

Fallout **EQUESTRIA**

By Kkat

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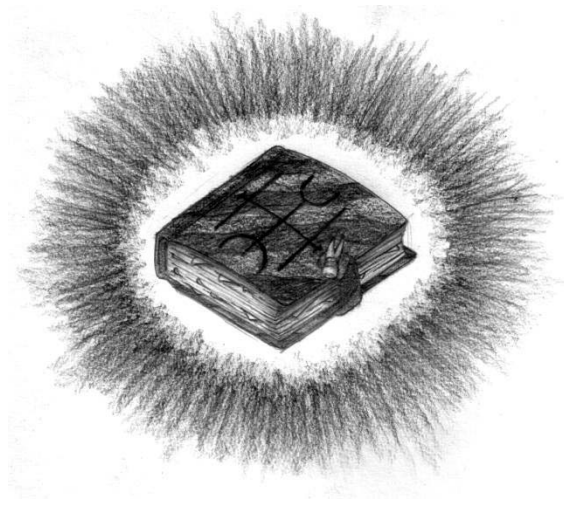
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VOLUME FIVE:
THE VIRTUE OF LITTLEPIP

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



THIS COMING STORM

"We all gotta go sometime. I was just hoping for something more... heroic."

Souls.

Souls are the spirit and essence of a pony, the fundamental core of their nature and the kernel of life that exists beyond the biology of flesh and blood and mental synapses.

I had seen empirical evidence of the reality of souls. Beyond that, my beliefs in an afterlife where the souls of dead ponies continued on in eternal peace and in the transcendent souls of Celestia and Luna as Goddesses who watched over us with love and pity and hope -- these surpassed the foundations of knowledge and were the architecture of faith.

But the two things I did know: souls had a living power, and a soul was a hard thing to kill.

There was no way I could know for sure if the Black Book had been destroyed. But if it was not, then it was either buried under rubble or fused into a crater of glass.

The Black Book hadn't needed to be the conduit of some eldritch cosmic horror, or its pages filled with blasphemous magic, to corrupt those close to it. It was enough that the Book was the host to a wicked and twisted soul -- the soul of an insane, maleficent zebra.

The Black Book called out to those around it who were susceptible to its influence. Two alicorns walked into the throne room. One sensed the presence of the Black Book. The other did not. Calamity had not reacted to it when I had found it; my other friends had been near it as they traveled with me. But it had sunk barbed hooks into my mind even before I had retrieved it. We had encountered two alicorns who had been affected by the temptations of the Black Book without ever having seen it or opened its pages. Nightseer had been transformed by the Book's proximity. She had been one of those who the Goddess had sent to find the Book. Did her telepathy leave her especially defenseless? Had the Black Book filled the void in her mind left by the absence of the Goddess?

I was vulnerable to it. My weaknesses -- addiction, curiosity and the shame of having only a single spell -- played to its strengths.

The soul of the Black Book had been particularly ancient and powerful. I had possessed the Black Book for less than two days, and it had already begun to tempt me. Clumsily perhaps at first; the Book wasn't telepathic like the Goddess. Most of the horrors in my nightmare I had provided myself. The Book merely used the tools my fevered night terrors gave it. And still, I did not have the strength alone to withstand its first probing attacks. To be able to stand against that influence as it continuously tried to erode you away, to hold to any part of yourself after years with the book, much less to take its twisted gifts and create something noble and good from them... that would take a level of moral endurance and fortitude almost beyond comprehension.

Be unwavering!

How often had those six ponies from the past, through the radiance of their souls, given me insights I couldn't have had myself, or allowed me to tap reserves of strength and will that I shouldn't have been able to

muster? They had saved me and guided me since finding Applejack in Old Appleloosa, their influence growing with each statuette I found. But it was only after I had brought them all together that they had been able to intervene on my behalf more directly.

I believe it was no coincidence that Rarity was the first to appear. My mind and soul had ever-so-briefly become the battleground for two warring influences. One powerful soul of evil and madness against six shards that shone with the virtue and hope of Rarity and her five closest friends. The shards of the statuettes were not truly those of the Ministry Mares -- I suppose they were more like Rarity's soul wearing perfect disguises -- but they shone with the true nature of those other ponies. They burned with the love and compassion and virtue and nobility of each of the Ministry Mares in turn. They were eternal, metaphysical images of the deepest, truest nature of those ponies, lit up like beacons, fueled by a shining piece of Rarity herself.

Rarity, whose magical talent had always been in the shadow of Twilight Sparkle, must have seemed like easy prey to the zebra soul within the Black Book. It had been wrong. She was one of the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony for a reason. And when the soul images of the Ministry Mares were brought together, they brought the inner fire that fuels the Elements of Harmony with them. They had proven more powerful, even as mere shards, than the whole soul residing in the Book. Or, at least, powerful enough to give me the strength I needed to fend it off.

If the Black Book could not stand against the gestalt of the Ministry Mares souls when they were only shards, how could it have stood against the whole soul of Twilight Sparkle combined in Unity with three of the most magically powerful mares of her time? The Black Book was not telepathic, but it could sense souls around it, knowing instinctively whom it could manipulate... and whom it could not. That last temptation of the Book had an air of desperation to it. The zebra soul had no way of knowing I was about to destroy its soul jar. It had been reaction to something else.

The Black Book had sensed the Goddess. And it had been *afraid*.

What happens to a soul when it no longer has a body to hold it? Does it truly transcend? Does it spread out, no longer contained -- like the hydrogen in a balloon that has been popped -- until it is no longer truly a soul, indistinguishable from the environment?

What of the souls trapped together in the horror that was the Goddess?

My goal had been to destroy the physical reality of the Goddess, and free the souls trapped inside. To allow Twilight Sparkle, Trixie and the others the rest they deserved and had been denied. I had not expected the Goddess to try to save her children, but I had not expected the impact of the six memory orbs either. By showing those memories to the Goddess, I had awoken something in Trixie. The Goddess had become lost, and I believe part of her was able to find herself in those memories. The Star Orb had been created for comparison; by showing that memory to the Goddess, I had acted like Rarity's mirror had for Pinkie Pie. Just like I had hoped the memories of the Balloon Orb might stir whatever still remained of Twilight Sparkle.

And what about my own soul?

If I died here, would Celestia and Luna welcome me, or turn me away in horror and disgust?

I knew what I had done. And my soul was blackened from it. I had finally taken that step off the cliff; I had sacrificed my own morality and goodness to save the Equestrian Wasteland. I was Red Eye now, through and through. And there would be a price for that.

Thirty-eight minutes would have been plenty of time, but that time was never meant for me. It was time enough for Xenith and Calamity to escape. I had been willing to forfeit my own life.

Thirty-eight minutes would have been enough for the alicorns of the Goddess to have scoured Maripony, found the bomb and disarmed whatever timer Red Eye had constructed for it. But the balefire bomb had never been *in* Maripony.

Thirty-eight minutes was *not* long enough for the alicorns to have fought their way through the maze of Hellhound warrens and found

the bomb hidden dozens of yards beneath Maripony's foundations. The balefire bomb had gone off in a subterranean detonation directly beneath us.



I awoke in pitch darkness.

I felt sick, even worse than in the days past. My body was hot. My mouth was dry. My stomach was twisted painfully but there was nothing in it to heave. My body was covered in sweat. There was a crushing weight on my lower body that brought back memories of a nightmare: being trapped under a wall, crying out while I watched Calamity and Velvet Remedy walk away.

There was a hiss from the darkness below. The floor beneath me slanted away. I would have slid down into the hissing blackness, but I was pinned.

My PipBuck was clicking slowly.

For a few terrifying minutes, I had no idea where I was. Then I remembered the bomb. Remembered running for the safe room. Bucking the emergency button.

I didn't recall a whole lot after that. My memories were a jumble. But I did remember feeling the almighty **FWOMP!!!** from somewhere underneath us. The feeling of the whole room being thrust upwards as the bomb annihilated everything above it. A brief moment of weightlessness and the rush of falling.

Click.Click.

I turned on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, wondering when I had turned it off. A dozen warnings flashed across it. The safe room had survived two megaspells, one almost point blank. But there was a micro-fracture somewhere in its protective walls and radiation was leaking in. Considering how hot it must be outside, the fact that I was still alive and the room wasn't an unbearable oven, spoke amazing praise of

Twilight and her Ministry. But I was swiftly reaching fatal levels of exposure.

I floated a RadAway from my saddlebags, bracing against the horrid taste. According to my inventory sorter, the other medical supplies I had packed -- several healing potions and a vial of Xenith's bleeding-stopper goop -- were all gone. I had been conscious before, but I had no recollection of it.

The magic of the safe room must have prevented me from being turned to paste by the concussive force of the blast alone. Even still, with the fall I must have taken, I was lucky I didn't break my neck. Or anything else. According to my E.F.S., I was remarkably unbattered... for a mare who was dying.

Wait... hadn't there been somepony else in here with me?

Peering into the darkness, I tried to remember. My E.F.S. compass was telling me I was alone. I lifted my PipLeg and turned on the light.

Oh merciful Goddesses!

My PipBuck light shone down a room, tilted at an insane angle. The terminal bank had torn from the wall. The concrete of the ceiling had collapsed in, revealing the shiny purple-tinted metal above it. A large slab of the concrete lay across me, pinning me in place.

Below, the lower third of the room was filled with discolored water, rubble and the mangled filing cabinet. A small spray was coming from a section in the wall which had torn open. Something floated in the dark pool beneath me.

It was a more spacious coffin than the healing booth. But I had been foolish to think this room would save me. I was trapped, locked inside. And even if I could escape, outside was instant death.

I'm out of food, and the safe room's water talisman seems to have been corrupted. Twilight had said. At least, I'm fairly confident that pure water isn't supposed to be that color.

The water talisman was tainted.

The body of what had once been Ambrosia was beneath that water... mostly. Her body had bulged and metastasized under the taint, straining against the armor. A blob of malformed flesh had pushed out through the open visor like a tongue.

A fleshy, grotesquely-misshaped worm floated on the surface of the water. I screamed as I realized it was one of my own hindlegs.

After several long minutes of terror, I realized I could feel both of my hindlegs. Barely able to breathe, I shifted my light, trying to look under the slab that was crushing me.

Both my hindlegs were there, intact and healthy... except one was the pink of exposed skin with only a light fuzz of a coat.

I had lost my leg in the fall... and I had regrown it!

I didn't think it was possible to feel even sicker, but I did. A deep, soul-aching horror filled me as I realized that I wasn't even a pony anymore. I was something else. I wanted to cry, to scream.

Was I a ghoul, transformed by the bomb? Or was this from my exposure to the taint? How far removed was I now from being one of the Goddess' children?

At least the radiation would kill me before the room filled enough for me to drown. Unless I was enough of a pseudo-alicorn that the radiation wouldn't kill me. I prayed that it was.

Please, please.... Celestia, I beg you...

Have mercy on me.

I turned off my light. It was better not seeing.



Something wrenched the safe room. The concrete slab scraped against me as it shifted, drawing blood. The wounds were already closing as I tried to brace myself, worried that the slab might slide off. Then I felt the whole room lift, soaring into the air.

The tainted water washed over me as the room righted itself. The misshaped flesh-blob that had once been my leg washed up against me. I screamed in horror at the slimy touch of my desecrated former flesh.

A violent grinding filled the air, and the metal shutters over the windows pulled away, revealing a purple-tinted sky of clouds filled with blowing ash. The armored glass shattered, the razor-sharp shards hovering and then whisking away.

My PipBuck began to click rapidly.

Somewhere above, I spotted the dark silhouette of a wagon and a glowing light of green and gold. For a moment, I thought it was Pyrelight. But then I realized the glow was coming from a pegasus. Had my friends come to rescue me? How? And at what cost?

“Oh Calamity...” I thought, weeping without tears, “What have you done?”

But something was wrong.

A purple glow enveloped me, a second floating the slab off my leg. I was levitated out through the obliterated window.

The super-alicorn, her coat a dark purple to the point of black, stared at me with glowing eyes as she casually tossed away the safe room, performing telekinesis that would have overstrained me with effortless ease.

The clouds above seemed awfully close. I glanced downward. We were very, very high. Below, the second crater of Splendid Valley glowed in the aftermath.

With a beat of her wings, she flew up level with the wagon above us, bringing me with her.

I realized at once that the wagon was not the *Sky Bandit*. And the glowing pegasus was not Calamity.

“Ditzzy Doo?”

The super-irradiated ghoul grinned happily at me, a sickly golden-green light emanating from her mouth and around her teeth.

The creatures of radiation do not merely heal in its presence. If they absorb enough of it, they grow stronger. More powerful.

Ditzy Doo had come into Splendid Valley looking for me. She had saved me. She and...

The super-unicorn set me on the front bench of the *Absolutely Everything* delivery wagon right behind Ditzy Doo. Without the glow of her magic, the purple tint vanished from the sky, traded for a sickly green. My PipBuck's clicking went insane. We were high enough above the crater for the radiation levels to be merely bad, but Ditzy Doo was shedding enough radiation to make this a very short rescue.

The glowing ghoul smiled and pointed back at the wagon. I turned around, looking in through a small window.

Inside the wagon were crates of RadAway, the packets glowing an inviting orange. I quickly levitated several and began to drink, turning back to thank her.

I stopped as my eyes caught the cutie mark on the super-unicorn's flank: a large, pink star surrounded by smaller white ones.

The super-unicorn was silent, impassive. Her gaze seemed fixed on my saddle bags.

I was struck by a flash of insight. The Goddess sent her children away. But she was telepathic, maintaining contact with them. When her body was destroyed, and the souls of the countless ponies who had been consumed into her were set free, some of them, the strongest ones, found their way into the bodies of her fleeing children.

Possession.

But those bodies already had souls of their own. It was unlikely this could last. Already, the cutie mark on the super-unicorn was beginning to fade.

I scrambled. If this was Twilight Sparkle in any way, there was something she needed to hear. I turned up the volume on my earbloom and levitated it towards her as I found the file.

The voice of Pinkie Pie, tinny and distorted, crackled through the air.

"Hi Twilight. It's me ...



"...I mean, I have you with me now, so you'll kinda be with me anyway. But it's not the same. I want the real Twilight Sparkle. I...

"I want my friend back.

"Please?"

"I'll do anything..."

The super-alicorn had hovered, seeming transfixed by the sound, until the message ended. Then, wordlessly, she turned and began to fly away. The cutie mark on her flank was already completely gone.

"Twilight! Wait!" I cried out after the disappearing alicorn. "Star Sparkle is still alive! And Spike..."

But whatever part of Twilight Sparkle my words might once have been able to reach were gone now. Evaporated. Or, if my heart could hope, just asleep.

I wanted to cry. But my body couldn't produce tears.

I drank another of those horrid RadAways as Ditzzy Doo turned and began flying us out of Splendid Valley.



Ditzzy Doo brought the wagon low as we reached the edge of the valley. We began flying along the border, moving more slowly.

We were searching for something. I wanted to ask what, but Ditzzy Doo couldn't speak.

What did you do? What did you just do?

The voice of Ambrosia fluttered through my mind. I fought to remember.

I'd told her about the bomb. I was sure about that. I couldn't recall exactly what I said, but an antsy mare with a magical energy battle saddle didn't exactly engender a desire to lie.

Her response had been to try to call Harbinger through the broadcaster built into her helmet.

