm not too scary. Honestly, look at me. What is Glory going to think?"

"Did you treat her differently when she resembled me?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"You don't look like a bad villain from a B-rate film," I countered.

"True. But so long as your friends know you're still you, you should be fine," Rainbow Dash said.

"I just wish my friends were here," I muttered. "I know we had to split up, but..."

Rainbow Dash sighed and gazed at the pictures by the desk. "Welcome to the club. We have crumbled cookies and spilt milk." She shook her head hard. "Anyway. Time's wasting. What's the

plan?"

"One second," I said, putting the bag in my saddlebags and trotting to the desk, finding a piece of paper and a pencil. Then, closing my eyes, I scribbled out the instructions. Lighthooves might think I was unconscious, but he also might be watching through my eyes right now. When I finished, I folded it over and returned to Dash. "Boo?"

The blank pulled her head out of a file cabinet with a snack cake in her mouth. In a trice, she ripped open the package, flipped it in the air, and caught the cake in her mouth. Chewing happily, she trotted to us as I passed the paper to the purple-armored mare.

Dash unfolded it with her wings, then stared. "Whoa. Blackjack, you have terrible mouthwriting." She scanned the list, nodding. "Okay. I can do that. And that. Annnnd probably that. But will your friend here be able to do her part? She seems kinda..."

"She's fine," I said, turning to Boo, hoping I was right. "Boo. Listen to me. You have to stay close to Rainbow Dash. She's going to find something that's very important, and you need to get it to me. Okay, Boo? I'm counting on you." I stared into her eyes, trying to will her to understand me.

She tilted her head. "Bwackjack?" Then she nuzzled my cheek and pulled her head back with glittering sparkles on her nose.

I whirled to Rainbow Dash. "She's good. She's all over this!" I said with a grin. The most convincingest grin I ever grinned.

"Riiight," Rainbow said skeptically. "Well, let's get going. No time to waste before we do something completely stupid." She started towards the door, but I hesitated. There was a small room to the side of the office, almost an alcove, that was clearly a media center of some kind. Six monitors were dark, but the seventh had an O.I.A. symbol aglow. Slowly, I approached, the ring icon flickered and disappeared, and something new appeared on the screen.

>EC-1101 detected. Update routing data Y/N?

I stared at it as Rainbow Dash and Boo waited by the exit. "One second. I need to take care of something," I said, and tapped the "Y" key. Once again I was treated to a digital light show as the information was transferred to my PipBuck. When the transfer ended, I saw that a navigation tag had been updated... but no matter which direction I turned, I couldn't see where it was supposed to go. It said 'Robronco HQ', but... then I looked straight down and saw the little icon directly between my hooves.

Oh. Well, I was certainly dressed for a trip to the Core.

"Hey, can you put me through to Glory?" I asked. "I want to see her again."

"We don't have time for this," Rainbow Dash objected. "Any second he'll have all those missiles loaded and be set to fire."

"You know what I'm going to do. Don't you think Thunderhead deserves a little warning?" I asked.

"And you can't use your broadcaster because of the Perceptitron," Rainbow grumbled as I tried to connect to Moonshadow's lab. The screen flickered a few times, and then there was a ping and I saw the astronomy lab a wreck. Equipment lay scattered over the floor, and there was smoke in the room.

"Glory! Moonshadow! Is anypony there?!" I shouted, but no pony answered.

"It looks like the science ministry got hit," Rainbow Dash said grimly.

I didn't give up. "I know another pony who might answer." I contacted Morningstar's lab. I heard ponies talking in the background. "Hello! Is anypony there? Doctor Morningstar?" While the equipment had fallen over, at least there wasn't as much smoke.

Then a drop-dead gorgeous mare stepped into view of the monitor, and I just stopped thinking for a moment as her long, luxurious mane swayed back and forth and gorgeous eyes blinked slowly and sensually. She asked in a voice that melted butter, "Yes? What do you want? We are trying to save valuable research here!"

"I... I..." Rainbow Dash thumped my rump with a clank and got my brain to engage, "I need to speak to Doctor Morningstar."

"Yes. Yes. What do you want?" she said in the most beautiful irritation I'd ever seen, and then she looked to the side. "No, that sample first, then those! And don't drop it again!"

"D... Doctor!?" I stammered.

She let out a snort of disdain and severed the connection. I gave my head a hard shake. Apparently something had gotten loose. I reopened the connection, being rewarded with a posterior that nearly made me forget why I called again. "Doctor Morningstar. It's me, Blackjack. Where is Glory?"

She turned, arching a brow, then smiled. "Ah yes. I am not the only one who's undergone some changes." She put on the doctor's, her, thick glasses and the effect snapped me out of my lust daze. "Better? Good. My pupil is at the office of emergency management. Terminal address MN1-TNDR1-EM1- Terminal six or seven."

Perfect. "Thank you, Doctor. Are you evacuating?"

"I won't let my work be destroyed by military stupidity," she declared with scorn that was gorgeous even with the glasses.

"Take it and as many researchers as you can to the Collegiate. Talk to Triage and Professor Zodiac. I'm sure they'll welcome you and any research you have," I said.

"Is that so? Well then... thank you," she said with a little surprise. "I will find some way to pay you back."

"No need. I owe you. Good luck. And leave the killing joke behind," I suggested before cutting the terminal and entering in the address he'd given me.

The link opened, startling a pegasus stallion. "Who are you? Get off this connection!"

"My name is Blackjack!" I snapped. "Put Morning Glory on now!"

"Blackjack?" Glory said from off screen. Then the gray mare rushed into view, knocking the stallion right out of his seat. The end of her mane was singed, and there was a bandage around her head and soot on her nose, but she was ten times more stunning to me than Doctor Morningstar had been. I couldn't talk for several seconds as she took in my appearance. Her gaze immediately softened. "Oh, Blackjack..."

"Yeah. I got upgraded." And to avoid talking and thinking about it, I rushed, "How is Thunderhead?"

"Your warning saved more lives than I can count. There've been some casualties, but for the

most part we've kept clear. The firing has slacked off a bit. Fortunately, we have somepony to manage this disaster." And she moved back to let a mummy come before the terminal. Or at least, that's what he looked like: a mummy in bloody bandages with two intense eyes.

"Sky Striker?" I gasped. "How did you heal your injuries?"

"I didn't," he rasped. "I'm slugging down a healing potion every ten minutes and trying not to move around much. What's the situation?"

"The Tower is being evacuated, and you should be ready to do the same for Thunderhead. Now's the time, while the Enclave are fighting each other," I said. "The Enclave want the tower and the plague more than they want you."