This room is designed to stop megaspells, I recalled telling her. Your radio isn't going to penetrate.

She had looked at me with panic. *I have to tell Harbinger! He has to get out of here. We have to pull back.* Her words had sparked a burst of fear in my breast.

How many ponies do you have outside?

The ground passed slowly beneath us. I couldn't remember any more.

I caught them on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, friendly lights appearing on my E.F.S. compass, before I actually spotted my friends. As we approached a clearing not far from the devastated Red Eye camp, SteelHooves appeared, pulling camouflage netting off of the *Sky Bandit*. Velvet Remedy, Xenith and Calamity emerged from within.

They looked worn, weary and bedraggled. Calamity immediately took to the air while Velvet and Xenith scanned the skies.

Pyrelight was missing from the group. Where was Pyrelight?

"Didja' find anythin' this time?" my pegasus friend shouted. I tried to jump up, but my body just didn't have the energy, so instead I waved. He couldn't see me anyway. Ditzzy Doo was too bright.

Ditzzy Doo flew us in closer, pulling up and hovering at the edge of the clearing. I downed yet another RadAway as she waved Calamity back. I felt weak, sick, half-dead. My body was alien to me now. I

wasn't me anymore. But all of that paled in comparison to the wash of joy at the impending reunion.

I needed to get to Tenpony Tower. Get cleansed of the taint I had suffered, assess what was left of me, and... if Homage would still have me... spend a forever with her and my friends.

A short forever, unfortunately. I had cleared the way for Red Eye to ascend, and he had a host of unicorns he planned to sacrifice in the process. With the threats of the Goddess and the Black Book taken care of, I now had a new quest before me: to brave the Everfree Forest and rescue those unicorns from Red Eye's Cathedral. I probably didn't have a lot of time. Now that Red Eye couldn't count on alicorns for protection anymore, he would likely act fast. But I was in no shape to fight a radroach, much less infiltrate a stronghold. My body was weeping for me to give it care and rest; I couldn't push it further until I had done so.

"Hey! It's Li'l'pip!" Calamity shouted ecstatically. "Hey, everypony! Ditzzy's brought back Li'l'pip! She's alive!"

Velvet Remedy and Xenith began to stomp in applause. Velvet gave out a thankful shout.

SteelHooves whinnied. "Thank Applejack!" He turned to the others. "Okay, let's get out of here. I don't like being in one place too long. Especially this close to..."

The ground erupted. Fountains of dirt burst into the air as half a dozen hellhounds tore themselves out of the ground.

Ditzzy Doo pulled up as one of them swung her magical energy rifle around and fired at us. Velvet Remedy let out a scream. Calamity spun in the air, kicking the lever of his battle saddle, switching ammo. One of the hellhounds closed on Xenith, taking a swipe. The zebra ducked, turning and bucking the hellhound in chest, dropping her. SteelHooves began to fire, his grenade machinegun tearing apart one of the hellhounds as she aimed a multi-gem magical shotgun towards Velvet and Xenith.

“Get to the wagon!” Calamity shouted as he took a shot, staggering a hellhound who was trying to climb onto the *Sky Bandit*.

The earth beneath SteelHooves blasted upwards as a hellhound lashed up out of the ground; the hellhound’s claw slashed in a long arc, slicing through SteelHooves armor.

SteelHooves’ armored body fell to the broken ground with a heavy thud. His armored head rolled a few yards away.

The world stopped.

The battle still raged, but it was someplace far away. All the color and sound seemed to mute, leaving just me, the beating of my heart, and the slow rocking of SteelHooves’ head.

SteelHooves was dead.

A cold, wet chill ran down my body. There was no coming back from that. I’d seen Xenith decapitate a Canterlot zebra. But the little pony in my head was shaking in denial. No, no, she insisted. There will be an ugly warping sound and he’ll be right back with us, just like always.

SteelHooves was dead.

I couldn’t move. Couldn’t feel. Couldn’t breathe. My mind was locked up, the gears jammed.

The hellhounds weren’t going to give me a moment to process, much less to grieve. The hellhound who killed SteelHooves stepped forward, skewered his claws through SteelHooves’ helmet, then spun and hurled the armored head of my companion, trying to knock us out of the sky. Ditzzy Doo dodged and SteelHooves’ head slammed against her wagon next to me, splintering wood. The impact cracked his helmet’s headlamp.

Something snapped inside me.

My horn burst with light, layer upon layer of overglow, brighter than even Ditzzy Doo. The hellhounds were surrounded with light as they shot upwards into the sky, all of them, higher and higher until they were nothing but dark specks. Then they weren’t visible at all.

“SteelHooves!” Velvet screamed, dashing to the fallen, headless body and wrapping it in her forelegs. All the others turned, eyes wide as they realized we had lost one of our own.

THUD!!

The ground shook as the first hellhound fell out of the sky. The mangled, broken body oozed.

THUD!! THUD!! THUD!!

THUD!! THUD!! THUD!!



Do you even know what balefire is?

Another flash of memory tugged at me as we approached New Appleloosa. We were flying low, moving quickly. Xenith stood on the *Sky Bandit*, watching the clouds. I got the impression we should be walking, but my condition was too severe for me to even try the journey.

“Ain’t safe t’ fly no more,” Calamity called out to me, flying as close as he could to the *Absolutely Everything* wagon without suffering Ditzy-exposure. “Damn Enclave have patrols everywhere, an’ anythin’ airborne tends t’ catch their attention. Not that the *Sky Bandit* exactly has a low profile, considerin’ our cloud breach last month.”

We just couldn’t catch a break.

“Ya sure it was Harbinger tha’ ya saw in Maripony?” Calamity asked as we began to slow.

“That’s who he said he was,” I called back, hating how much effort it took to shout.

“Damn. Ah figured this had t’ be big when a whole regiment o’ the Enclave descended on Maripony. Xenith an’ I barely made it outta there. But we blew up a member o’ the Enclave High Council? Ah could use one o’ yer creative swears ‘bout now, Li’lpip.” Calamity frowned. “Congratulations. We jus’ declared war on the Enclave!”

Ouch. But even as I grimaced, I realized that the Enclave had shown up knowing that Red Eye was plotting against the Goddess. If anything, they would suspect he had been behind the bomb, and I had been his agent. Which, on a very real level, was absolutely accurate.

From the Enclave's perspective, Red Eye had just declared war.

I could see Pyrelight circling above the city, a single bird of prey. She let out a hoot as the two wagons landed, Ditzzy Doo setting down a little distance from the *Sky Wagon*. Pyrelight dove out of the air, disappearing into the town.

"Maybe he got out?" I offered weakly.

"Not much chance o' that," Calamity called back. "Moment the alicorns were clear, a huge alicorn shield wrapped 'round alla Maripony. I reckoned she was tryin' t' trap ya inside with her. No pony got out."

Or she was trying to contain the blast. Protect her fleeing children.

With a shield that powerful, generated by the Goddess herself, the only thing that would get out through it was her telepathy... until the second that the bomb killed her. That was, assuming she didn't realize that the bomb wasn't within her shield. In truth, the balefire bomb was planted far enough beneath the facility that it very well could have been *outside* her shield. And if she suspected that, maybe she was trying to save herself.

Either way, it didn't matter. The megaspell-augmented balefire had proven greater than the Goddess' power.

It's magical fire, I had offered, answering Ambrosia even as I realized I really *didn't* know what balefire was, other than green and radioactive.

It's bottled, necromancy-enhanced dragon's breath, Ambrosia had told me. *The magical, disintegrative type of dragon's breath that can send you someplace else. In the case of balefire, probably straight to hell.*

Based on the possession of the super-alicorn (who had probably been a normal alicorn until Twilight Sparkle flew around new crater in

Splendid Valley searching for survivors), Ambrosia's guess was almost certainly wrong. But the concept was still chilling.

Something Rarity had said struck me: *I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia.*

I remembered thinking of Spike roasting an Enclave pony inside her armor. It was horrid and sickening to witness, but I felt a little better about it if I could imagine he was sending her soul straight to Celestia.

Which led to the hurting reality of the body being carried inside the *Sky Bandit*. Should we have SteelHooves cremated? Would Spike be willing?

"We can't stay here," Calamity said, the normal cheer gone from his voice. He looked at Ditzzy Doo. "None of us."

Ditzzy Doo nodded sadly. She dropped one of her chalkboards and wrote on it. "Is this permanent?"

"Nah. Ah reckon it should bleed off, jus' like when Pyrelight soaked in the Fillydelphia Crater," Calamity assured her.

"But Pyrelight took days to return to normal," Velvet Remedy reminded them. Her eyes were still wet and puffy with tears. She had been riding with SteelHooves' body and head, keeping watch over him. "And Ditzzy Doo has taken far more radiation than Pyrelight did. It could be weeks."

The sweet ghoulish mare looked panicked. She quickly erased her chalkboard and wrote "Silver Bell" in large letters.

Velvet Remedy nodded, smiling sadly. "I'll stay here and watch over her."

"You can't," I said, speaking up finally. "We're not allowed inside town."

Xenith looked up in surprise. "We are not?" she asked, her exotic voice betraying her own depression. "When did we offend this town?"

“B’fore yer time,” Calamity said. “Back when it was jus’ Li’lpip, Velvet an’ me.”

“Well, then I am not barred, it would seem,” Xenith asserted. Turning to Ditzzy Doo, she too smiled gently. “It would be a pleasure to watch Silver Bell for you while you have to be away.”

Ditzzy Doo forgot herself, swooping up to the zebra and giving Xenith a tight (albeit squishy) hug. Xenith stiffened but bit back any response. The ghoulish pegasus swiftly backed away, writing “Sorry!” on her chalkboard.

“Hey, look, Ditzzy,” Calamity offered. “Ah might know where y’all could get some help. There’s a mare up in Friendship City whose been researchin’ radiation an’ its effects on creatures. If anypony c’n help ya shed this off quicker, it would be her.”

Ditzzy smiled brightly, one of her eyes rolling upward as she visibly fought her urge to hug Calamity now.

“Why don’tcha travel with us fer a spell,” Calamity offered. “Ain’t safe t’ travel alone, an we’re headed that way, ain’t we, Li’lpip?”

“Tenpony Tower.” I nodded, realizing we couldn’t cremate SteelHooves’s body. He wasn’t ours. “Fetlock first. We have to take SteelHooves back to Stable Twenty-Nine.”

The massive gate to New Appleloosa rumbled open. The griffin bodyguard whom I had seen with Ditzzy Doo before flew out, Silver Bell scampering after him. Her eyes went wide as she saw Ditzzy Doo.

“Mommy, you look like Pyrelight!”

The little lavender filly began to charge across the road between us, trying to reach her. Xenith swiftly caught her, holding her back.

“Mommy!”

I heard a strangled sound. I wasn’t sure if it was from Velvet or Ditzzy Doo. The glowing pegasus rubbed her hoof against her chalkboard, erasing Silver Bell’s name, and wrote something else before picking the chalkboard up again.

Silver Bell struggled against the restraining legs of Xenith and began to cry.

Ditzy Doo trotted halfway to where Xenith was holding Silver Bell -- as close as she dared to get -- and set the chalkboard down on the street.

“Stay away, love. Mommy’s poison.”



The clouds had begun to darken, threatening the Equestrian Wasteland with another storm.

Dark shadows moved just behind the surface of the clouds. As we watched, the shadows took the shape of great black warships descending beneath the cloud curtain. Each warship was a huge deployment hangar and platforms for massive magical energy cannons, flanked by blackest thunderclouds and moving through the air on a dozen propellers. Through my binoculars, I could barely make out the swarms of black dots that were armored pegasi flying in formations between the warships.

“Raptors,” Calamity announced grimly, watching as the warships descended lower, altering course slightly. “Dragon killers.”

I allowed my magic to expire, dropping my binoculars onto the ground next to me. I was at a loss for an appropriately colorful metaphor. Anything involving Luna’s horn now struck me as grievously inappropriate. My gaze found Ditzy Doo, the brightest point of light. She was enwrapped in a lead-lined cloak, something she had the griffin fetch from her shop. An old mailbag hung from her side. But her hooves, face and wings still burned like an emerald furnace.

I recalled something Homage had said as DJ Pon3, claiming a “mail pony” had delivered a letter from Ditzy Doo.

Beneath the anti-radiation barding Ditzy Doo had provided me, and my own barding beneath, my own coat was growing back over my hindleg... my *new* hindleg. Just thinking about that felt deeply

wrong. I'd been drinking enough RadAway to purge most of the radiation from my system, even traveling in the back of the *Absolutely Everything* delivery wagon. But I still felt weak and twisted up inside.

We were just a hill back from Trixie's cottage. In theory, we had stopped for lunch, but nopony was eating. I couldn't stomach anything, Ditzzy Doo didn't have to eat, and neither Velvet nor Calamity had any appetite. They'd both just stared at their cans of beans until Ditzzy Doo trotted up, dropping her chalkboard which said "Your poor beans are getting all lonely. They want to be with their stomach friends."

Calamity had chuckled and nibbled a little after that. Velvet Remedy had just given a sad smile. I drank another RadAway.

"They've been comin' down outta the sky like that the last two days," Calamity informed me. "Ponies are freakin' out. Goin' inta hidin'. Whole damn wasteland feels like it's under martial law." He looked askance at me. "They took over the broadcasts this morning. Both Red Eye an' DJ Pon3. Radio's now all Enclave, all the time."

I put in my earbloom and turned on my PipBuck's radio, trying to ignore the squirming feeling in my insides. Instead of Homage's music or DJ Pon3's voice, I caught the end of a pegasus anthem.

"Greetings, ponies of Equestria. By now, you have seen our ships in the sky overhead. Perhaps our pegasi have even landed in your streets. But there is no need for alarm. Our scouts are merely assessing the current situation before we determine how best we can help you..."

I switched it off. I'd heard better propaganda from Red Eye.

"Ah'm tryin' not t' doubt muhself here," Calamity admitted. "Ah left cuz Ah realized the Enclave never intended t' rejoin the rest o' Equestria. The Enclave wasn't interested in helpin' down here. Now Ah'm second guessin' a lot o' things."

"They tried to make a deal with the Goddess," I told him. "They aren't here to help."

"Yeah," Calamity said dourly, "Ah didn't really figure they were. This is just the backup plan."

Calamity started packing up the camouflage netting again. "Where did you get that?" I asked.

"SteelHooves," Calamity sighed. "When the Enclave first appeared, he procured this from Crossroads. Said we needed t' keep the *Sky Bandit* covered whenever we weren't movin'."

I swallowed. I started to think of all the times SteelHooves had protected us. But ended up just thinking about his voice, that deep masculine rumble -- like Flutterguy's voice, Watcher had claimed -- and how I'd never hear it from him again. My burning eyes wanted to cry.

"He was real good at that," Calamity said solemnly. "Thinkin' tactically."

We shared a moment of silence.

Minutes later, we were flying again. We had been trying to keep low, but the terrain was about to make that difficult. Calamity winged us upwards, gaining altitude as we passed over the ruins of Trixie's cottage.

There were several alicorns standing around it. They didn't pay us more than a fleeting glance. If anything, I would have said they looked lost.



"Tomorrow," Crossroads told us.

I blinked with surprise. We were in the security center of Stable Twenty-Nine. A somber air hung over the entire Stable. SteelHooves' body had been taken into the Crusader Maneframe room by an honor guard.