Sky Striker frowned. "Why evacuate now? We're managing a decent resistance. I don't know where they learned it, but those two earth ponies are driving them crazy with their mines and bombs. I think the Enclave are scared to put a hoof on the ground without it blowing up under them."

In response, I showed the piece of paper. "Quiet. Don't say it. Lighthooves might be listening in. But yes, I do, and I'm using it." The shock was on everypony's face, and I couldn't meet Glory's eyes. "I'm sorry, Glory. I know I said we'd save it... but..." The shock and horror was clearly etched on her face.

"You tried your best, Blackjack," Sky Striker grumbled. "How much time do we have?"

"Long as it takes for me to get what I need. Fifteen minutes?" I said lamely.

"That's barely time to get under the cloud layer," he grumbled.

Rainbow Dash leaned in. "There may be another way. Get every pegasus you can and push Thunderhead away from the tower."

"Who--" Striker began.

"Time, remember?" I stressed.

"You have seventy or eighty thousand pegasi. Thunderhead is ten miles away already. If you all fly pushing in the same direction, you might get clear." She put a lot of emphasis on that 'might'. "Eight hundred wingpower can drain a reservoir. Eighty thousand can certainly move a city."

"Right. Right! We'll get on it. But again. The more time the better." Then he pulled away, starting to bark orders as new bloodstains spread under his bandages. Glory moved back to the screen, and I gritted my teeth.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, lowering my eyes. "I just wanted to save lives," I said lamely.

"Blackjack, you have! If you hadn't come up here... with Stargazer dead... it would have been a bloodbath. And ultimately, we still would have lost. The Enclave would just bring a Thunderhead next time. Wouldn't that be ironic?" she said with a smile full of tears. "Just do what you have to to bring this to an end. And Blackjack, I love you. No matter what you do or how you have to change, I love you. Just come back from this safely. Okay?"

"I'll try. I love you," I said, then cut the connections. I couldn't cry, but I wished I could. Just one more way I was less equine than before. Laughter, tears, hunger, lust, pain... good or bad, they were things that made a pony a pony.

And love. Love too.

* * *

The elevator ride down took far longer than I anticipated. I nearly bounced on my hooves with impatience. I wanted this done. "Rainbow Dash? Lighthooves... when did he come up with this idea for using a bioweapon to discredit the Enclave?"

"About a year ago. Why?" she asked.

"After he returned from his first mission to the surface?"

"His 'mission'? He was just a rookie. Claimed he got lost in a feral lightning storm and took shelter in a surface ruin." She shrugged. "It's happened for generations. Every now and then a pegasus will be so damned curious they'll nip down for a closer peek. Most are so horrified by what they see that they're gung-ho backing up the Enclave's isolation policy. A few stay down. That's why they don't give rookies power armor for their first few months. Why?" she repeated the question.

"Did you know he was related to Doctor Mephitis?" I asked.

"No. Does it matter?"

"It did to him," I said simply. Rainbow Dash just growled in annoyance. I'd been in the dark for months; she would get used to it.

As the elevator descended the shaft, the blue lights dimmed and flickered. "He's using the emergency generators, too," Rainbow Dash said. "I've been doing everything I could to slow him down."

"Time to stop him," I said, then smiled at her for reassurance. "Just keep to the plan. Get it and get it back to me." She nodded, and I closed... I really wished I could close my eyes! "Dealer? Are you there, Echo?"

"I'm here," he replied, his voice small and ghostly.

"You know what I need?" I asked.

"Are you sure about this? Do you have any idea how many ponies you might kill?" he whispered in my ear.

"Probably less than he will if all these missiles fly," I countered. "Can you get it set up?"

"I can. Will you accept responsibility for those who die here?" he asked, his voice tense and on edge.

I sighed. Kill one to save two. Don't kill one and let two die. Which was the moral answer? Was there one? "Yes. Add it to the bill."

"I'll have it ready," he answered simply.

The lift reached its destination, and I stepped out first, walking across the floor of the central shaft to the stairs going down to the fabrication level. When I entered it, I saw a colossal chamber that I guessed was where those six large shields flared out. Below me was an entire self-contained factory. A smelter sat in one quarter, then large machines equipped with rollers and stampers and cutters. A machine shop in a second quarter had cyberponies welding and cutting. A third quarter was dominated by racks and racks of talismans and electrical equipment. The last section had a large transformer from which dozens of thick cables ran overhead to each door and launcher. The astringent whiff of ozone was in the air, and every now and then there was a loud snap and shower of sparks from the hanging lines.

Above these four quarters, around the perimeter of the factory floor on elevated frames, sat the

missiles. Each one looked to be forty or so feet long and five or six feet around. A large round intake sat atop the fuselage, and a pair of five-foot-long wings swept back two thirds of the way from the pointed nose. A pair of smaller wings were near the front of the missile, and a vertical wing towards the back gave me the impression more of a big sleek paper glider crossed with a dart than of a missile. I also wondered who in the zebra empire demanded all their equipment be striped. A little white pony in my head sniffed disdainfully.

Each missile sat in a launch cradle, a half-tube with a vertical plate on the back, before a large metal door; barrels and spare parts were strewn haphazardly across the floor around them. The very doors the cyberponies were using to harass the Enclave. As I watched, one of them rolled up in three seconds to admit a half dozen fliers and then closed just as quickly. Each launch cradle rested on hydraulic pistons that kept it in place. In the very center of the huge space, hanging from the ceiling, was a lit round room with windows on in every direction. A large crane on a rail looped around the room, and from it dangled huge plastic tanks attached to hoses that sloshed with bilious brownish contents, hoses that were being used to fill the warheads of the missiles.

I knew where I'd be if I were Lighthooves. I walked towards the center of that factory. As I passed, cyberponies halted their work and just stared. None of them took any shots, though. I didn't know if it was because they were intimidated, tired, or had been ordered not to. Many looked stressed to the point of breaking, with shaking hooves and haunted stares. Many didn't seem to have the full conversion others did, and I wondered if they'd been augmented against their will... thrown into the machine, cut to pieces, and made 'stronger'.

"It's her! We... we should... we should attack? Right?" a blue pegasus colt not much older than Scotch stammered as his eyes darted around the room.

"No. There's been enough attacking. It's time to talk," I replied.

"Talk?" a mare hissed. "What is there to talk about?"

"You're the enemy. All of you," muttered a stallion, but at this point he could have been addressing me or the entire room from the way his augmented eyes swept the crowd.