"Tomorrow?" I asked, swaying slightly. My body felt so weak; my hooves wanted a rest. My mind was fogged, but I was fairly sure that the new acting Elder's announcement was abnormal. "Isn't that... awfully fast?"

Star Paladin Crossroads neighed. "Every Steel Ranger outcast who would be able to make it is already here..."

"Applejack's Rangers," Calamity spoke up. At Crossroads' querying look, Calamity explained, "Ah know that ain't an official name, but that's how SteelHooves thought of y'all." Looking down at his hooves, he added, "Should honor it, 's'all Ah'm sayin'."

The brown mare with the cropped yellow mane nodded. "As I said, all the Applejack's Rangers who would be able to attend the Elder's funeral are already here. There is no delay. It would be unseemly to allow his body to... go unburied."

I imagined there were internal matters to address as well. SteelHooves had been the leader and symbol that all these rangers had rallied around. With him gone, Crossroads had to act quickly to keep the rangers from falling apart. Everypony seemed to expect Crossroads to step into the role of Elder, many already acted as if she was, but I sensed there was official protocol to be attended. And Crossroads was not willing to take those steps while SteelHooves remained unburied. Her love and respect for him were too much to allow that.

"Will you be able to attend?"

"Wild manticores couldn't drag us away," Calamity said. I quickly offered a prayer to Luna that Calamity's words didn't beg prophesy.

I nodded. "I couldn't travel any more tonight if I wanted to," I smiled grimly. I was having trouble standing. "We'll stay the night, so long as it is all right with you. And you have a place Ditzzy Doo can stay safely."

Crossroads smiled grimly. "Your glowing friend? We can put her in one of the shielded rooms in maintenance." She explained, "I'm not going to turn away somepony just because she is a ghoul, especially not

on the eve of SteelHooves' funeral; but I can't have her trotting about the Stable either. She is dangerous to those around her."

I nodded. I knew Ditzzy Doo would understand.

"Where..." Nope, that was it. My legs decided that they were done with this standing thing and wanted to try something else. How about falling over? Yep, that sounded good.

Thump.

"Li'l pip!" Calamity reared, his voice full of worry.

"I... I'm fine," I told him quickly. "Floor's nice. I think I'll just stay down here for a little while."

Crossroads stepped forward. "What's wrong with her?"

"Li'l pip was in Splendid Valley when the megaspell went off," Calamity told him worriedly. "She keeps breakin' all the rules an' survivin' the impossible, an' Ah think reality is kickin' her tail fer it."

"I'll have our medics..." Crossroads was saying.

"Ah'm getting Velvet!" Calamity swore, turning and flying out of the room.

I sighed. All this fuss. I just needed to rest a bit. Just a little nap...



Dark grey clouds hung over the Equestria the next morning. A cold wind blew across the grass, bringing the scent of impending rain. Soft rumbles of thunder growled in the depths of the cloud curtain. Somewhere in the distance, the cracking booms of some sort of gunfire echoed across the landscape.

We were gathered on the greens of the rolling hills near SteelHooves' Shack. The wind rippled the dark water of the lake. Behind us, Ditzzy Doo stood near a single large tree on the hilltop. She had draped a large black sheet over her lead cloak, her glowing face and hooves

shining out from under it. The ghoul pegasus had somehow known to bring several such sheets.

I sat in a wheelchair just up the hill from the rows of armor-clad rangers that flanked both sides of the procession. I had been up for little over an hour. I had passed out on the floor of the security center and slept all night in the Stable Clinic. The rest had done me a world of good, but I still felt terrible, and alien in my own body. Velvet Remedy had washed me, hardly speaking a word the entire time, then insisted I attend the funeral off my hooves.

Calamity had created black dresses for both Velvet Remedy and myself out of the additional sheets provided by Ditzzy Doo, again demonstrating his freaky knowledge of sewing. The cloth matched the color of my heart. I was drowning in sorrow, but I still hadn't managed to cry. I felt like I was broken.

The Rangers on each side of the aisle stomped slowly in unison, a processional beat.

Six Rangers in ceremonial barding walked slowly down the cleared aisle, their mouths holding the rods that held up the platform upon which SteelHooves' body rested. I noticed that Strawberry Lemonade was one of the pallbearers. Tears were spilling from her eyes as she kept step with the larger stallions, walking SteelHooves to the hole in the ground that would be his final resting place.

Somepony had welded SteelHooves' head back on. Somehow, that was what got to me most. My breath caught, then came out in shudders. My whole body began to tremble, wracked with sobs.

Velvet Remedy reached up a hoof and held me gently. She had been crying softly since we left Stable Twenty-Nine, and most of the trip here yesterday. Now she comforted me while the dam inside me broke. My eyes burned fiercely. I still had no tears, but my whole body did what my eyes could not.

Star Paladin Crossroads stepped forward as the pallbearers reached the pit. She began to say the words she had written the night before, words spoken on SteelHooves' behalf.

“Applejack’s Rangers,” Crossroads began. “That’s what Elder SteelHooves called us...”

My mind drifted as Crossroads spoke. I went back to when SteelHooves first began traveling with us.

So... why are you still with us? I had asked SteelHooves

Maybe I have nothing better to do.

“...lived through more than any of us could imagine,” Crossroads was saying. “He survived more than we could fathom. And through the centuries, his heart never strayed from his love and commitment to one single mare...”

I’d doubted him. He had kept his motivations, like his feelings, close to his chest. I remembered with pain that there was a time I considered bucking him to the curb.

I follow you because you are a better pony than I am. And you remind me of somepony else. You honestly strive to help and protect other ponies. I believe she would have approved of you.

He’d said that when I’d called him into question.

I haven’t been faithful to my Oath for a long time. But at your side, I can be again.

“...nothing more appropriate than to repeat the words he spoke to us all,” Crossroads reminded the Rangers gathered before her. “In the words of SteelHooves: I call on you to stop and consider your Oath. Consider where you are and what you are doing. Do your loyalties lie with Applejack, the Mare of the Ministry of Wartime Technology, the creator of the Steel Ranger armor and the mare who by Her own hooves, the sweat of Her brow and the honesty of Her heart forged the Steel Rangers?...”

Another memory galloped on the hooves of the last. SteelHooves and I staring out over the harbor, looking towards Friendship City.

I need to thank you, Littlepip.

For what? I had asked.

For failing, SteelHooves had answered, surprising me. *All this time, you have been somepony to look up to. You have made me want to be a better pony. But at the same time... you were too good. You were an impossible standard. Tonight, you have made it easier for me to live with myself.*

I curled up against Velvet Remedy, burying my face in her dress.

“...Applejack was put in charge of the Ministry of Wartime Technology because She was the Bearer of one of the Elements of Harmony, and the ruler of Equestria recognized the caliber of that. Do you think it was the Virtue in Her soul or the jewelry on Her neck that made Applejack a Bearer?” the mare who was soon to replace SteelHooves continued to speak his words with the reverence they deserved. “Today, you must choose with whom your Oath lies.”

Another memory surfaced, filling me with fresh pain for my friend and for all he had lost.

It's better that my child never knew me.

SteelHooves had been a haunted pony. The shadows of his past, his sins and mistakes, pressed down on him.

I'm sorry, Littlepip. I did everything I could to make them believe taking Stable Two was a mistake. I have been for decades. But after you two showed up, and they realized there was still a functional Stable down there...

I had been so angry at him, even though he had tried his best. Part of me had wanted to kill him on the spot. He didn't resist or fight back. Instead, he had stepped up, become the better pony he had wanted to be.

Thank you, SteelHooves, Xenith had said. *For helping my daughter's village. I know it must be hard for an old soldier to help zebra kin.*

Applejack would have wanted her Rangers to protect all good people. Not just ponies.

He had struggled with his own prejudice. And was finally beginning to overcome that too. He had taken steps on a path to recovery that he would now never be able to complete.

I tried to remember the last thing I had heard him say. A warning, urging us to move. But the words themselves slipped from my memory. Instead, the actual words I clearly remembered my friend speaking were: *The rest of you can go ahead if you wish, but Applejack would not want her Rangers to ignore a cry for help.*

“...carry on in his name and in his memory,” Crossroads said, concluding her eulogy.

There was a pregnant silence, broken only by the wind and the sounds of strange gunfire that continued in the distance, unabated.

“Is there anypony else who wishes to speak?” Crossroads offered, the sadness soaking her voice, “Before we lower SteelHooves into his final rest?”

I pulled myself from Velvet Remedy and focused my magic, rolling forward. She walked beside me as we made our way to the front.

I turned towards the expectant heads of the Rangers. I opened my muzzle, but my voice caught in my throat. Another sob shuddered through me.

I stared down. Again, Velvet put a steadying hoof on my shoulder. “I...” I swallowed heavily. “I only knew Applesnack for a short time. B-but I may have k-known him better than anypony. He shared th-things with me. M-m-memories...”

I stopped. I couldn’t continue. Instead, I lifted my PipBuck-infused leg. Velvet Remedy’s horn began to glow.

“I... There’s nothing I can say to do him justice. But as Applesnack is lowered, I want to play this song. It was his and Applejack’s song.”

I started the music. Velvet’s magic amplified it beautifully, allowing it to carry across the grassy hills, wafting over the pits of sand and out across the lake like a breeze.

"I want to calm the storm, but the war is in your eyes.

How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?

When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding

And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won't survive?"

As the song played, the knights stepped forward, setting down the platform where SteelHooves' body rested, encased still in his Steel Rangers armor adorned with red trim and Applejack's cutie mark painted on the flank. The platform rested over the pit, the poles resting on the edges of the freshly dug earth.

"All things will end in time, this coming storm won't linger

Why should we live as if there's nothing more?

So hold me 'neath the thunderclouds, my heart held in your hooves,

Our love will keep the monsters from our door."

The song was only marred by the rumble of distant thunder and the persistent sound of weapons fire. Strawberry Lemonade stepped away, her tear-reddened eyes meeting mine. Then she turned away, looking into the distance.

I heard the sharp intake of air as Strawberry Lemonade gasped. I lifted my gaze in the direction she was staring. Far, far away, I could see the mountain range that ran through Equestria, the silhouette of Canterlot jutting from the tallest cliffside, wrapped in a haze of pink that had been slowly bleeding away over the last few days. Dark forms hovered around the city, sparking flashes of colored light.

"For I know tomorrow will be a better day.

Yes, I believe tomorrow can be a better day..."

A few other Rangers were turning to look, although most kept their focus reverently on SteelHooves. Against the better judgement of my aching heart, I floated out my binoculars and turned them towards Canterlot.

Enclave Raptors, several of them, were firing on the Canterlot Ruins. No, I realized as a spike of disbelief and dread lanced through me. They were firing *under* the city!

Oh Goddesses! They *couldn't*!

But even as I thought the words, the reinforced supports beneath the royal city gave way. The city above shifted, white towers cracking and breaking apart as the whole of Canterlot crashed down the mountainside.

The rumble echoed over all of the Equestrian Wasteland, almost indistinguishable from the rest of the distant thunder. A black pit swallowed my heart.

We'll come back for her... I had promised. *Until then, she's safe here.*

My last promise to SteelHooves. And now I would never be able to keep it. The Enclave had destroyed the Canterlot Ruins, casually killing everypony in Stable City.



The wind cut into my mane as I stood before the gravemarker that one of the ranger ponies had already created. It was a beautiful, stately marker fashioned from a large chunk of polished rose granite that had been scavenged from the Fetlock Chamber of Commerce. Red and grey. SteelHooves' colors.

Here Rests

ELDER "STEELHOOVES" APPLESNACK

Forefather of Applejack's Rangers

Steadfast.

Enduring.

Unwavering.

...and a true friend.

Calamity stood beside me. Velvet Remedy just behind. “Xenith should be here,” I noted mournfully.

“Ayep,” agreed Calamity.

“She’s here in spirit,” Velvet Remedy reminded us.

I looked down at the base of the gravestone, and the special holder that had been fashioned there.

“She ain’t the only one,” Calamity said, following my gaze.

In that special niche rested the orange statuette with the blonde mane and tail which I had told Crossroads that she would find in SteelHooves’ shack. The words “Be Strong!” were barely visible where the base was set into the granite. His little pony would watch over him forever. The spirit of Applejack would never leave his side.



I rolled slowly down the hall of Stable Twenty-Nine, my thoughts filled with shadows and regrets and pain. I’d failed SteelHooves. He was dead, and I had failed him. He’d only asked the one thing of me. He’d asked me to save just one pony. But I had left Star Sparkle in Canterlot, and now she was dead.

I wondered if the Enclave even knew they had wiped out a village of ponies. If they had bothered to check before they started their attack. If they even cared.

I reached the end of the hall and looked up at the lit banner above the door: Vinyl Scratch. I lifted a hoof and clopped it against the door. “Velvet?”

A voice drifted out from inside. “I want to be alone!”

“Velvet, please...” I knew she was taking the loss of SteelHooves hard, but I had begun to really worry when Calamity had told me she had locked herself in Vinyl Scratch’s room. “...it’s time for us to go.”

“I *said* I wanted to be alone!” she shouted from behind the door, making me flinch.

“Velvet?...” Something was wrong. Even more wrong than I knew. “Please, talk to me.”

I heard the door unlock. The metal slid away with a pneumatic hiss. Velvet Remedy was standing there, looking wrecked, a cross expression on her face. Her horn was glowing.

“You don’t want to talk to me right now, Littlepip. Now go.”

I focused, beginning to roll inside. She telekinetically threw something at me, hitting me in the chest. I looked down at the object which had bounced off me and fallen into my lap. It was a box of memory orbs.

SteelHooves’ memory orbs.

“You knew!” Velvet said firmly but surprisingly without accusation. “Calamity told me that much. But I didn’t realize SteelHooves knew too. All of you did.”

Oh Goddess! She’d looked at his memories. She’d seen him dying on the battlefield the day that Fluttershy first tested the megaspells!

“Velvet...” I began only to find there was nothing I could possibly say other than, “I’m sorry.”

“Just. Go.”

I choked. “I... I was trying... I should have...”

“Told me?” she questioned, a pained smirk crossing her muzzle. “I know why you didn’t. You were trying to spare me the truth. Trying to save me. And others, I suspect. That’s what you do, isn’t it?”

There was something in her voice I deeply disliked. I had been fearing this day for weeks, sure that the truth about Fluttershy’s role in the end of things would devastate Velvet Remedy. But I was expecting rage, screaming... not this.

“Fluttershy... she made a mistake,” I offered, wanting to tell Velvet that the megaspell bombs weren’t really Fluttershy’s fault. That all the death and destruction shouldn’t be laid at her idol’s hooves. That it was okay to still love Fluttershy. “She created...”

“Fluttershy created something beautiful,” Velvet Remedy interjected sternly, brooking no room for argument. “The only mistake she made was that she gave it to anypony.”

That... well, I should be relieved to hear her say that, right? So why wasn't I?

“Now if you'll excuse me, I want to be alone,” she said gravely. “I don't think I can travel with you anymore.”

“What?” I breathed, my wounded heart breaking. I couldn't lose another friend! Not now. “W-why?”

Velvet Remedy huffed, becoming truly cross. “You really want to leave, Littlepip, before I say something we will both regret!” She began to walk away, trying to close the door behind her. It refused to shut, sensing that I was in the way.