"The real reason Lighthooves made you into what you are," I said as I looked up at the control center. The pegasi began to murmur to each other, but they weren't taking their eyes off of me. "He's lied to you. This isn't about plagues or Thunderhead or Neighvarro. This is about him. It's always been about him." Maybe it was the resigned note in my voice, or that I was the pony in the room with the least flesh remaining. One by one, red bars winked to blue, and I continued past them.

A spotlight on the bottom of the control room suddenly painted me in its beam. "That's far enough, Blackjack," Lighthooves said over a loudspeaker. "I suppose this is the point of our climactic battle? Good versus evil? Light versus darkness? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm afraid that I'm pressed for time. The Enclave has attacked a helpless civilian target, and they shall pay dearly for it."

I could almost read it like a script. "I went to Yellow River," I called out to him. "But then, you wanted me to."

The light snapped off, and the door to the control room opened. Lighthooves emerged onto a landing. He still looked more flesh and blood than I, but, then again, the measure of a pony wasn't in flesh and blood. "Yes, I know. I saw what you did. Your demonstration of physical prowess was most inspiring."

"I never really knew why you pointed me to it. That note you left wasn't just for me, though. It was for anypony who came after you. You wanted somepony to see the camp and know what Mephitis

did.” I activated my wings and kicked off the floor, levitating up toward him and setting off a murmur among the watching cyberponies. “But that wasn’t enough, was it? You knew that, even if Dusk or I went to Yellow River, the truth wouldn’t get out. They’d ignore it. Or bury it. Or bury you.”

“History has ever been the servant of tyrants,” Lighthooves replied. “What hope has the truth against such odds?” His grandiose speech matched up with what Doctor Octopus had said. Melodramatic. Immature. I could stall him. Time was my greatest asset at this point. He gestured with his head at the control room and stepped in, with me following. While his back was to me, I flipped open my PipBuck and pushed a button. If he spotted my movement, he didn’t say anything. “So, did you put it all together?”

Standing this close, he was a wreck. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot. “You tell me,” I replied. “You found out that you were descended from one of the Enclave’s heroes. The genius doctor who prevented the Enclave from making a terrible mistake and returning to the surface. And you took pride in that lineage. And somewhere in researching your ancestry, you found out about Yellow River. So at the first opportunity, you went down looking for it. To stand in the place where your ancestor stood.”

“As a descendant of Twilight Sparkle, I’m sure you can relate,” he replied, then smiled smugly. “Oh yes, I’ve done my own checks on you since we parted ways.” His eyes were calm, almost serene. Around the room, papers were thrown all over the floor. Tapes and memory orbs were cast across the controls like garbage.

“I can,” I said. “More than you know. I know that Twilight did some messed up things, too. Ignored people she shouldn’t have. Hurt people she shouldn’t have.” I narrowed my eyes. “Though I have to give Mephitis credit. He committed atrocity on a whole other scale.”

The calm broke, and Lighthooves hissed at me, spittle spraying. “He left them! He took his ill-gotten gains and left them! Left them to starve! I saw the security footage the automated turrets left behind! Some of them lasted for months! Months!” he hissed at me, outrage etched in his face as his spittle speckled my visor.

I continued, calm and cool. “But he was a doctor. A virologist. And, most importantly, a pony the Enclave could use.” I watched the serenity settle over his face once more. “It’s one thing to argue about whether you should or shouldn’t return to the surface if it’s easy to do so. It’s another thing entirely if the surface is too deadly to risk,” I said, and we slowly started to circle around the edge of the control room.

“The Enclave has milked that propaganda for two hundred years. Two hundred,” Lighthooves said with a smile. “The wealth and fame they poured on him has been paid back ten thousand fold.”

“Chicanery told me that you worked out how many lives might have been spared if we’d gone back. Still, what could you do?” I continued. “Who could you tell? It wasn’t enough that you knew. You couldn’t just take that knowledge and be a better pony. Not you. No. You had to act,” I said as we walked. “You needed something they couldn’t ignore. Something nopony could ignore. You needed something so monstrously huge that it couldn’t be covered up. So you approached Rainbow Dash with a plan.”

“She’s always been looking for a way to bring down Neighvarro. It wasn’t hard to convince her,” he replied with a tired, almost rueful smile.

“And for a time, you gathered the pieces. The plague. The delivery system. The targeting talismans. Everything you needed. But something changed. Something that meant the scandal wasn’t enough. What was it?” I asked.

He laughed quietly a moment. “I told you, Blackjack. I told everypony.” His wings reached down

into the rumpled mat of documentation at our feet and swept up a few pages that he shook at me. "The Enclave found out what we were doing, and *praised* us." Disgust dripped from every syllable. "They wanted to accelerate the plan. They wanted to distribute the virus to every corner of the surface, wipe out all hostile life, and, oh, *then* return!" He threw the pages in my face, and they swirled about us wildly.

"So a scandal wasn't enough. Defaming Mephitis wasn't enough. You needed more. You wanted to bring down the Enclave," I said as the papers fell around me.

"Don't tell me they don't deserve it!" he hissed, marching over and smacking a control. One of the monitors lit up, showing a scavenger city being blasted by magical energy weapons. I watched a foal get disintegrated right before my eyes. To my shock, I saw LittlePip, tears streaking her face, trying to collect the dust. "I got that from a contact yesterday. They targeted children, Blackjack!"

I tore my eyes from the screen and returned my attention to Lighthooves. "You had it all set up. You weren't going to create a scandal. You were going to create a *crisis*. After Maripony, things were unstable. There was fear and doubt. You were going to hand over all the evidence with every camera rolling, give yourself over to a huge trial, make Thunderhead the hero that saved the Enclave from Neighvarro's mad agent." I paused, we both stopped, and a vein began to tick in Lighthooves's temple. "Only--"

"Only you murdered the fucking councilor!" he roared at me, eyes wide. "Did she come to arrest you, only for you to slaughter her, or was her death planned in advance as a way to spite me? She might not have been a good politician, but she was a caring pony and a friend!"

"It wasn't me who killed her, Lighthooves," I said, knowing he wouldn't believe me and not really caring anymore about whether he did. "But her death did fuck your plan, didn't it? Stratus wouldn't have investigated like the councilor would. He would have covered everything up. The last thing you wanted. So you fell to plan B: lure in the Enclave fleet and blow it to pieces. That would be a disaster far worse for them, and you could follow up with the plague at your leisure."

"Yes," he said, seemingly once more calm. "But the power draw was too much. It destroyed the substation power grid."