“But...”

Velvet Remedy spun, stomping. “Fluttershy's mistake was giving the megaspells to other ponies. She'd created magics of life and healing. How could I not love her for that?” She glared, “But it was beyond naïve to think she could give megaspells to anyone without them being turned into something horrible!”

I fought to respond but my brain wasn't working. I felt paralyzed as I watched one of my dearest friends seem to self-destruct.

“Oh, I understand why she thought other ponies would use the spells for good. I've been just as stupid. I've spent all my life wanting to help ponies because I've held to this idiotic, naïve belief that, deep inside, we are inherently good. That we deserve to be helped. To be saved.”

Her words were giving me unpleasant flashbacks to Mister Topaz. “We... we are basically good.”

Velvet Remedy laughed a broken, nasty laugh. “Haven't you been paying attention, Littlepip?” she scolded. “Did you somehow miss Arbu? How about Fluttershy's Cottage? Or every other damn thing we've seen?” She shook her head. “Deep inside, we're all raiders.”

My muzzle hung open. “No! That’s not true.” I knew Velvet Remedy was hurting. I prayed this was her pain speaking. I couldn’t bear seeing her like this.

“No?” she countered. “Even the best of us fall to evil at the drop of a hat. Do you know what the worst thing I have ever done in my life was?” I suspected she was about to bring up killing the raiders in Fluttershy’s home, but she surprised me. “It was when I tried to use you to make Calamity jealous. I knew you loved me, and I...”

She lowered her head. “It was horrible. What I tried to do was cruel and *unkind*. I didn’t deserve forgiveness.”

I wanted to reach out and hug her. To hold her. “But I forgave you,” I told her softly. “We all have moments of...”

“Evil?” she interrupted. “That’s the point, Littlepip. Hell, you’re possibly the most selfless, noble pony in the wasteland, and look at what you’ve done. We’re here attending SteelHooves’ funeral because you decided to set off a megaspell in their den.”

I reeled as if she had bucked me.

“Honestly, I know you just think of them as monsters. And I even know why you had to do it. The Goddess was a threat to everyone and everything. But... you blew up their *home* to get at her, Littlepip!”

Oh Goddesses!

“You massacred all those monster families with their little monster children.” Her tone was sad and without malice, but each word slammed into me with the force of a sledgehammer. “Honestly, what did you expect them to do? Roll over? Play dead?”

She looked directly into my eyes. “SteelHooves is dead because of what you did.” My whole body went numb. “And the worst part is that it was the right thing to do.”

All of this... SteelHooves’ death... it was all my fault!

“And you are the best of us.” She reached up and pushed me out of the doorway with a hoof. “I’m not coming with you, Littlepip. I can’t

help save the wasteland if I can't believe the ponies in it are worth saving."

The metal door slid shut between us.

I fell out of my wheelchair and curled up on the floor, hurt beyond the telling of it.

Finally, the tears came. And they wouldn't stop.



Calamity came looking for me. I didn't want to move. I wanted to just die.

"I... I did this," I moaned, unable to cry anymore.

"Now ya stop that right now, y'hear?" Calamity ordered. "Ya risked yer own life an' nearly lost it savin' the Equestrian Wasteland from one o' the biggest threats Ah could imagine. Yer a big damn hero, and Ah won't stand fer none of this self-pity."

"That bomb killed... how many?" Hellhounds, pegasi. How many unintended dead. Just to take out the Goddess. I imagined even Red Eye would be appalled at how I had discarded my morals.

"Way Ah see it, ya saved everypony," Calamity told me. "An' weren't yer fault the damn Enclave showed up when they did. Nopony coulda predicted that."

"How about the hellhounds?"

Calamity nickered. "Aw, dammit, Velvet!" He stomped. "The hellhounds are nothin' but murderous, territorial monsters who kill ponies indiscriminately. They have been fer centuries. Y'all saved countless lives by wipin' so many o' 'em out."

He was right, but that didn't stop me from thinking of magical dragon's fire burning away monster families filled with helpless, screaming children.

"Let's go get ya well, Li'lpip."

I blinked, looking up at him. “You’re coming with me?”

I was actually surprised that the pegasus nodded. “Ah want t’ stay with Velvet. Be here for her,” Calamity told me, flapping his wings in his discomfort. “But y’all need t’ get t’ Manehattan. An’ it ain’t safe fer y’all t’ travel alone. A sick heroine an’ a ghoulish merchant?” He shook his head. “She’ll be hurtin’ somethin’ fierce, but if Ah don’t come along, Ah reckon ya might not make it. An’ Ah ain’t aimin’ t’ lose any more friends this week.”

Manehattan. Homage. My heart was bleeding out. I needed her so badly. But the idea of seeing her again filled me with dread. How could she possibly want anything to do with me after all I had done. After what I had become.

He leaned down and gave me a nuzzle. “Especially not muh first one.”

I felt a brush of warmth against my bleak, dying heart. “Thank you. I... I’m sorry for pulling you away from her.”

“From what Ah gather, y’all ‘ave given ‘er more help than Ah could. If there’s any way outta the darkness she’s in right now, those little statue thingies are the best guides she could hope fer.”

Sometimes, my pegasus friend was startlingly wise.



Calamity and I huddled together in the back of the delivery wagon, clad in anti-radiation barding. (Our ghoulish friend had smiled broadly as she produced the second suit from the back of the wagon, this one tailored for a pegasus stallion. I was beginning to think Ditzzy Doo really did carry *absolutely everything* we might need.) Calamity had strapped his battle saddle on over the anti-radiation barding, foregoing his normal armor. Even with the barding, we were having to consume RadAway at least once every hour. Calamity didn’t have to be in here with me, but he insisted. I was both thankful and annoyed with him for it.

Calamity didn’t want to risk taking the *Sky Bandit* into Manehattan. Crossroads had confirmed reports of a lot of Enclave

operating within the city. So we would either have to go in on hoof, or in Ditzzy Doo's wagon.

The trip shouldn't take more than a few hours. We were going to stop at Tenpony Tower first, drop me off. Then Calamity was going to go with Ditzzy Doo to Friendship City. If Homage would still have me, I hoped to spend a week wrapped in her embrace.

"Aw pony feathers," Calamity said, looking up from our fourteenth game. "Best of thirty-nine?" I was beginning to suspect he was letting me win. Really, nopony could be this bad at Tic-Tac-Toe.

I felt the wagon slow.

"Aw hell," Calamity spat as two Enclave pegasi shot past the wagon and yawed, circling back towards us.

"Halt, pegasus!" one of them called out, her armor magnifying her voice and altering it with an intimidating reverb, **"Identi... great leaders, what the hell is that thing?!"**

Not good.

Tzzrartch! Tzzrartch!

"They're shooting at us?" I gasped. The two Enclave pegasi had opened fire on Ditzzy Doo!

The wagon went into an abrupt dive. Calamity and I tumbled against the wall of the wagon along with several crates. One, containing dozens of packets of RadAway, spilled open, scattering glowing orange packets. Several fell through the window that looked out the front of the wagon.

I pulled myself to the window and peeked out as the wagon began to pull up, twisting as Ditzzy Doo made a hard turn, weaving through the piers of the Luna Line. Smoke curled off a hole in her lead barding just behind her left wing, glowing ichor seeping from her wounded flesh.

Tzzrartch! Tzzrartch!

Above me, part of the roof glowed, a hole the size of a foal disintegrating away. I floated out Little Macintosh, pushing myself onto a toppled crate until I could see one of the attacking pegasi through the opening. I slid into S.A.T.S.

Calamity launched himself out of the back of the wagon, taking wing as I fired several shots into the black carapace of the Enclave soldier. Two of the bullets glanced off the armor, but the third penetrated. I ducked back down, needing to reload with either armor-piercing or magical bullets.

Tzzrartch!

The wagon shifted again, all of the crates sliding towards the open rear gate as Ditzzy Doo tried to gain altitude. I cast out a levitation net, trying to keep Ditzzy Doo from losing all the wares she was carrying. A bolt of magical energy flew into the wagon, striking one of the metal boxes and melting it, destroying whatever had been inside.

I could hear Calamity's battle saddle firing. "Deadshot" Calamity. I was sure he hit his mark.

One of the Enclave pegasi was swooping in right behind us. The gems in her battle saddle crackled, glowing brighter as the pegasus switched to more powerfully charged sparkle packs. I lifted Little Macintosh, my targeting spell allowing me to lock onto the pegasus' head. I hadn't had time to swap bullets, but if I could hit the visor, I was sure my shot would go through.

I was thrown back violently as Ditzzy Doo suddenly came to a complete stop. The chasing pegasus tried to pull up, but slammed jarringly into the back of the wagon's roof.

We started moving again as the black carapace-clad pegasi dropped to the ground, unconscious.

I was cleaning up the crates, levitating them into order when Calamity flew back in.

"Sorry, Li'lpip, but Ah couldn't bring muhself t' kill the fellow," he said, his muzzle etched in a grimace. "Ah grounded 'im wi' a shot

through the wing, but we're likely t' have more trouble from that lot." He looked away. Ah used t' be one o' those soldiers."

I understood. "Do you want to talk about it?" Calamity shook his head.

"Not right yet. Let's get ya better first," he said, looking for time. "But yeah, Ah reckon Ah'm gonna have to talk 'bout this, and sooner than later."



"Oh it just keeps getting better," I groaned as we spotted the Enclave array on the top of Tenpony Tower. Ditzzy Doo veered away, looking for a safe place to land, someplace out of sight. We would have to approach Tenpony on hoof. Or, more precisely, I would. The Enclave presence in Tenpony meant that it was no place for either of my pegasi friends.

A memory resurfaced.

Open it back up! Ambrosia had yelled, ordering me as the antenna-like weapons of her battle saddle had glowed threateningly. *You open this room right now, or I swear by the Council I will teach you what it's like to melt!*

I can't. I had tried to reason with her. *I'm as trapped as you are. This room can only be opened from the outside.* And, based on the videos I had seen on my first trip to Maripony, only by the Goddess.

That was all. Just a flash. A fragment of those thirty-plus minutes I was missing.

Ditzzy Doo landed in the darkened mouth of a crumbling chariot-wash. She unhitched herself from the wagon, digging a healing potion out of the mailbag slung at her side.

"Ditzzy Doo? Calamity? Would you wait here for me?" I asked plaintively. "Just a few hours. In case I can't get in? Or something goes wrong?" In case Homage kicks me out.

Ditzy Doo nodded swiftly. Then dropped her chalkboard and wrote a single word:

“Muffins?”

I smiled. “If I can get Homage to bake some more, absolutely!”

A few minutes later, I was walking through the rubble towards Tenpony Tower. The building seemed so much more imposing from street level. It towered upwards, the only truly intact building anywhere close to its size, rising out of the graveyard of Manehattan like a lighthouse, serving as both beacon and warning.

My hooves trod between emptied cans of food, old campfires and a dozen other reminders that part of Red Eye’s army had camped around the tower, cutting it off from the rest of the Equestrian Wasteland, threatening to destroy it with a balefire bomb.

The balefire bomb I had talked Red Eye into sending to Splendid Valley so I could use it to kill the Goddess and destroy the Black Book. And kill countless others, including SteelHooves, in the act of it. The thought clawed at my heart. The little pony in my head wept quietly.

I stopped, leaning against a giant “S”, one of the more intact letters which had come crashing down from the face of the building. I wasn’t breathing right. I wanted to collapse again, and I couldn’t tell if it was from the sorrow threatening to overwhelm me, or the weakness that was wrecking my body. They felt like one and the same.

Ahead, I saw the main entrance to Tenpony Tower had been armored over. The whole lower floors were barricaded with a yard of magically-fused rubble. The only way in, other than the roof, was through the Four Stars station above me. I had known this, of course. But it didn’t make the idea of levitating up to the station any less exhausting.

I looked upwards, and saw the black, insectoid form of an armored Enclave soldier striding across one of the tracks above me. With a flick of my hoof, I turned on the MG StealthBuck II and became invisible.



“What do you mean, she’s not here?!” I cried as I followed Life Bloom.

Life Bloom led me through the secret parts of Tenpony Tower. Places that neither the citizens of the tower nor its new, armor-clad guests knew of.

“Just that, Littlepip,” Life Bloom affirmed. “The Enclave shut down her broadcast. Apparently, they have the ability to override whatever any of the rest of us are doing with those towers...”

But... it will still be my project, right? Rainbow Dash had asked. It will still be the Ministry of Awesome?

The Enclave didn’t control the central hub for the Single Pegasus Project, but they controlled who knew how many Ministry of Awesome hubs above the clouds. And Rainbow Dash had assured that the Ministry of Awesome had overriding authority.

I knew my Homage. She wouldn’t stand for being shut down. She would see the truth got out if it killed her. “When did she leave?” I asked, worried more for her now than I had been when Tenpony Tower faced Red Eye’s bomb. That, at least, I had been in a position to prevent.

“Yesterday morning, just a few hours after they took control of the airwaves,” Life Bloom told me as we reached the chamber where he would purge the taint still trapped in my body. “She took a bunch of those override devices like the one she gave you for the Fillydelphia Tower. Said she had an idea.”

“You go Homage!” I whispered, wanting to cheer for her despite my worries and fears.



Ditzy Doo’s hooves touched down on the docks of Friendship Island.

“Oddly nice, bein’ able t’ approach Friendship City without bein’ shot at, ain’t it?” Calamity asked me as he hopped out the back of the wagon.

“Ayep,” I said, mimicking his accent decently. He chuckled.

Ditzy Doo detached from the wagon and shook herself, the lead-lined cloak fluttering. She had been disappointed but understanding about the lack of muffins. Calamity had been concerned when my stay at Tenpony Tower had proved so short lived. But without Homage, and with pegasi in black carapace-like armor walking through the public areas of the ritzy building, I had found myself without reason or desire to stay. Watching a couple armored Enclave ponies looking into the window of my locked-up former cheese shop as they chatted about how they should require “hero discounts” was the final buck that drove me back outside.

A guardpony was approaching us, her eyes shifting between the two pegasi. “So, it’s a visit from the great and benevolent Enclave, is it?”

Calamity coughed, stomping a bit. “Not hardly.”

“Really?” the guard asked, moving closer. “Then let me see your flank.”

I raised an eyebrow at that, but Calamity turned, taking the anti-radiation barding in his teeth and pulling it up over his flank, revealing the scar in the shape of a cloud and lightning bolt that had destroyed his cutie mark.

“All right then,” the guard mare said, relaxing visibly. “Welcome to Friendship City.” She gave us a pleasant smile. Her eyes scanned over the wagon then looked at Ditzy Doo, widening in surprise. “Ditzy? The *Wasteland Survival Guide* Ditzy?”

Ditzy Doo gave a happy clop at the recognition.

“DJ Pon3 had said you were a ghoul, but he never said you were a glowing one!”

Ditzzy Doo set down her chalkboard and wrote on it before kicking it over to the guard: “Glow is new. Too much Splendid Valley. Friendship City can fix?”

The guard read the chalkboard and looked uncertain but hopeful. “Well, if there is anypony who could help, it would be Doctor Freshwater. She’s in charge of the science station built into Friendship Island. She created the water purifiers about a decade back, and has spent the last few years working on unlocking the mysteries of what she calls the Children of the Bombs.”