"No. I destroyed the power grid," I replied, my eyes locked with his. His were, at least, still flesh and blood. Still windows to a soul in torment. We both stopped our circling.

"You... how?!" he spluttered.

I smiled grimly. "You don't know the whole story, Lighthooves. You don't know about Dawn, Cognitum, or the Tokomare. You're not the princess... piece... thing on the board, you're just a prawn too. Or are those horsies? Or maybe one of the castle thingies." Okay, I really needed to learn the game if I was going to keep up with the chess analogies. "Point is that there is way more going on than just you and your personal issues!"

"I see. I must admit, I am boggled as to why you would side with Neighvarro--" he began.

"I'm not siding with them!" I snapped, cutting him short. "You self-obsessed little colt; did it ever occur to you that there's more sides to this than just you and your petty, bloody ego trip?" I asked, my words seeming to stun him more than mere blows. "You can make all the little speeches you want. I'm going to destroy this plague, those Raptors, and you. Possibly a great deal more, but definitely the first three," I finished quietly.

For a second, there was doubt; for a second, I hoped sanity would prevail in the end. Then his features turned hard and skeptical. "Oh, are you? You seem so very certain you can. Well, I'm going to have to disappoint you. Those missiles are going to fly as far as they possibly can. I'm even sending a

few to the zebras, just so they can enjoy the fun,” he said with a laugh that just made me feel fatigued. “With Project Steelpony, our own people will be safe, augmented and immune to the plague. Everypony will know the truth. All the lies will be swept away, and finally... it will be over.”

“Why?” I asked tiredly, knowing the answer but hoping that somehow, some way, I was wrong. In my E.F.S., I saw two blue bars moving about; hopefully one was Boo. I put my forehooves on a chair in front of one of the terminals.

“I told you! For truth! For their crimes!” he cried back at me.

“Don’t give me that brahmin shit!” I snapped back. “Look at me! Look at what I’ve done to myself to stop you! No more lies! Tell me the truth!” Do it, I mentally screamed at him. He wanted to. “You owe me that much.”

“Because I hate everything!” he snapped at me. “I hate the Enclave for its hypocrisy and lies. I hate Thunderhead for its mewling complacency. I hate the surface for its savagery and weakness. I hate the past for all that it’s done to us and I hate the future for all that it’s denied us. I hate every drop of blood in my being. But most of all, Blackjack, I HATE--”

And that was the point in which I threw the chair with all my strength right into his face. He flew clear across the room and smashed into the window hard enough to almost drive him through it. “You were going to say ‘you’, right?” I asked, and then I galloped straight at him, slightly enlarged steel-clad horn aimed right at his chest. He brought up all four hooves and caught my skull, deflecting me to the side. I smashed my shoulder into his chest, and together we went flying through the window. We tumbled in the air over the factory floor, and at least a hundred cyberponies stared up at us.

“Doc Oc was right,” I said as I hovered... well, bobbed. “Immature and self-destructive as fuck.”

Lighthooves swept his hoof at me. “Shoot her!” They all continued to stare up at him. “Kill her! A few more minutes and it will be done. Everything will be done!” Still not a one of them moved, and I smiled at him. “What... what are you doing?” he asked in bafflement.

“Mewling complacency?” a mare asked in an angry, low voice.

“You set all this up?” a stallion growled as he pointed his guns at Lighthooves. “You said this was for Thunderhead’s freedom!”

He slowly looked around. “How... you don’t understand. It had to be done!”

“You told me it was for my children,” another mare shouted. “Why?”

He stared at a sea of very angry cyberponies, then gaped at me. I flipped open the panel of my foreleg and showed him my broadcaster. “You wanted to confess your sins to the world? Well, now you have.” I’d forego burning off his cutie mark and branding him a Dashite. He didn’t deserve it. The cyberponies were falling apart. Without the lie of the nobility and necessity of this, the reality of what they’d sacrificed for him was coming home. I heard some ponies screaming in shock. Others wept, and some just sat there in stunned disbelief.

I looked at him and saw a pony who’d lost everything. Everything. Such a waste. I turned to them. “You need to get out of here. Fly to the surface. Get to the Collegiate. Maybe... maybe somepony there can help you. But you can’t stay here.”

“We can still kill him!” one yelled.

Another roared, “Let’s rip off the meat he’s got left!”

Lighthooves glared at me with utter hatred. "You did this. You all deserve this. Command: snapped strings."

Suddenly, every cyberpony around me began to spasm and fall over. Some managed to cry out as they collapsed, gripping their chests with expressions of agony. I thought back to the scavenger in Tenpony. Blood spurted from their mouths as they jerked and shuddered. A few fired weapons as they expired, but in a matter of seconds, it was all over. With three words, he'd killed hundreds of ponies. Mothers, fathers, siblings... all dead.

A purple streak dashed through the air and slammed into Lighthooves, knocking him from the air and across the factory floor into heaps of stacked metal bars. "You monster! You murderer! I trusted you!" shouted Rainbow Dash as her hoof blows rained down. "You betrayed us all!"

"Betrayal is a matter of perspective," Lighthooves spat back. "If I must finish this myself, so be it!" His wings snapped, and he pressed his attack, the two blurring through the air above the factory floor locked in dazzlingly swift aerial combat.

"Boo!" I shouted as I rose to my hooves. If all the cyberponies were dead, then that meant that Hoarfrost's ponies would be here in minutes. From the darkness, Boo trotted out. "Did she find one, Boo? Did she? Did she?" I asked with a desperate smile.

She beamed a smile, reached into her saddlebag, and pulled out a Fancy Buck Snack Cake. "Bwackjack!" she said cheerfully as she presented it to me. I slumped, really not having the time to search for one myself. I panned my eyes over to the racks of talismans, but there were dozens of different kinds, perhaps hundreds.

"That's okay, Boo. That's okay." I rose, hoping I'd get lucky as Rainbow Dash and Lighthooves battled through the air. Lighthooves may have been augmented, but Rainbow Dash was the best flier in history as far as I knew. Maybe I'd find one in... then I saw Boo cupping something in her other hoof. It was a talisman about the size of a hoofball, white, and with a boresight on the front of it. I leaned in, grabbed her shoulders, kissed her hard, and then grabbed it with my mouth; I had to be careful not to bite down too hard, or it'd be lunch.

"Bwa..." Boo said with a very baffled look on her face, then unwrapped the cake, popped it in her mouth, and ran after me.

The pegasi moved almost too fast to follow. Rainbow Dash and Lighthooves streaked in purple and white lines around crackling power cables as each moved to strike the other with as much force as they could. Lighthooves had all the cyberpony control, strength, and resilience I did, but Rainbow Dash's special armor more than once disappeared just before he struck only to blast him from literally out of nowhere. His lightning-fast counterattacks hammered the purple-laminated steel in a shower of sparks.

I flew back up to the control room and found a terminal. I'd only seen this once, but I tried my best to remember everything she'd done. "Dealer, time to make this happen," I said as I scrolled through the commands as best as I could remember them. Outside, Lighthooves and Rainbow Dash were just blurs of color. The talisman flashed red three times, then turned completely red as it was armed.

Time's up.

Suddenly, Lighthooves came flying through the window and slammed into me, and we bounced across the control room floor together. He flipped up while I rolled under the factory control terminals. The bright red talisman went bouncing out the control room door and into the factory.

"Boo! Get it!" I shouted as pulled myself to my hooves. If it broke on the way down... well... I'd

just have to worry about that then.

"Enough!" Lighthooves cried, his flesh bloody and his armor plates dented, and then he rose to his hooves and began slapping buttons as quickly as he could. "I'm ending this now!"

"Automated launch sequence activated," said a cool recorded voice. With a whirl, the doors began to rise one after another. "Fire one." A launch cradle rose up at a steep angle as the end of the missile began to whirl. Then the missile slid down the cradle, out the door, and into open air. A second later the end of it erupted in flame, and it whooshed out into the sky. "Fire two," the speaker said calmly, the launcher already rising up.

"Stop them," was all I could say to Rainbow Dash. With all the fighting going on outside, there was no way the Raptors would be able to intercept all of them in time. As the second missile slid down its cradle and the third one started to rise, she launched herself towards the open door. I flapped like an iron albatross towards the fourth.

Lighthooves rammed into me, and together we crashed into the fourth launcher. The impact from our bodies made the launch platform shriek and shift as it rose above us. The supports snapped off and the entire sling swung to the side. The missile began to slide down... and then I heard a crunch as the engine began to rev up. Together, we looked at the end of the launcher and saw that the nose of the missile had caught on the base of the door. "Launch error. Launch error," the voice said calmly.

Far off to the west, I saw a brilliant explosion. If Rainbow Dash could get one missile, I had to trust that she could get two more.

Lighthooves rose, hatred etched deep in his features as he glared at me. All around us, sparks rained down as the missile in the cradle above started to smoke. "You don't have to do this, Legerdemain," I said as I stared into his stark features.

"I have lied. I have killed. I have betrayed," he said simply. "I'll fire off the rest of the missiles manually if I must, but I will see this ended."

He turned and darted towards the fifth launcher. My horn wasn't working at the moment, still very upset with me after my last teleportation attempt. Still, I had wings now. Jumping over bodies, I activated the levitation talisman enough to get me airborne, snapped my wings, and launched myself with forehooves outstretched at his back. He glanced over his shoulder at me and flattened to the ground so that I sailed straight over him, crashed into the floor, and bounced up into the missile cradle. My wings and hooves ripped into the delicate fuselage, soaking me in something smelling strongly of flamer fuel.

"This can't end well," I muttered.

Then the cradle suddenly tilted, and the missile began to slide down towards the edge. Trailing rainbow-tinted fluids, I ripped free and threw myself over the far side of the launcher just as Lighthooves made for launcher six. The ruined missile tumbled out into open air and, seconds later, I heard a resounding explosion. Plunging after Lighthooves, I dove once more as his hooves began working the launch controls. He paused only long enough to deliver a double-hooved applebuck to my face, sending me flying back into the spent launcher behind me.

As the cradle started to lift, I kicked off with my hooves and snapped my wings once more. Crossing my forehooves in front of my face, I barreled right into the hydraulic lifts of launcher six and sheared them from the deck entirely. Hooves scraping, I scrambled out from beneath the launcher as it fell over, barely escaping being splattered. The wings and engine of the missile snapped off as it rolled from the cradle and across the floor towards the seventh launcher. Barrels marked 'lubricant' and 'hydraulic fluid' scattered before me, and Lighthooves looked up in time to see me charging at him. He

darted into the air, over number seven and moving on to eight. The rolling missile slammed launcher seven and split, spewing more fuel across the launchers, the floor, and me.

Did I mention that the power cables snaking overhead sparked?

With a fluid hissing noise, a sheet of blue and orange flame spread across the factory floor. I launched myself into the air as the fire expanded towards me. Come on Boo, find that talisman. Come on Rainbow Dash, finish those missiles and get back to me.

I flapped over seven and spotted him working on eight's launch mechanism. Canceling my levitation, I fell like a ton of cyberpony. His wings cracked like a pile of twigs as I crashed down on him and rolled off, getting quickly to my hooves. Even though his wings now resembled crumpled paper, he didn't slow in the slightest as he leapt into the air and brought all four metal hooves down on my head. My skull rang like a bell as it hit the floor, and for a second I was sure that I'd black out. But I couldn't black out. I had an enemy to defeat and a nightmare to stop. As I shook it off, he once again beat on me with his lightning kicks and blows... but this time I was much more armored.

I heaved myself to my hooves once more, reared up, lowered my head, and drove my armored horn straight at his chest. He reared up and brought his forehooves to my face... and then the ends of his hooves opened like flowers, three fingers and a thumb springing from each. He grabbed my face, latching down on my horn and jaw, and with a great heave used my own momentum to throw me over him and slam my back through a barrel of fuel that burst like a milk carton and with a resounding clang into the metal floor beneath. Bracing his hindlegs against my body, he started twisting my head far further than it was intended to turn.

"I have to admit, thumbs are useful," he said as sparks of pain broke through my usual numbness. Not a good sign.

Wait. Did he put a design for thumbs in that damned conversion machine?

Only one way to find out. I did something I hadn't done in more than a week and tried to pop my fingers out. With a hiss, the casing around the ends of my forehooves peeled back, and two black hands emerged. Each grabbed his hindknees and pressed with all the torque they could muster. His legs gave way, and, robbed of his leverage, he stopped twisting my head off.

I fought my way to my hooves, and he kicked out of my grip with a powerful backflip, landing several feet away. "So what's the plan? We keep fighting till Rainbow Dash arrives or the Enclave crash the party?" I asked.

"Actually, I'm betting that all those augments draw a lot more power than mine. In fact, I'm pretty sure you've burned through a lot of your reserves. Am I right?" he asked with a smirk.