“Cheery,” I thought aloud, suspecting that I might very well fit into that category.

Life Bloom had magically purged me of taint, but I had been exposed to a lot of it, both through direct contact with the dirty I.M.P. lake in Maripony and later in trace aerosol amounts from the leak in the safe room. According to Life Bloom, all my internal organs were in the right places, and I hadn’t started to change size or grow wings, but the taint had altered me on a fundamental biological level. According to the unicorn, I was closer to being an alicorn than to being a pony.

I did not consider this a good thing. The Goddess claimed the alicorns were improved and superior, better suited than ponies to survive and thrive in the new world, and their natural successors. I just felt a stranger in my own skin.

The guard gave me a look. “And anything I can help you with, friend?”

I thought a moment. “We’re here to help Ditzzy Doo, and we’ll be staying as long as that takes. Can you give us a quick picture of Friendship City?”

The guard nodded. “You bet I can. Basic rundown is this: Friendship City tries to be a good place for decent ponies to live with as much freedom and safety as we can offer. The Island makes that pretty easy. We don’t get much trouble from raiders or slavers out here. Usually, just the occasional sea serpent or radigator. We occasionally get refugees or folks looking to settle down. We do the best we can for them, although we’re beginning to run out of

room. Raspberry Tart wants to start building shacks around the base of the main city, but Mayor Black Seas is impeding the expansion. She doesn't want Friendship Island becoming a shantytown."

I nodded, taking mental notes.

"Friendship City is run by a council of three august ponies. Doctor Freshwater, who I already told you heads up the science station, Mayor Black Seas, who speaks for the general citizenry, and Chief Lantern, who is head of the guard.

"If you are looking for temporary housing, your best bet is the Warm Smiles Inn. You can also seek refuge in the Common Room for free, but I don't recommend it," the guard scowled. "The place is run by Raspberry Tart. Mayor says she runs things crooked. Don't know about that, but I do know she takes advantage of the lack of supervision she had fostered around that place."

Ditzy Doo bristled and neighed, stomping a hoof. At my questioning look, she trotted over and recovered her chalkboard, erasing it with her hoof and writing: "R.T. does bad business. No muffins for her."

The guard began to lead us around to the science station entrance which back-doored onto the docks. Despite the city's name, the entrance looked anything but friendly. Thick armored slabs operated by pneumatics sealed the science station with armor-shielded turrets covering the approach. There was no lock and no terminal. Just a camera. The door could only be opened by somepony inside. A little green mat of faux grass and white flowers lay at the foot of the door saying "welcome".

"Raspberry Tart is the head of the merchant's union. Mayor Black Seas says she's building a case to get her thrown out of the city, but the others won't act unless they have proof, for fear that she'll take too many of the merchants with her." The guard rolled her eyes. "That is, assuming she could even get out the front door."

The guard waved a hoof at the camera, smiling. I heard the turrets power down as the thick slabs slid open with a deep-throated hiss.

“Now I’m afraid you will have to turn in your weapons at the door,” the guard mare cautioned, “Friendship City is a friendly place, friends, and we want to keep it that way. You’ll get them back once you leave. I recommend you take a moment to introduce yourselves to Mayor Black Seas as soon as you get Ditzzy Doo settled in. You’ll find her in Black Seas Supplies.” She then smiled to Calamity. “And I imagine you’ll want to be paying a visit to Radar, our resident Dashite.”

Calamity gaped in dumbfounded surprise. “Radar’s still alive?” he gasped. “An’ he’s *here*?”

“Yes indeed. Ancient as dirt, but still flapping his wings. He was in charge of the science station back when Friendship City was founded. Helped turn the city into the place it is.”

I blinked, suddenly remembering a chapter from the *Wasteland Survival Guide* on the founding of some city somewhere. I had only skimmed the chapter at the time I read the book; after all, I had been more interested in basic survival tips than grandiose concepts like settlement building. And then I remembered Calamity’s assertion that a pegasus had helped string up the rope bridges connecting the freestanding sections of Friendship Bridge.

The guard grinned at Calamity’s expression. “I take it you weren’t really expecting to see another Dashite in your lifetime.”

I giggled at my companion. “Might want to pick up your jaw before you come in.”



Calamity was turning in his battle saddle at the guard station just inside when a water-blue unicorn pony with a short shock of raspberry mane and a matching short tail trotted up with a sense of urgency. Dressed in her lab coat, she looked very scientific.

“Hello, everypony. Welcome to the Friendship City Science Station, where we’re making a better tomorrow for all ponykind. Please, please

come in," she encouraged. "I'm Doctor Freshwater. This is my facility. Please make yourselves at home. Don't touch anything."

She shook my hoof then spun immediately to Ditzy.

"Ditzy Doo, is it?" Doctor Freshwater asked, floating on a pair of glasses and trotting over to get a closer look at our glowing ghoul pegasus. She floated out a small device that began to clickity-click just like the radiation sensor on my PipBuck.

Ditzy Doo nodded, apparently at ease with the abrupt invasion of personal space.

"Let's quickly get you to the radiation testing chamber, shall we? My, your output is impressive. And this is a new condition? When did you become like this? Where did you get such exposure? No, no, don't stop to write anything, just come along." The doctor was already trotting away, motioning with her tail for Ditzy Doo to follow. "Let's get you all hooked up."

Ditzy Doo glanced back over her wings, giving us a look that I couldn't interpret because her eyes were doing that weird thing of hers again. Then she fluttered off after an impatient Doctor Freshwater who seemed eager to poke and prod her in the name of science.

"She'll be all right, won't she?" I asked a passing lab pony.

"Oh, yeah sure," the pony drawled. "Once she's got da glowin' one strapped in, she'll stay on da safe side of da glass."

"I meant Ditzy Doo," I said crossly as the lab pony ambled away.

"Ah'm sure she'll be fine," Calamity assured me as he flew up next to me, battle saddle-free. "Doctor Freshwater seemed a bit odd, sure. But if she c'n help Ditzy Doo go back t' Silver Bell any faster, Ah'm sure the ol' mare will be happy t' put up with the tests."

I shuddered, disliking the idea. This was why we were here, why Ditzy had wanted to come, but that didn't make me feel comfortable with it. I hoped they did right by her.



“Zebra potions,” the elderly pegasus insisted proudly when Calamity rather bluntly asked about his longevity. Radar thumped a sienna hoof against his chest (wincing slightly) and exclaimed, “Ain’t nothin’ better. Them stripers have unlocked all manner o’ secrets with their brewin’s. Yew’d be amazed!”

“Actually, I can believe it,” I told the wrinkled, old sienna pony whose close-cropped mane might have been white even before the turn of the century. I chuckled, eyeing Calamity who looked caught between an urge to dash and a desire to break into squees of “ohmygosh”. It was a reunion he had never expected with a pony he had never known, but the mere idea that he wasn’t the only Dashite in the Equestrian Wasteland seemed to have overwhelmed him.

“That darned upstart youngin’ Freshwater may have usurped my position on the city council, even taken over my place as head researcher, but she can’t force me t’ retire! Not while there’s plenty o’ life an’ mind in me,” Radar insisted. “I’m as fit as I ever was.”

To prove it, the old pegasus stretched out his wings and flew halfway across his loft in the back of the science station. He made it three full yards before having to land, wheezing frightfully.

“Whoa there,” Calamity said, the spell he seemed to be under breaking. He flew up to the wobbling elderly pegasus, trying up to steady him. But Radar pushed the younger Dashite away.

“I said I was fit. Don’t need no help!” He looked between us. “Now, who are yew folk and what can ol’ Radar do yew fer?”

“Ah’m, Calamity,” my friend said warmly, “An’ this muh best friend, Li’lpip. Ah’m a Dashite, down from the clouds fer ‘bout seven years now. Ah thought Ah was the only one around. Ah mean, Ah heard stories o’ ya, but ya left the Enclave so long ago...”

“And now they’ve come back,” Radar pointed out. “Helluva bad bit o’ timin’.” Calamity nodded morosely. Radar looked Calamity up and down. “Tell me, what d’yew think they’re here fer?”

“Ah don’t know,” Calamity admitted. “But Ah don’t think they’re here t’ ‘Save the Wasteland’.”

The elderly pegasus smirked. “Ahh, so yew don’t buy the horseapples they’re shovelin’ over the radio none either.” Calamity shook his head. “Good buck. I was beginnin’ t’ think it was jus’ me.”

“And yew, what’s yer name,” Radar turned to me. “And how ‘bout yew, youngin’? Yew think they come down from the big ol’ sky t’ save yer tail?”

“Littlepip,” I reminded him. “And no. No I definitely don’t.”

Radar smiled, nodding sagely. “Well, way I see it, it’s got t’ do with the Sustainable Pegasus Project. That’s the key t’ the Enclave’s power.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Agriculture, yew silly ‘corn,” Radar stated. “Without the towers, the Enclave can’t feed the ponies. The pegasi wouldn’t be able t’ survive cut off above the cloud curtain.”

Remember when ya asked about what we ate up here, an’ Ah joked ‘bout cloud seedin’? Calamity had told us, referring to a conversation we had the morning after the Pinkie Bell farm. I dunno what them towers were originally meant t’ do. But Ah know what the Enclave has repurposed ‘em t’ do. And that’s t’ enchant the clouds fer miles around ‘em so that we c’n grow crops right up in the sky.

“Without that,” Radar insisted, “the Enclave falls.”

“Red Eye plans to take control of the... S.P.P. He wants to control the weather.”

Radar scoffed, muttering under his breath. “Good luck with that.”

I remembered what Calamity said back in Spike’s Cave:

Only time they c’n act as one is when they’re feelin’ threatened.

“Then, from their perspective,” Radar surmised, “It’s him or them.”

“Luna’s shuddering moonquakes,” I cursed (getting a raised eyebrow from the elderly pegasus and a whispered “she does this a lot” from Calamity). “We *could* have seen this coming.”

I looked at Calamity in sullen weariness. “When we first learned that Red Eye was messing with the Fillydelphia Tower, we could have at least guessed the Enclave would be stepping in sooner or later. By the time we had left Canterlot, we should have known for sure.” I bit my lower lip.

“It was only a matter of time. The moment they cottoned on to Red Eye’s plan...”

“Ain’t like the Enclave ‘as been payin’ the Equestrian Wasteland all that much attention,” Calamity told me. “Least it never seemed like they did t’ me. Few scoutin’ parties every year...”

“Wait!” Radar suddenly flew up to me, his snout pressing against mine. “Yew said yer name was *Littlepip*?”

“Y-yes,” I stammered, taken aback.

“Yew ever been t’ the Ministry o’ Awesome? Before the grand an’ mighty Enclave tore all o’ Canterlot down from the mountain?”



I watched the monitor as Radar keyed up the sequence.

“Y’all ‘ave been in the Ministry o’ Awesome?” Calamity asked Radar, unable to conceal his shock.

“Yeah, I was,” Radar replied. “Was decades ago, not long after they burned my cutie mark off me. I was hopin’ t’ find answers.” He looked at us as the monitor came to life, showing first static and then a scene of the MAw basement, the shield dominating the center. “I didn’t get no farther than the security station, and I zoomed outta there leaving the whole damn place on high alert behind me. But I did manage to snatch up this little gem from the security logs.”

I watched the monitor. The timestamp on the log was old. A few years post-apocalypse.

“What did you mean, ‘good luck with that?’” I asked as I watched the minutes tick by on the recording.

“What now?”

“When I said Red Eye was planning to take over the S.P.P.,” I reminded him. “You said ‘good luck with that.’”

Radar made a sound of understanding. “Well, the whole damn Enclave’s been tryin’ t’ get into the central hub fer generations now. If they can’t do it, I don’t see how Red Eye has a chance.”

“He’s got a plan,” I said confidently.

“Does he now?” Radar scoffed. “Well, I’d love t’ hear it. Cuz that place is locked up tighter than my ex-wife’s anus...”

Oh Goddesses, how I did not need the images that conjured.

“...Place has the best defenses Equestria could build. Has a super shield ‘round it so powerful nothin’ had been able t’ penetrate it. S’pose it has super guns too, but they’re all inside the shield and that shield is so overdesigned that they’re pretty much useless.”

“Ah know that the Enclave has built a whole base ‘round it,” Calamity added. “Whole mass o’ troops just t’ guard a place nopony can get into.”

Radar chuckled, grinning at Calamity. “Never found anypony who could get through. Enclave High Council figures the shield’s keyed only t’ Rainbow Dash herself. An’ Dash had no survivin’ kin. So when she left, she pretty much screwed the powers that were outta their prize.”

“Bet they took *that* well,” Calamity grinned back.

“Deemed her a traitor, what they did,” Radar spat. “Sent griffin mercs t’ kill her and bring back her head. Hoped somepony wearin’ Rainbow Dash around their neck might be able t’ walk through.”

Calamity and I both gasped in horror.

I turned from the monitor. "The Enclave wanted... that's... Goddesses!"

Radar agreed grimly, correcting me in one point, "Well, they weren't 'xactly the Enclave quite yet. But they were gettin' there right quick."

"What happened?"

Radar stated simply, "Well, either they ain't never got her head, or they did and it didn't work."

"Pinkie Pie?" Rainbow Dash's voice floated up from the monitor. I shifted back to see the rather bedraggled cyan pegasus walking into the basement. The security camera zoomed in, following her. "You here?"

"Pinkie Pie?" she tried again, sounding so small in the vast room. "I brought them, just like you asked. What's this about?"

Her words echoed off the walls. The light of hope in her wide eyes slowly diminished.

Rainbow Dash stopped a few yards in front of the shield, the magical light painting shadows across her features as she looked around. "You weren't kidding about the health potions, by the way. I'm down to my last one, and I still need to make it out of that pink stew outside. That stuff is... awful."

The room remained still and silent. The light in her eyes went out entirely, her expression becoming painfully sad. "You're not here, are you?" Rainbow Dash asked the emptiness around her. "I guess that means you didn't make it either."

Rainbow Dash stepped solemnly through the shield. She walked up to the little pedestal sitting at its center and the memory orb box resting upon it, its lid slightly ajar. Rainbow Dash nudged it open with her nose, revealing three memory orbs and spaces for three more. The second, third and fifth were missing.

"I don't know what you needed these for, or who this Littlepip you mentioned in your note is, but I hope it's as important as you said it is,"

Rainbow Dash frowned, her voice soft and sad. She reached into her saddle bags and pulled a memory orb out with her teeth, gently setting it in the spot reserved for the butterfly orb.

“Wasn’t easy getting these things, especially with Gilda on my tail. But even she isn’t brave enough to follow me into what’s become of Canterlot. Much less my own Ministry.” She put the star orb into its resting place. “But she’s waiting for me out there, and after that pink crap, I’m not sure I can take her.”

Rainbow Dash fished the final memory orb, the one to be placed in the holder with her own cutie mark. She paused, staring at the little emblem of the cloud and its rainbow lightning bolt. Then sighed and put the orb into its place.

Rainbow Dash shifted her attention to the orb in the fourth holder. The balloon orb. “But I trust you. You know that. You said this was important, and I believe you. And I wouldn’t leave my friend hanging. Even... even after she was...” the last word was barely a whisper, “...gone.”

A single tear trailed down her cheek as she gave a weary smirk. “One last prank, right? Together as always.”

She lifted a hoof and pressed the orb box closed, the click of the lock loud in the sepulcher room.