Oh crap; he was right. I was down to a third again already! So I charged in, trying for a blow to his head to take him out in one hit... but one thing that hadn't changed was his damnable agility. He deflected, he dodged, he did everything he could to keep me flailing wildly with my hooves while he calmly avoided me over and over again. This relatively low exertion wasn't going to eat up my power, though. He was running out of time; any second, somepony else was going to join the party, and it wasn't going to be anypony on his side. So why wasn't he running to the next--

A pink pony in my head then pointed behind me with a worried expression. I chanced a glance and saw the spreading flames snaking closer and closer as pool after trail after splash of rocket fuel ignited. Then I met his eyes and saw his lips spread mockingly. "Or we can find out how fireproof you are, Blackjack."

That was why! And I'd have to move away from the launcher to get away from the flames. He

might get a little toasty, but he wouldn't go up like a candle; he'd certainly still be able to launch this missile. But I couldn't hit him, either, and in a few seconds it would be academic... and my self-extinguishing skills would be tested. Finally, in both desperation and frustration, I reared back to strike; he just smirked smugly, ready to dodge once again.

My hooves fell on one of the barrels of lubricant, the cylinder rupturing and spraying us both with slippery black oil. "How fireproof are *you*?" I countered, grinning at him.

He gaped at me, then flapped, slipped, and slid over to the wall next to the door and a large blue talisman mounted on it, me flapping, slipping, and sliding after him. He rammed his hooves against the talisman, and it immediately flashed to life. "Fire prevention measures, activated," the mechanical voice said, and instantly white blobs fell all over the factory with heavy 'flumps'. One landed right on top of the pair of us, chilling me instantly. I poked my head out of the snowdrift and looked at him as the pristine white quickly stained black around the both of us. He panted, staring back at me, just as filthy and exhausted. The fire was out, the snow steaming from where it'd extinguished the blaze.

Having a few cubic yards of snow dumped on my head really helped cool my anger, too. "I'd really appreciate it," I said as I tried to wiggle out of the snowdrift and just sank up to my chest, "if you just gave up now. Before this gets any more... ridiculous."

"I didn't do all of this just to give up. Not for you. Not for anypony," he muttered as he pulled himself free.

"Come on," I whined, still fighting to get myself up. "Let me do what I have to do. No more plague. No more missiles. And I might save Thunderhead, too." I stared at him, begging him to accept.

"Would you, after all you've done, after all you've been through, give up simply because your enemy asked you nicely?" he asked archly as he stood easily on the drift.

He had me there. "No," I admitted. "Probably not." Then I scooped up a load of snow between my hooves and packed it into a ball. "But if the battle for the future of the Enclave and the Wasteland comes down to a snowball fight, nopony is going to believe it." Well, my friends might, but they were used to my... solutions.

He stared at the ball as I drew my hoof back 'threateningly', then let out a snort. Then I started to laugh as well. Somehow, I doubted that the history textbooks were interested in moments such as this. "I don't believe you," he said after the laughter ended. "I kill hundreds... maybe thousands... and you... Blackjack. Why are you doing this? Don't you care?"

"Of course I care! I know you've done wrong. So have I. Things that I deserve to be killed for. But since then, I've taken every chance I've gotten to do better and improve the world. So I can't just be an executioner," I answered. "I think you should pay for what you've done... but there's so much good you could still do. Killing you's a waste. It's not punishment. It's what you want." That made his smile slide away.

"You are a very strange mare," he replied. "I think I would have been better off getting to know you instead of thinking of how best to use you." He stood up and started towards the launcher again. "But sometimes, there is no second chance. Sometimes, execution is the best option. For everypony."

"Lighthooves..." I warned, then activated my flight and resumed kicking and clawing my way out of the snowdrift, my wings flinging little bits of slush everywhere. Damn it, why did pegasi get to walk on drifts like they were clouds?

"No, Blackjack. I've come too far and done too much to betray it all now," he said as he started

tapping the controls.

Then the engine of missile four, jammed against the door and its launcher, activated and filled the factory with its incandescent thrust, and I didn't hear anything but the roar of combustion. A sheet of fire washed over the ceiling, cable insulation igniting and flames spreading in a glowing fan. An immense cloud of steam formed instantly as the snow all but flashed away from the blast of flame overhead. Thick plumes of smoke obscured anything that wasn't ablaze, and the heat was so intense that pieces of the metal roof began to melt. Cyberpony or not, I'd melt too. I screamed for Boo but had no idea if she heard me over the furious roar of the engine.

Then the missile crushed itself like a tin can, ripped like foil, and exploded in a ball of fire that washed through the factory in a wave. All I could do was curl up in a ball, cover my mouth, and endure. An elegant white unicorn in my mind told me to hang in there. When the fireball passed, I slowly uncurled, tasting the chemicals in the air. A half dozen other missiles were on fire now, tangled and twisted in their launch cradles. I slowly rose to my feet. "Lunch Errrr. Lunch Errrr," the voice slurred.

"Boo?" I croaked out. "Boo!" I turned around, half terrified I wouldn't see her and half terrified I would. I spotted the red bar first. Lighthooves was at the base of launcher seventeen, struggling with the hydraulic jack that would let the missile slide free. Slowly, I approached. He wasn't handsome anymore. His white exterior was charred as black as mine. A dark hole in his chest still oozed blood. His mane was no more than reeking stubble, and the metal of his augments was warped. He attempted with his scorched fingers to connect wires from his chest to the motor. He slowly turned. One eye was cooked like an egg in his skull, and the other was an angry pit of rage.

"It's over," I said simply.

"No. They... they have to suffer... they have to pay... I have to make them pay!" he rasped as his hands fumbled; he wasn't used to using them like I was. I could hear the shouts of the Enclave approaching, orders for them to seize everything.

"You don't have the right," I said solemnly.

"And you do?" he gasped as he lay there.

"No. Nobody does."

He connected the wires to the motor, and slowly the cradle began to rise. "One more. I just need one," he said as he smiled at me. "Unless you kill me."

"I'm not an executioner," I muttered, but this time, the words didn't feel noble. They sounded cowardly and hollow. He was helpless, crippled, and probably mortally wounded.

"There's a first time for everything," he said as the cradle tilted further and further. A few more feet and more death would fly. Killing one helpless, crippled enemy to save thousands. It shouldn't be this hard...

The sound of metal piercing metal filled the air once more.

Slowly, I pulled my horn out of the machine that sat where his heart once lay, blood and cyberpony fluid washing down my face. The lift slowed, then halted. He smiled, his skin cracking and sending blood dripping down the sides of his face. "What was on the piece of paper?" he whispered. "The one you kept showing everypony?"

I fished it out and showed it to him. His remaining eye widened as it passed over the fifteen letters that spelled out those four little words, and then he smiled in honest happiness. "It's over..." he

breathed. Then the red bar winked out. Boo appeared, the Perceptitron perched on her head and the red-glowing talisman in her mouth. Without a word, I moved the former into my saddlebags and took the latter. I tapped the talisman, and it began to blink. I then set it in his hooves.

I walked to one of the open doors, and then Neighvarro Enclave stormed into the tower from all other sides. "Save the missiles," somepony ordered. Then they spotted me and Boo standing beside the door. "You! Blackjack! You and your... robot are under arrest! Surrender!" they bellowed at Boo, who cringed back, and me. Our utter lack of armament was likely the only reason we weren't dusted then and there by fifty armored ponies.

"Surrender. You are weaponless, outnumbered, and injured," an officer barked. From somewhere outside I could hear the whir of a Raptor that was far too close. "You don't have a chance," he sneered.

"I don't need a chance," I replied, showing him the paper. "I have a megaspell."

The red talisman let out a beep and suddenly everything in the room jerked sideways towards the talisman as a purple aura surrounded the orb. The moment was all I needed to grab Boo and jump out of a perfectly good tower. Far below the city, I imagined a troupe of skeletal magical phantasms around a diamond saturated with arcane power for two hundred years. A glance at my PipBuck as we fell told it all.

- >Hoofington Megaspell Complex
- >Access Megaspell Chamber #8.
- >Lock target: Target Talisman 12964-239-428J.
- >Target Locked
- > Cast Megaspell Y/N?
- > Y Authorization EC-1101.
- > Warning, Megaspell #8 at 125% arcane saturation. Do you wish to proceed Y/N?
- > Y
- > Casting Megaspell: Implosion

An orb of purple light flashed out from the middle of the tower, passing through everything as it expanded further and further. I had no idea how far it would go; I might have just killed the Hoof and all my friends in it. A flock of Enclave poured in on me as I spread my wings and tried to get away... and then I felt a jerk that stopped me in midair. For a moment, I wondered if I'd been speared by a power armor tail, but a glance back saw them hanging in midair as well, seemingly just as baffled as I was. Then a soft rushing noise filled the air... and it reminded me of the sound of the air blasting out of the tower. But this wasn't blowing out. It was sucking in.

With every bit of energy in my body, I tasked myself with flying away.

Still, I couldn't help but look.

A hazy purple field of energy permeating the air seemed to be drawing everything into it. The branches with their gantries and equipment shook wildly, and the whole tower began to sway. The noise and motion filled the air with a bassy groan I was sure would carry for miles. Vortices twisted into the open bay doors like hungry mouths, and I watched as the Neighvarro fliers closest to the Tower were sucked in. The Raptors struggled like the *Seahorse* caught in rapids.

With Boo clinging to my back, I only had thoughts of getting away. Below me, the cloud layer boiled and tore like moldy fabric, thick black clouds studded with rotting vegetable matter streaking up towards the Tower in foul gray chunks. I barely got my face covered in time before getting hit with a spray of noxious lumps of mushy plants and wet cloud. A few of the greasy, tumbling balls flashed to dust in

front of me, struck by stray beams from the power-armored ponies on my tail. There was a megaspell going off, and they were still trying to kill me; I couldn't decide if that was dedication or insanity. Maybe both.

Then another purple shell of magic radiated out from the tower, and when it hit me, suddenly it felt like the world had turned on its side. I flapped my wings, trying to propel myself in the direction of 'away', and it felt as if I were once more trying to fly straight up. Then a deep gonging noise reverberated through the air, so massive-sounding that both I and my zealous pursuers chanced another glance back.

The ring of doors and missiles was gone. So were the walls between the doors. Instead, a rumpled seam looped around the Tower where the fabrication level had been, with no gap between the parts of the Tower above and below. The world was still sideways, but the roaring wind cut off entirely; for a moment, silence prevailed. The Raptors seemed frozen in their positions, and silent clumps of cloud and fetid matter 'fell' past me with barely a whisper. I could see the Tower and the other spires of the Core exposed completely beneath me; not even the slightest wisp of vapor obscured the luminous boulevards below. Despite the broken buildings and sickly green glow, in an almost obscene way, it seemed... inviting. As I stared, everything seemed to hold its breath, even the city.

Then a groan, pained, tortured, and so low that it was more felt than heard, echoed across the valley. I watched the crease where the fabrication layer had been deepen and stared as it crept up and down the side of the tower. The groan grew into a wail as the building began to twist and warp before my eyes like a melting candle. The top drooped like a wilting flower for a few moments before the metal finally failed, and then all at once it was snapping and springing apart as the building disintegrated. A plate from the massive armored head reached out like an immense steel paw and caught one of the Raptors; in an instant, the warship shattered, the pieces joining the falling colossus. I only hoped it was the *Blizzard* and not the *Castellanus*.

Something was wrong, though: the tower wasn't falling down, it was falling *in*. The pieces wrapped around the middle where the fabrication level had been, and the sounds of tortured metal grew to a higher and higher scream as the pieces were compressed under the force of the magic... and then another pulse of purple emanated from the shell. As it passed through me, hooks of magic dug into every particle of my being... and we all started moving towards the center of the spell. "Oh no. No no no!" I shouted as I tried my best to flap away, 'up' when I seemed so much heavier to the new 'down'.

I could now hear a tremendous rushing sound. Not of wind, precisely. Not the high-pitched throaty scream of the vortexes I'd heard earlier. This noise was deeper, wetter, more like a current of water than air. As I struggled to move away and failed, I saw that all of us, fliers, Raptors, clouds, and even Thunderhead itself, had begun to orbit the crumpling sphere atop the Tower. The pull ripped away the clouds from more and more of Hoofington, pulling them towards the center of the valley in a great upward spiral, all to be compressed down around the sphere. "This is bad. This is very bad!"

Another chorus of ripping metal filled the air, and I glanced back to see that the immense, collapsing sphere of metal rotated as well, and that as it moved it was slowly stretching and twisting the Tower below it. With a resounding crunch, the foundation gave way completely, and I watched in stunned amazement as the dangling length of the M.o.A. hub flew through the air, a massive length of steel looking like so much string. Another Raptor, straining to get away, was clipped by the end as it passed. The ship snapped in half, and immediately its debris was pulled inward as well. As I watched, the closer the pieces got to the sphere, the smaller they became, as if massive hooves squeezed them to fractions of their former size. In a few more seconds, both they and the dangling tower were gone, wrapped into

the orb.