I reached out and touched the monitor screen, tears welling in my own eyes.

Rainbow Dash turned and started to walk away. As she reached the inside of the shield, she stopped. Her face screwed up with determination.

“But you know what, Pinkie? Since you’re not here, I’m changing the rules.” Rainbow Dash spun around and trotted over to the maneframe on the far side of the shielded area. “If somepony comes poking around in here, I want to know. I’m setting an alarm to go off in every Ministry of Awesome hub. If I’m still alive, I want to meet this Littlepip of yours.”

Dash paused. "Sorry Pinks," she said, looking back over her shoulder. "I hope you don't mind."

I watched the rest of the recording in stunned, comprehending silence.



Friendship City rose above us -- concentric rings of stores and homes, connected by walkways and platforms that spun out from a central spiraling stairwell ascending through the chimney-like open space like a plume of smoke rising to the head of the Pony of Friendship.

Crowds of ponies moved up and down the spiral stair, diverting onto the catwalks and merging with the traffic that surrounded the layers of scavenged-material structures built into the interior walls of the massive statue -- a city built from junk, a fair portion of it pulled from ships which had sunk in the harbor. A small forest of support beams further congested the lower levels.

Ponies gathered around a watering hole called Sparkle's, run by a friendly but slightly frazzled mare with the cutie mark of a Sparkle-Cola on her flank. Her assistants moved between tables nearby, taking orders and delivering homogenous, deep-fried foodstuffs. From a radio nearby blared the sound of heavy horns, marching drums and rumbling thunder. Enclave music.

Ponies stopped to stare at us as Calamity and I walked through Friendship City. Conversations died on unfinished sentences. For once, their gazes weren't oppressing me; it was the presence of a pegasus in their midst that snatched their attention. Invariably, their eyes would quickly search out Calamity's flank.

We no longer wore the anti-radiation barding, having left it with one of Doctor Freshwater's more amiable assistants. Without barding or battle saddle, Calamity looked strangely naked beneath his desperado hat. At the sight of Calamity's Dashite brand, nervous faces broke into smiles. We were soon mobbed by strangers wherever we went, all offering friendly greetings to my pegasus friend and his little mare companion.

I had garnered no attention at all until two Friendship City Security guards approached wearing heavy barding in cheery pastel colors that closely matched their manes.

“Welcome to Friendship City, Calamity,” one of them smiled, offering a hoof. Word of our visit had spread faster than the crowds had allowed us to travel. “And you must be the Stable Dweller that DJ Pon3 keeps cheering. It’s an honor to meet you, miss.”

I felt myself blushing hard as I stared up at the security pony.

“Sorry ‘bout shooting at you last week,” the pony said, looking chagrinned, offering me his hoof.

I was reaching out to shake it when his dour partner groused sullenly, “I’m not.” I froze.

The guard looked to his partner in dismay, but the other guard pony stood her ground. “She shot those foals’ parents right in front of them,” she said, glaring at me. “With bullets of fire.”

My hoof dropped back to the scrap metal floor.

“They call you hellmare, you know,” the guard glowered. “The kids.”

The other guard, the buck, put a hoof over his face in embarrassment. “All right, Night Bright. Let’s just go.” He looked at us regretfully. “Sorry ‘bout that, folks.”

As the two guards moved away, Night Bright looked back over her shoulder and mouthed slowly: Bullets. Of. Fire.



“Welcome to Black Seas Supplies,” the black-maned indigo mare at the counter greeted us genially as she took in the sight of us. “My name’s Black Seas. I’m the mayor of this fine city, and owner of this fine store. And you must be Littlepip and Calamity.” She smiled. “Word gets around. Thank you for stopping in. What can I do for you today?”

I looked around, feeling dazed. The small cargo ship that Black Seas Supplies was built out of had been cut apart and imported into the Pony of Friendship, then rebuilt almost completely. Metal flooring and rows of shelves had been welded into the hold. Narrow metal stairs led up to the living quarters which had once been the captain's cabin. An old-model precursor to the terminal -- a combination of monitor and intercom system -- was built into the wall behind a counter that looked like it had been scavenged from a diner.

Calamity fluttered forward to greet Mayor Black Seas. "Pleased t' meetcha," he grinned back affably. "Mind if Ah take a poke 'round yer store? Ah'm lookin' t' do some tradin'."

"Well, that's a damn fine coincidence," Black Seas grinned back. "That's what Black Seas Supplies is here for, after all. We got about everything you might be looking for. Here, let me show you..."

I watched in foggy amusement as Black Seas and Calamity dove into business, my pegasus friend looking to unload a lot of what he scavenged from the Ministry of Image in return for bottle caps, ammo and medical supplies (with an emphasis on RadAway). Black Seas was a skilled and charismatic barter mare though and soon had him shopping for a gift for Velvet Remedy. Something to touch her heart and remind her that there really is good in ponies worth fighting for.

My thoughts were still drowning in the cold reminder of Arbu, leaving me detached from my surroundings and the conversation in front of me. I barely reacted when the door opened and an arsenic-colored stallion brushed by, carrying a walking stick in his muzzle. I only reacted when the stick transformed into a magical energy blaster and he fired it at the mayor.

"Tarf sayf heffo!"

Calamity was faster, flying into Black Seas, knocking her out of the path of the shot and into a shelf of lunchboxes, sensor modules and garden gnomes which rained down on the indigo mare. The blast of lethal magic struck a display of steam gauge assemblies, pulverizing it.

My first reaction was to pull out Little Macintosh, but with a start I realized my most trusted weapon was not with me. Calamity pivoted, hooves dropping to the floor as he stood between the assassin and Black Seas. The stallion shifted to get another shot, realizing he would have to take Calamity out to get at his target.

I lashed out with my telekinesis, lifting the arsenic-colored pony and pushing him against the far wall where two shelves blocked his view of both my friend and the mayor mare. I wrapped my magic around his neck, squeezing. The stallion kicked and flailed, his eyes bulging, the magical weapon dropping to the floor with a clatter.

Black Seas was climbing back onto her hooves, a couple garden gnomes rolling off her back, as the assassin lost consciousness. I released him. The mayor blinked slowly, shaking her head.

"Well, looks like your reputation as heroes is well founded," she said, wincing slightly from a sprain. "Thanks for saving my life."

"It's what we do," Calamity said, more for my benefit I suspected than hers. "Why ya reckon he was out t' kill ya?"

The mayor frowned. "I'm pretty damn sure Raspberry Tart was behind this," she proclaimed, trotting over to the old terminal. She pressed one of the buttons under the monitor and barked, "Tart! I need to speak to you *right now!*"

The indigo pony tapped her hoof impatiently. Glancing to Calamity, "Would you be a dear and tie that bastard up?" Her eyes dropped to the magical energy weapon on the floor. "How the hell did Lantern miss that?"

I stepped up to where the weapon had tumbled, floating it upwards to examine it. It was a model I had never encountered before, but then I was barely knowledgeable about magical energy weapons. "You might want to ask Grandpa Rattle about that," I suggested. The spell disguising the blaster as a stick was too similar to the old buck's magical research to be a coincidence.

I have a shotgun.

I couldn't imagine Grandpa Rattle working with murderous ponies though. At least, not willingly. I was suddenly fearful for the crazy old buck.

The monitor flickered to life, showing the face of a grossly overweight, pomegranate mare with a yellow mane and an overly-charismatic smile. "Ooh, Mayor Black Seas! How good it is to hear from you." Her words virtually oozed out of the speaker above the monitor. "And to what do I owe the honor of your call this evening?"

"You know exactly why I'm calling, you murderous bitch," Black Seas spat, stomping her hoof. "You just sent a pony to kill me."

"Laaaanguage!" she chided, her smile un-phased by the accusation. "Now, now. It is hardly befitting the mayor of our glorious city to use such foul sentiment. Or to go slinging such dreadful false accusations."

"You deny it then?" Black Seas narrowed her eyes. "Well, seeing as the would-be assassin failed, I'm sure we can put this to rest after Chief Lantern has a day or two with him in her interrogation room."

"Oh?" the blob of a mare looked surprised. "He survived then? Good. The sooner the Chief can ferret out the true culprit, the better, no? Although it will cut into your opportunities for slander. More's the pity."

I trotted up, floating the intended murder weapon in front of me. Black Seas looked at it, then back to Raspberry Tart. "And I don't suppose you have any idea how a weapon like this could have found its way into Friendship City?"

"Shouldn't you be asking that of Chief Lantern?" she suggested.

Black Seas nickered, "We both know that anything that finds its way into Friendship City behind her back has gotten in through you."

The pomegranate mare feigned offense. "Despite what you claim, mayor, the Common Room is not a den of smugglers and thieves. And, as the voice of the ponies, I would think you should have more faith in them." Her words washed over my ears like

slime. “Besides, let’s be honest, if I wanted to kill you, I would never use so crude a method. I’d poison your food.”

Raspberry Tart got the reaction she was looking for. Black Seas’ eyes widened just for a moment before narrowing again. The overweight mare virtually purred in pleasure.

I was beginning to deeply and egregiously dislike Raspberry Tart.

“Now, be a darling and keep me informed, would you, mayor?” Raspberry Tart pressured. “As head of the merchant’s union, I have a right to know about shenanigans that threaten the peace and safety of all our little ponies.”

“Of course,” Mayor Black Seas grouched before cutting the connection.

The mayor’s expression was cloudy. “Slimy worm of a mare. Now Chief Lantern will have to spare guards for this viper, just to make sure he doesn’t have an unpleasantly life-ending accident before he can be questioned.” She kicked one of the scattered garden gnomes. “And I’m going to be obsessing over where I get my food.”

“Any way we can help?” I offered.

The mayor raised her eyebrows. “Can you get a confession?” She shook her head. “You’ve already helped me more than I could ask. But...” She thought a moment. “If you can sneak a listening device into her office above the Common Room, I may be able to catch her saying something about this mess that I can take to the council.”

I grinned, crossing my PipBuck-bonded foreleg in front of me. “Sneaky is one of my specialties.”



My plan was simple. “I’ll use my StealthBuck to turn invisible. Slip past Raspberry Tart’s guards and defenses. Even if she’s in the room, I’ll be able to plant the listening device and get out unnoticed.”

I looked down at the MG StealthBuck II set into my PipLeg. I’d already used it to get in and then out of Tenpony Tower. The device

hadn't had much time to recharge, but if I moved swiftly and all went well, I would only need about ten minutes.

"Ah don't like the timin' o' this," Calamity said, flying over me as I pushed my way through Friendship City towards Sparkle's. My innards had stopped queasing after Life Bloom had purged me of taint, and over the last few hours, my stomach begun to rumble, reminding me that I hadn't swallowed anything other than water and RadAway in days. At least half of my weakness was from starvation.

"You think the attack on the mayor has something to do with us?" I asked. Calamity had echoed my own concerns. For the attack to take place right after we walked into the store was a hell of a coincidence, and I was growing un-fond of coincidences.

"Well, no," Calamity admitted. "Not *us*, particularly. But 'tween Red Eye an' the Enclave an' the death o' the Goddess... there's just too much goin' down right now fer me t' believe this is jus' happenin' now by chance." He let out an growl of frustration and drooped in defeat, hanging limply from his wings. "Hell, fer all we know, the hellhounds might be plottin' this. Ponymappin' and coercion ain't 'xactly outside their limited vocabulary."

"So this could be my fault," I moaned, staring at the floor. "Add it to the list."

"Hey now," Calamity perked up, landing in front of me. "None o' this is yer fault, girl. Red Eye has been plottin' 'gainst the Goddess an' the Enclave since long b'fore y'all stepped outta that Stable," he argued with confidence. "He was workin' on ways t' get into the Ministry o' Awesome an' chances are he'd already found one." He did already have griffins to help shut down the security systems. "All ya did was bump up the clock on the Enclave's arrival. An' Ah reckon that's prob'ly a good thing if it throws a bump under Red Eye's wagon."

I turned away, but Calamity grasped my head between his hooves and made me look at him, his wings flapping as he lifted back off the walkway.

“Yer blamin’ yerself fer those dead hellhounds? Maybe even SteelHooves?” My wince betrayed me. “Well, ya c’n jus’ stop that nonsense right now, y’hear? Ya got that bomb away from Red Eye an’ used it t’ take out a genocidal threat. What d’ya think Red Eye woulda done with it if ya hadn’t?” He stared into my eyes forcefully. “At best, he’d o’ done the same himself. At worst, he’d ‘ave used it on a pony population center strong ‘nuff t’ stand in his way. Hell, he was already threatenin’ Tenpony Tower with it.”

I realized I was crying.

“Awww dammit, Li’lpip,” Calamity said, his expression softening. “Come ‘ere, now. Let me getcha somethin’ t’ eat.”

I followed him obediently.

The crowd had thinned around Sparkle’s. The waitress mares were looking thankful for the respite. The music on the radio had been replaced by an authoritative voice:

“...colluding with a monstrosity in Splendid Valley which called herself The Goddess. This Goddess was the mother of the horrific alicorns who have been tormenting the Equestrian Wasteland, endangering the lives of all good ponies like yourselves. But the fiendish plot of Red Eye and the Goddess made the murders at alicorn hooves and magic pale in comparison...”

My face slapped into Calamity’s backside as the pegasus stopped abruptly, his ears up, listening.

“It was their intention to rip you from your homes and from your families. To force you to endure an agonizing, taint-driven transformation that would render you into mindless slaves. Red Eye and the Goddess have been working together not just to take your freedoms or your lives, but to annihilate individuality and to devour your very souls.”

I stumbled back, shaking my head. Then joined Calamity, wondering what the Enclave was up to. “If they thought the Goddess was so bad,” I whispered to my friend, “Why did they try to ally with her?”

“Naturally, the Grand Pegasus Enclave could not let this stand! We may have been gone for a while, but we have not forgotten our unicorn and earth pony brothers and sisters. And we were not about to allow these abominations to violate and destroy all of you.

“That is why we detonated a megaspell beneath the home of the Goddess, the Maripony facility in Splendid Valley...”

My jaw dropped, the world seeming to spin out from under me.



“Who the hell are you?” Raspberry Tart spat as she saw me. “What the hell are you doing in my loft? How did you get past my guards?”

I had planted the listening device and had been halfway out the door when the StealthBuck died.

The tub of pony flesh wobbled around to face me from her place on the lounge bed behind her desk. “Gizmo, get in here!” I felt a pony move swiftly behind me, blocking my exit.

“Gizmo, escort our uninvited guest out,” the bulbous pomegranate mare requested of the stallion behind me. “Preferably through a window.”

“Wait,” I said, thinking swiftly. “I’m here about the contract on Black Seas.”

Raspberry Tart raised a mocking eyebrow. “What contract? Ah, now I remember you. You were standing in the background when our good mayor called me up to start slinging accusations.” She hefted up one of her slab-like hooves, signaling the stallion behind me to wait. “What do you want?”

The gears in my head spun. “The pony who tried to kill the mayor was sloppy. And stupid. And now the mayor trusts me.” I gave her my best conspiring smile. “I could do the job easily. And correctly. But it wouldn’t be cheap.”

Raspberry Tart sighed. "Do you really think I'm that stupid? Did you really think you could pull the wool over my eyes that easily?"

I found myself picturing the attempt to cover her with wool -- the rolls of fat, the massive jowls. "Not enough sheep in the world," I muttered aloud before I could stop myself.

She rolled her eyes. "You know, I really don't like being insulted, especially from home invaders. Gizmo, tear the little pony's legs off, would you?"

Oops! I cantered, circling to see Gizmo. My eyes widened as I took in the surgical scars and the mechanical wings. Gizmo was a cyberpony. Almost certainly a refugee from Stable 101.

Gizmo spun, spreading out his wings to slash at me. I dodged to the side, the blades of those wings whisking through the air inches from my eyes. I couldn't guess if those cybernetic wings would actually allow the earth pony to fly like a pegasus, but the feathers were razor sharp.

Gizmo somersaulted, his wings lifting and slicing through the air at me as I dove for cover, casting about for something to use as a weapon. Gizmo spun again and bucked, turning the chair I had moved behind into a battering ram that knocked me over. My armor took the blow, leaving me winded but unhurt.

"Gizmo, stop playing with your food," Raspberry Tart ordered lazily. "Just finish her already."

I scrambled for the door. Gizmo jumped up onto a couch and leapt into the air, spreading out his wings. Maybe he couldn't actually fly with them, but they allowed him to glide. He swooped across the room and landed on me with all hooves, driving me to the floor.

I focused, my horn glowing. I was weak and weaponless. But I'd fought my way through Canterlot, dammit. And Old Olneigh. There was no way I was going to fall to some two-bit crook's augmented mook!

I felt a hoof press down against the back of my head as Gizmo shifted so he could angle a wing at my neck. Then I heard the squelching

sound as I telekinetically drove my screwdriver down through his ear and into his brain.

Gizmo collapsed off me, twitching. It took him almost a minute to die.

Pushing myself back up, I turned towards Raspberry Tart. "All right. Let's try that again."

"Or I could just finish you off myself."

"I don't think you could," I snarked. "I'm not a pie."

My horn glowed as I levitated Gizmo's body, pointing one of his razor wings towards her broad throat. "Now, one last time."

Raspberry Tart took fresh stock of me. "You might just be useful after all."



Chief Lantern was waiting with the mayor when Calamity and I returned to Black Seas Supplies.

"Did you get all that?" I asked eagerly the moment I trotted through the door.

"Yes," Black Seas informed me with a heavy tone, her expression cloudier than ever. I drew up short. This was not the demeanor of a mare who'd just had her rival floated to her on a silver platter. "And almost immediately after, I got a call from Raspberry Tart, reporting your attempt to barter for my murder."

I stammered. "What? Wait... I wasn't... I was just trying to get her to say something that... I wasn't actually offering..."

Chief Lantern waved a hoof. "Don't worry, girl. We know that. It would take an amazingly stupid assassin to negotiate a contract against a target she knew was listening through a device she planted herself."

Oh! I breathed a sigh of relief.

“But Raspberry Tart covered her tail. Made it look like she was just playing along in order to bring another wanna-be assassin to justice. We can’t use anything she said to you against her.”

Calamity bristled. “Well, how ‘bout her sickin’ that cyberpony on Li’lpip.”

“You were invading her home,” Chief Lantern told me.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter now,” Mayor Black Seas claimed. “We’ve got bigger problems.”

Calamity whinnied. “What now?”

Mayor Black Seas moved over to the terminal. “Just after she called us, Raspberry Tart made another call...” She pressed a button. An unfamiliar stallion’s voice sounded through the speaker.

“Hello? Who is this?”

“Well hello to you too, darling,” Raspberry Tart’s voice slithered. “We’re all set for your visit. I’ve cleared the way. When your boys get here, the doors will be open and waiting for them. The... package... they’re looking for doesn’t suspect a thing. But we have had one small setback...”

“Those aren’t words I like,” the stallion informed her coolly. “You shouldn’t be telling me words I don’t like.”

“Mayor Black Seas is still going to be a problem,” Raspberry Tart whined. The mayor and the security chief exchanged glances as they listened.

I could hear a heavy sigh through the speaker. “The mayor of that rusty monument you call a city was your responsibility. We’re more than ready and capable of doing things the hard way if we meet any resistance.”

“O-of course,” Raspberry Tart said, sounding a little worried now.

The stallion neighed. “Personally, I would prefer the hard way. Tends not to leave loose ends.”

“No, that won’t be necessary, darling. How long until we can expect your arrival?”

There was a snort from the unidentified stallion. “Our Raptors are eighty minutes out. Should give you plenty of time to fix your little problem. Or flee the city.”



The Enclave was coming for Friendship City.

“I... I could just turn myself over to them,” I offered meekly. The ponies gathered in the council room with me stared appraisingly.

“What makes you think you are the one they are after?” Doctor Freshwater asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well...” I grimaced. I had no reason for my assumption other than the timing and the fact that it always seemed to be me. “Who else would it be?”

“Aw hell no!” Calamity spat. He turned to the others. “Y’all ain’t handin’ over anypony t’ the Enclave!” He paused, his determination melting into hope, “...are ya?”

The door opened behind us and Chief Lantern marched in, followed by several security ponies. “Raspberry Tart’s gone. Looks like she took one of the boats.”

“Good riddance,” Mayor Black Seas nickered. “We can’t worry about her now. Question is, do we fight, evacuate or both?”

“Do we have enough boats to evacuate everypony?” Doctor Freshwater asked, turning to the security chief. The pony shook his head sadly.

“Maybe we did about five years ago. But not anymore. We can get maybe a third of the population packed into the boats we have. Slightly less, seeing as Tart took one of them.”

“To be fair,” I noted disdainfully, “She kinda took a whole one up herself.”

Calamity shook his head. "If their target might be on one o' those boats, they'll sink 'em all."

Chief Lantern growled. "We fight then. That's what we have those harbor guns for."

Doctor Freshwater looked at the others. "Are we seriously not going to put negotiation on the table? Based on that recording, they only want one pony. How can we put the lives of everypony in this city at risk for just one?" She stared at us imploringly. "Shouldn't we even ask who they want?"

"And if it's you?" Calamity nickered. "Then what?"

The doctor frowned. "Well, then I try to get away. Alone."

"Can we try to communicate with them using Raspberry Tart's terminal?" I suggested.

If I was the Enclave's target, I was more than willing to give myself up to spare the city. And I was sure Calamity felt the same. But letting the Enclave close in on the city while we waited to find out who they were after felt like a tactical disaster. Not for the first time, I wondered what SteelHooves would recommend...

Have recommended, the little pony in my head reminded me, bringing heavy clouds of sorrow.

Chief Lantern shook his head. "Already tried that. They're not responding." Not a good sign.

"Sounds t' me like they've decided t' do this the hard way anyhow."



I turned on my PipBuck radio, listening to the Enclave's overriding broadcast in my earbloom. I didn't expect to glean any real clue as to what they were up to, but I felt I'd better start keeping apprised of what they were saying. For the moment, I was only getting dark, funeral-esque marching anthems. SteelHooves' funeral had been this morning, the loss of my friend wrapped my heart in chokingly tight

sorrow, and the dour tones of the music were cutting at me like sharp metal wings.

Calamity was off assisting Chief Lantern. A quick inspection of the harbor guns had revealed sabotage -- apparently part of Raspberry Tart's "clearing the way" for the Enclave. The damage had been inexpert, and Calamity was certain they could have at least half of the harbor guns working again before the Enclave arrived. But they had to work fast.

I followed Doctor Freshwater to the observation room and stared through the anti-radiation window. Greenish-yellow light poured brightly through the glass. Inside, Ditzzy Doo saw me approach the window and waved a wing.

A device mounted into the wall clickity-clicked, reading the ambient radiation inside the room.

"Let's try it again," one of the lab technicians, a cream-coated unicorn with a cornflower blue mane, spoke into a microphone. "Focus..."

The unicorn technician began to walk Ditzzy Doo through the mental exercises that young unicorn fillies and colts used to practice telekinesis. But Ditzzy Doo wasn't a unicorn. She had no magic. What could they be expecting...

PFWOOSH!

The radiation counter squealed as the light in the room became momentarily blinding. Ditzzy Doo tumbled to the floor comically, the burst of energy from her own body knocking her off-kilter.

"Oh very good!" the unicorn technician cheered into the microphone, clopping his hooves together in applause. "Keep that up, and you'll be able to purge yourself of this radiation in just a couple days."

Inside the chamber, Ditzzy Doo pranced joyfully.

"Now, let's go again," the unicorn said with a happy chuckle. "But this time, try to keep centered so you don't keep knocking yourself over."

I smiled to Ditzzy Doo and applauded too. Somehow, watching her joy made the storm clouds over my own head scatter, if just for a little while.

The music in my earbloom ended, and a voice began to speak. I turned away from the glass, listening. I didn't want Ditzzy Doo to see the expressions I expected to play across my face.

"Greetings, ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland. The Grand Pegasus Enclave embraces our earth-bound brothers and sisters.

"I know many of you are mourning the loss of Canterlot, such an iconic symbol of the Equestria That Was. But that royal city was destroyed centuries ago, and all that remained was a breeding grounds for monsters and poisons. Sometimes, in order to allow the body to heal, we must cut out the infected flesh..."

I could feel the scowl forming on my muzzle. I didn't like where this was going. It felt like more than just excusing their attack on the Canterlot Ruins.

"...burn away the diseased areas before the infection spreads..."

I winced as a blast of static cut through the broadcast, nearly making my kick off my earbloom.

"Goooooooood evening, chiiiiildren!"

DJ Pon3's voice burst over the airwaves.

"It's me again, your old pal, DJ Pon3! Comin' to you from a secret location somewhere in the Equestrian Wasteland. You didn't think I'd abandon the Equestrian Wasteland just because of the Enclave, didja children?"

"Now, ol' DJ Pon3 ain't got a lot of time before big sister Enclave shuts this down, so let's get right to it shall we? That's right, it's time for the news!"

YES! The little pony in my head was bouncing around gleefully. Yes!

Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!

"Now, first up, the truth about what went down in Maripony. Now I've got my information from irrefutable sources here, children. And I've got to admit, the Enclave is right about one thing: the Goddess was as big and bad

a threat as they're making her out to be. But that's where the truth stops and the lies begin."

Irrefutable sources, I assumed, meant she'd been watching from the towers. But wait...

"Now I don't know what the Enclave were out at Maripony for, but it sure as hell wasn't to take out the biggest threat the Equestrian Wasteland has ever known. No, that deed was performed by none other than your and my favorite heroine, the Stable Dweller!"

My ears were burning, but I was too happy just hearing Homage's voice (disguised as it was) to mind.

"And the bomb she used to do it was the very one Red Eye was threatening Tenpony Tower with for weeks. Turns out, our heroine talked Red Eye into giving up his big trump card..."

...oh! Irrefutable sources. Homage had watched my memories!

"So that casts serious doubt on the whole Red Eye-Goddess alliance the Enclave has been spouting off about. They're lying to you, children. Plain and simple. Now DJ Pon3 still doesn't know what they're up to, but I can tell you this: the Grand Pegasus Enclave are not your friends!"

"Now keep an ear out, cuz I'll be..."

Another burst of static and DJ Pon3's voice was gone.

I floated off my earbloom and held it to my breast, basking in the knowledge that Homage was out there, still alive and fighting the good fight in her own very important way.



"Attention, citizens of Friendship City!" the armor-altered voice boomed over the city's public-address loudspeakers. **"We are here to take into custody a pegasus wanted for crimes against the Grand Pegasus Enclave. His name is Radar. You can recognize him by the following brand on his flank..."**

I stared up at the nearest loudspeaker, a grey box attached to one of the support beams outside Sparkle's. I had just made it back to the watering hole and was waiting for Calamity's return when the Enclave announcement started.

I checked my PipBuck's clock. The Enclave was early! We had almost twenty more minutes. The mayor had made her own announcement, urging ponies to return to their homes, less than ten minutes ago. Mayor Black Seas had called it an "exercise", knowing that panic would cost lives. But an "exercise" didn't have a lot of motivating power. The central "chimney" wasn't anywhere close to cleared.

Our Raptors are eighty minutes out.

But their armored troops were much faster.

"...Failure to produce this pegasus and turn him over to the Enclave will be considered an act of collusion. Prompt compliance will be rewarded. Refusal will be met with force."

The ponies who had stopped to stare and listen began to panic. Ponies began racing up and down the stairs, pushing into each other. A cobalt-coated buck screamed as he was knocked over the railing, falling three stories to slam heavily into the ponies racing about the floor below.

Somewhere, the voice of a scared foal cried out.

I launched out of my seat, looking around for the source of the voice.

With a bang, the doors into the central chimney swung open and the nightmarishly-armored forms of four Enclave pegasi moved in, their scorpion-like tails curling slowly, the antenna-like integrated weapons of their Enclave armor pulsing with colored light.

"Everypony stay where you are!" one of the pegasi. **"We are the Enclave. We are here to bring one pony to justice."**

Many ponies stopped, frozen in their tracks. Others raced for the nearest doors, diving inside. I could hear the foal crying under the thunder of hundreds of frightened whispers.

“We will be searching the premises,” the pegasus informed the crowd. **“Do not attempt to hide. Do not attempt to flee. Do not attempt to interfere. Obey, and we will be out of your manes in short order.”**

The pegasus beside him stepped up, as the two behind started to fan out, moving through the crowd. The pegasus called out, **“Any pony with information leading to the swift arrest of the pegasus Radar will be rewarded with a finder’s fee of five thousand bits!”**

To their credit, not a single pony in Friendship City stepped up to take the offer.

“Fuck you!” a mint-coated buck shouted from the spiral stairwell.

The Enclave pony looked up at him. The gems on her armor glistened.

Fzzzzzat! The ponies around the buck scattered as he was turned into a glittering pile of ash before their eyes.

Two more ponies in the crowd broke into a run, trying to make the door of one of the shops.

Fzzzzzat! Fzzzzzat!

The glowing bolts of magical energy threaded the crowd, striking down their targets. One of the ponies vaporized, her ashes scattering across the door she had been trying to reach. The other collapsed onto her side, screaming in pain.

“I repeat: do not attempt to hide, do not attempt to flee, do not attempt to interfere. Obey.”

I was trembling. If I had my sniper rifle, all four of them would be dead right now. One of the black-clad pegasi started to move through the patrons of Sparkle’s. She stepped close to me, walking around behind me as she looked me over. I forced myself to stand there silently, knowing any action could put ponies in danger.

She paused, her visor turned towards the PipBuck melded to my leg. “Everfree winds!” she whispered in revulsion, moving quickly past.

I caught sight of the little, wine-colored filly curled up under the foot of the spiral stairs, shivering and whimpering. My heart went out to her. I started to inch closer, hoping I could comfort her.

I made it halfway when she saw me, her eyes opening wide with utter terror. "Hellmare!" she screamed, scrambling up and fleeing from the sight of me.

No!

Fzzzzzzat!

"NO!!"

The foal's momentum had carried the glistening pink ash as she glowed and disintegrated, fanning it out across the metal floor.

My world shattered apart. I collapsed, my hooves raising to my muzzle as if they could contain my screams. "*Noooo!*"

"Brightwind, you shot a filly!"

My whole body was shaking and couldn't stop. The tears couldn't stop. Oh Goddesses, no!

"Fly steady, soldier."