Now it wasn't just rotten plants and clouds striking me. A storm of garbage and debris from the *surface* began to batter us as we struggled against the mighty pull. The weight of the debris and the force of its flight increased by the second. First papers, then tin cans and dead branches, then limbs of trees... I rotated to the side so that the heavier stuff smashed into me rather than Boo. Another chance glance behind me and... no...

Where the top of Shadowbolt Tower had been was a spinning sphere of purple magic pulling in air and debris from all across the Hoof. Now there were rusty wagons in the debris, parts of houses. I barely heard the screams of the fliers as their lighter frames were buffeted by the shrieking winds. I didn't look for them; I didn't want to see them meet the same fate as that Raptor. And damaged pieces of Thunderhead were being plucked off and pulled into the vortex...

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea...

A little purple unicorn pointed out that the best direction right now wasn't away, it was towards the surface. Her orange friend told me to keep flapping, and a white unicorn told me not to give up and push harder. A pink pony pointed out chunks of metal wagons and hunks of buildings heading for me, and a blue pegasus cheered me on as I looped and dodged the debris as best as I was able. The yellow pegasus just covered her face with a terrified squeak... and... and... for some reason I imagined someone was eating popcorn as they watched things unfold!

If this continued, I might have taken care of Cognitum entirely by accident. I couldn't worry about that at the moment, though; I was flying downward as quickly as I possibly could. That it was towards the Core didn't matter; I was resistant to Enervation, and it hadn't seemed to affect Boo when it spiked the first time. And neither of us was immune to whirling vortices of death! With painful slowness, I pulled us down to the rooftops of the highest of the black skyscrapers... but, given how pieces of them were now flying up towards that maelstrom above, I didn't stop there. I started moving down between two of the obsidian-sided buildings--

And then *another* wave of purple magic swept out, and my direction reversed. No amount of flapping increased our distance from that sphere, and gravity seemed entirely impotent. I once again passed a standing skyscraper's roof, though, and reached out with a hoof, popped out my fingers, and grabbed the metal rail that ran around the edge of the building. Boo began to slide off me with a scream, and I reached out with my other hand to grab her forehoof.

If I'd been only half metal, I think I might have been torn in two. Now I was worried about Boo as she swung above me like a kite in a hurricane. I watched in stunned surrealism as small chunks of skyscrapers began to be pulled up towards that disk. The sturdy railing I was clasping for dear life started to bend...

And then another purple wave swept through me, but this one was heading in, collapsing around the sphere. As it passed through us, I felt one last mighty yank, and then Boo and I slammed into the roof of the building. We lay in a heap, Boo shaking in pain and me holding her as I stared up at the mess above us. In seconds, the sphere collapsed around where the megaspell had activated, then revealed a shimmery, dark orb only a dozen feet across. The disk of debris twisting around it slowed, and the orb let out a thunderous crack. A solid white sphere of cloud and pouring rain expanded, spreading like an umbrella above me

Then the orb, which I guessed was Shadowbolt Tower and everything else that'd been pulled in,

fell to the earth trailing a great plume of hissing cloud and steam behind it. The sphere shot past us into the middle of the Core, and suddenly the skyscraper we clung to leapt beneath us as the entire Core rumbled. The black towers swayed, some smashing into each other as the falling sphere impacted somewhere far below. Flame and dust fountained up from thousands of nooks and crevices, blasting up into the air in dirty gray jets that covered everything in a choking layer of particulates. The rooftop we were on gave way once, and again, and again as floor after floor pancaked beneath us. The walls of the skyscraper peeled away, sending Boo and me tumbling towards the streets below.

I struggled for enough power to fly. To levitate. To do anything to prevent a bloody smack against the broken road below us. I clutched Boo close as my back slammed into strings of cables running from one building to the next, snapping them in my passing. Then again. Then again. Finally, Boo and I landed with a crash atop the rest of the rubble. Then, as if adding insult to injury, we were drenched in a cold, torrential rain. I stared, through the downpour, up the narrow canyon at the slit of now distant sky. The tiny black motes in it turned into pieces of buildings, chunks of wagons, and a barrage of all kinds of other debris falling down upon the Hoof. The shaking earth stilled for a moment, and then a deep, reverberating groan filled the city, a moan of something far below accompanied by a second, slighter tremble of the ground. Then it was gone, and the city filled with just the patter of falling debris and the hiss of rain.

"In retrospect," I said as I lay there atop a pile of rubble in the middle of the deadliest ruin in all the Wasteland, "maybe that wasn't the very best idea I've ever had."

Then Boo straightened, her ears twitching as the clouds of dust swirled around us. "What?" I panted, but then I heard it too. A whining of engines fighting a losing battle against gravity. I stared up as the rolling gas cloud parted to reveal the bow and plasma cannons of a Raptor plunging at us, *straight* at us down into the gap between the buildings, its shattered dorsal propellers sheared away and its supporting storm clouds nothing but tatters. Its edges ripped and tore at the sides of the skyscrapers in a scream of metal as it descended. I made out the name, *Hurricane*, across its bow. As I lay there, only one thought passed through my mind before the ship struck.

Does that count as a boat?

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Whew. You have no idea how hard it was to get this chapter done and out. Holidays, finals, and other drama constantly pushed it back and pushed it back. But this is the end of the Homecoming Arc. Now there's just the finale. I'd like to thank Hinds, Bro, and Swicked for helping me get this done without killing each other, or me, or me killing them... really, a lack of killing all around is good. I'm thankful for folks who took a peek ahead of time. I hope that it's a good read.

Edit: also, I know some folks may think Blackjack's upgrades are a bit... much. Please bear with me three more chapters. I know what I'm doing... I hope.

In other news, we will be going back sometime relatively soon and tightening up Mare Do Well in the second half and make a few other little tweaks to this arc before coming on to the finale. I also want to tell folks I finally got some what steady employment starting in January. Now it's just a matter of hanging on till then. I'd like to thank everyone who sent me tips this month. They're basically the only thing keeping my bills paid that this point. The temp work is... sigh... temp work. Anyway, thank you so

very much, everyone who contributed. Some folks were uncomfortable when I named names, so just know I thank and appreciate you so much. If it wasn't for you, I'm not sure I could have made it.

I also found out that Kkat read Horizons up to chapter sixteen and said it was okay... wildly off canon from what she planned... but good. So that's good too. I will always be grateful for her for creating FoE and letting all of us play in her sandbox. I hope the Finale will meet with everyone's enjoyment. Take care and I hope everyone will enjoy the last arc: Horizons.)