"Fly steady?" The second pegasus rounded on the first. **"You just shot a filly!"**

Hellmare! I'd killed the filly, just as surely as Brightwind had. I'd killed her by trying to help. The image of her vanishing in a spreading cloud of pinkish glitter kept playing over and over in my mind. I couldn't think of anything else!

The first pegasus, Brightwind, turned to her accuser. **"We had our orders, and you will obey them. Now fly steady!"**

"She wasn't running to warn Radar or to hide him! She was just scared!"

I take it back! I cried out silently to Celestia and Luna. *I take it back! I didn't try to help. I didn't let her see me. Please, bring her back. Please! Let me take it back!* But no amount of regret or pleading

with the Goddesses would make the sparkling ash spiral upwards and be reborn in a flash of light.

“W-we can’t know that, soldier,” Brightwind insisted defensively. **“Now either shut up and fly steady or get your tail back to the Raptor and I’ll deal with you later!”**

“I didn’t sign up for this,” the pegasus said, turning away from Brightwind and flying back the way they came.



The thunder of the harbor guns signaled the arrival of the Raptors. Friendship City had not given up their resident Dashite. The Enclave began a full attack at the sixty-ninth minute mark.

I had crawled over to the ashes of the Arbu filly, gathering them together with my telekinesis. That’s as far as I’d gotten when Calamity found me, flying in loaded down with all our weapons.

“Li’lpip! What are ya doing?” he shouted as a lancing blast of crimson magical energy speared through the upper levels of the Pony of Friendship, slicing through homes and catwalks. The pegasus grabbed me, dragging me away as chunks of walkway and scaffolding came raining down.

“I... I couldn’t find anything to put her in,” I said, looking up into the eyes of my friend, showing him the glowing ball of ash wrapped gingerly in my magic. It was so small. It seemed hardly enough to have been a filly.

Calamity sat me down in the shelter of Sparkle’s as another blast from one of the Raptors’ magical energy cannons burnt a hole the size of a chariot through the side of the statue, engulfing Warm Smiles Inn. If there were any ponies inside, they were incinerated within seconds by the fuchsia-colored flames.

Calamity looked at the ash I was holding, his bewildered expression shifting to wounded understanding. He looked around and dug an

empty Sparkle-Cola bottle out of a trash bin. “Here, Li’lpip. Put her in here.”

My world had become that ash. With gentle reverence, I magically funneled the filly into the bottle. It glowed a soft off-pink. I floated out a bottle cap, screwing it on tight.

“Okay, Li’lpip. She’s taken care of,” Calamity was telling me. “Now Ah need ya back. Ah know it’s hard, and Ah know it hurts, but we need ya here an’ now.” I stared at him, wondering how he could be so close and yet so far away.

“D’ya understand me, Li’lpip?”

All around us, ponies were fleeing in terror, trying to get to the exits. They didn’t care that there weren’t enough boats. The thundering of the harbor guns was thinning out.

Calamity slapped me. Hard across the face with his forehoof.

I gasped, lifting a hoof to my cheek in surprise.

I could hear screams and nearby explosions.

“Ponies lives are countin’ on ya, Li’lpip,” Calamity said, drawing my attention to a focus. “Y’all gotta pull yourself together. Hurt tomorrow, help today.”

I slowly nodded, coming to my senses like a swimmer fighting her way to the ocean’s surface.

Tucking the bottle of ash into my saddlebags, I looked to Calamity. “W-What can I do to help?”

Calamity smiled, looking ready to collapse in relief.



“They came in with three Raptors,” Radar told us as we reached one of the sniper platforms in the crown of the Pony of Friendship. “Harbor guns took out one o’ them.”

I looked into the sky at the two dark warships hovering over Friendship Island as dozens of pegasi swarmed about the statue. Chief Lantern and two security ponies fired at the attacking Enclave soldiers as quickly as they could find targets, ducking behind low barricades as the pegasi returned fire. Beside me, Calamity swiftly assembled Spitfire's Thunder.

The cannons of the left Raptor flashed, sending magical energy blasts into the statue, tearing through its reinforced copper skin and into the city beyond. The other Raptor floated impassively.

"That second Raptor stopped firing after taking out the last o' the harbor guns," Radar informed me. "We need t' take out that last Raptor!" Shaking his head, he added, "Really wish I knew why they were so hot t' get me."

Radar looked at me apologetically. "I would o' gone out myself, but Freshwater wouldn't let me. Threatened t' shoot me if I tried." He looked up. "I'd go now, but it don't matter anymore."

He was right. The Enclave had gone this far. They weren't planning on leaving survivors.

An Enclave pegasus pulling a war wagon dove towards the ponies spilling out of the statue. With a kick of her hoof, a door beneath the wagon snapped open and bombs began to fall. Helpless ponies below were rent apart, their bodies flung in tatters by detonations of savage energy.

Calamity stood up, taking aim. Spitfire's Thunder tore at the air, the shot piercing the war wagon. The explosion ripped apart the sky.

"Good shot," Radar praised gently.

Calamity was breathing heavily, looking near tears himself. "Not fast enough."

"Ain't none o' this worth me," Radar said.

I followed his gaze down to the blasted ground, bloodied with the shredded bodies of innocent ponies. The crushing grief that had

overwhelmed my soul was breaking apart, slowly replaced with a building war cry.

This wasn't right. This was *evil*. And I had to stop it.

"I think yew c'n turn this whole thing 'round if yew can shut down that last Raptor," Radar repeated. "I'd do it myself but..." He looked down. "Not as fit as I used t' be." Looking up again, he added, "And not a word o' that t' Doctor Freshwater, yew hear!"

"We'll do it," I told Radar. Turning to Calamity, "I have a plan."



I stared at the burning wreckage of the docks. The Enclave had bombed the ships. No pony was getting off the island by boat.

The delivery wagon for *Absolutely Everything* was scattered in burning fragments across the water and along the sagging, demolished piers.

I looked to Ditzzy Doo in empathetic horror. But the glowing ghoul merely shrugged, writing "It's just a wagon" on her chalkboard.

As the glowing pegasus flew out over the devastation, my eyes caught sight of something crimson and green floating in the water. A pony's forehoof, bloody and ragged.

A memory bubbled to the surface of my brain.

Help me! Ambrosia had rasped. She had been dying inside her armor, pinned by part of the terminal bank, half-sunk in the tainted water that was spraying into the room. Her body already twisted and malformed.

I hadn't been able to reach her. I had barely been quick enough spreading Xenith's goop over the ragged stump of my hindleg before I had bled out. I'd downed every healing potion I had, but the loss of blood had left me so weak and dizzy I couldn't levitate anything heavier than one of the coffee cups. My blood had left a wet crimson river pouring out from beneath the slab that was holding me down, flowing

down into the tainted water, making it pink in the light of my PipBuck.

Heeeelp meeee! she had whimpered, her voice filled with torment.
Pleeeeeease! Kill meeeeee!

I had wanted to. For the love of merciful Celestia, I had wanted to. But shy of trying to beat her to death with a coffee cup, there had been nothing I could do.

Then a voice in my head had reminded me that wasn't true. There was one thing I could do.

I remembered focusing my magic, lifting up her visor. Her eyes hadn't been in the right places anymore. Only one of them, engorged and strange, had stared out at me, tortured beyond the telling of it.

As I stood near the docks, watching that bobbing, severed hoof, I recalled thinking: *maybe not a sword, but there is enough blood for a dagger.*

The memory broke, leaving me shaken. I tried to dredge up what had happened next, but there was only blackness where the memory should have been.

It took her less than a minute fluttering about the debris and floating crates before our friendly ghoul returned to me, her eyes looking in different directions, a smile on her muzzle and a StealthBuck in her hooves.

I shook myself from my morbid reverie and added the StealthBuck to the other equipment I had acquisitioned. I shuddered. What had happened to me that I could look at a poor pony's dismembered stump and not want to scream? The Equestrian Wasteland had poisoned my soul.

Above us, the hostile Raptor fired a blast at the crown of the Pony of Friendship, engulfing one of the sniper platforms in deadly magic. I pulled Ditzzy Doo with me, taking cover against the copper robes of the statue as chunks of burning flesh rained down.

Calamity swooped up next to us, dodging falling debris as he dropped two sets of Enclave armor at my hooves, scavenged from the bodies of pegasi taken out by the snipers.

"Two?" I asked him. "I can't wear one of those." I pointed out dryly. "Horn. No wings."

Ditzy Doo jabbed me with a hoof.

"What?" My eyes widened as I literally put two and two together. "Wait. Ditzy, you can't come with us! We're going into a fight!"

"She's lived two hundred years," Calamity reminded me. "Ah reckon she c'n take care o' herself, li'l miss two-months-outta-the-Stable."

Ditzy Doo leveled a look at me as explosions shook the island. Calamity hefted up Spitfire's Thunder, searching for the war wagon on a bombing run.

"Okay, fine. You're coming," I acquiesced, locking the StealthBuck into my PipLeg and locking everything we weren't taking, including Calamity's battle saddle, in a nearby crate. "Suit up."

Ditzy Doo gave me a one-hooved salute and started dressing, hiding her brilliant, ghoulish body completely inside the black, insectoid armor.



"This is Raptor Pyrocumulus to Raptor Altostratus. Respond immediately."

As Calamity and Ditzy Doo, disguised as Enclave soldiers, flew us closer to the black maw of the attacking Raptor's hangar, my PipLeg had latched onto a new signal -- one which wasn't playing the Enclave's continuous public broadcast -- and decrypted it. I found myself listening to the pegasi's inter-warship military frequency.

"This is Commander Thundersheer of the Raptor Pyrocumulus to Commander Ice Break of the Raptor Altostratus. Why have you stopped firing?" the authoritative voice of the commanding mare

asked, clearly attempting to communicate with the unresponsive second Raptor. **“You are required to respond.”**

Calamity landed on the Raptor’s lower flight deck, dropping my invisible self and the sacks I was carrying onto the black metal floor lined with small, pulsing guide lights. He trotted up to the hangar door, looking over access terminal. I moved up next to him, Ditzzy Doo watching our flank, as he attempted to hack into it. As expected, the access terminal had a cloud interface. I could offer him advice, but once again I was denied the chance to do this myself.

“Commander Thundersheer, this is Commander Ice Break. The enemy is defenseless. The battle has been won. Raptor Altostratus is standing down,” a second pegasus mare replied in a dignified, reserved voice. **“A wing is standing by to retrieve the prisoner as soon as Raptor Pyrocumulus disengages.”**

Ditzzy Doo gave a little dance in her armor. Apparently, she was picking up the transmission too. The rebellion of the second Raptor filled her heart with delight.

“Almost got it,” Calamity grunted. I turned back to the terminal, scanning the lines of code he had brought up. Somewhere in that matrix was the password.

“Commander Ice Break, those are not your orders! Resume firing.”

“With all due respect, Commander Thundersheer: no.”

After two failed tries, we located the correct password. Pragmatism.

The heavy blast doors sealing the hangar slid open. Inside, the high ceiling was laced with humming lights identical to those I grew up with in Stable Two, but more sparsely placed, leaving the hangar feeling dark and cold. Large, heavily armored windows along the roof let in the grey twilight of late evening between mounted magical energy turrets. I imagined that the hangar would have been bright and almost pleasant if those windows were letting in the pure sunlight of mid-day above the cloud curtain.

Enclave technicians and internal soldiers wearing the light combat version of Enclave armor moved above busily. Rows of war wagons lined the edges of the hangar. Red fire boxes were mounted at intervals along the walls. Racks of bombs stood between the observation windows at the far back. On the other side, Enclave officers split their attention between watching the hangar and monitoring the war chatter.

“Dammit, Ice Break! Operation Cauterize is in effect. This is straight from the Enclave High Council,” the mare commanding the Raptor we had boarded reminded her peer. **”You have your orders. Now lock your targets and resume firing or you and your entire crew will be guilty of Disaffection!”**

Ditzy Doo and Calamity moved off together, moving like they had a purpose, like they belonged. So long as they didn’t do anything suspicious, they should be ignored.

Meanwhile, I galloped silently towards the first war wagon. I only had one standard StealthBuck’s worth of time to do this, and I had already spent half of that just getting up here and inside.

“Raptor Pyrocumulus, the ponies of Raptor Altostratus regret to inform you that we will not slaughter helpless ground ponies, no matter what our orders say.”

I reached the first wagon and bucked the switch that opened its bomb door. Floating two of the homemade bombs out of the first sack, I wedged them up next to the war wagon’s payload.

The bombs had been built using the schematics for the “bottle cap mine” that Ditzy Doo had given me (it felt like ages ago). But instead of cherry bombs and bottle caps, these lunch boxes carried explosive munitions used in the (now destroyed) smaller-caliber harbor guns. Mayor Black Seas had donated the supplies. Ditzy Doo had helped me make them. A lot of them.

“Ffft. Bwah?” Commander Thundersheer sputtered in disbelief as I moved to the next war wagon. **“By our great leaders, this is mutiny, Ice Break! Think about what you’re doing. They’ll have your crew for treason.”**

There was no response from Commander Ice Break or the other Raptor. I planted two more bombs and moved to a third war wagon.

Shadows played across the hangar. I looked up, watching through the ceiling windows as the huge magical energy cannons mounted on the Raptor's top deck swiveled to the left. I could hear the belly-mounted cannons still firing on Friendship City.

“Raptor Altostratus this is Raptor Pyrocumulus!” the commander barked. **“You will lock your targets and resume firing or we will fire on you!”**

Finishing with the third wagon, I dashed to the first of the bomb racks, setting bombs as quickly as I could. I spared a glance towards Calamity and Ditzzy Doo. They had been waylaid by an Enclave officer who was demanding something of our speechless ghoul.

“She can't talk,” Calamity was saying, prevaricating swiftly, “Battle wound t' the throat.” Beside him, Ditzzy Doo nodded, eagerly backing Calamity's story. “Look, Ah'm her C.O., so anything ya need t' ask her, ya c'n ask me.”

The Enclave officer, a youthful grey buck with a black mane and a quill for a cutie mark, looked between my two disguised friends, insisting, “We don't have any soldiers on Raptor Pyrocumulus with that kind of injury.” He stared at Calamity suspiciously. “And I don't recognize that accent. Where did you say you were from again?”

Everypony in the hangar froze, turning their gazes upwards, as Raptor Pyrocumulus opened fire on her sister.

I scrambled to place my makeshift explosives on the second and third bomb racks. I was getting close to where the officer was interrogating my pegasus friends.

Calamity flapped his wings in irritation. “Look...” he grumbled, “We're from the Altostratus. Command over there's gone disloyal. We got out while we could...”

“Well, that is to be commended,” the buck told him, wrenching his eyes from the windows above. “But under the circumstances, I'm afraid

I'm going to have to place you both in the brig until the battle is over." The young officer revolved in place, looking for the closest soldiers. "Your loyalty will be determined by a tribunal once we are cloudside again."

"Aw hell," Calamity hissed as he stepped back, striking down the officer with a sting of his armored tail. Ditzzy Doo back-trotted, her body language betraying shock.

"Time t' go!" Calamity shouted as bolts of colored light whizzed throughout the hangar, the soldiers and defense turrets reacting swiftly. I floated the signal detonator out next to me, dropping the sack of lunchbox explosives at the base of the last bomb rack, and galloped.

Beams of magical energy struck at Ditzzy Doo and Calamity, peeling away at their protective magically-powered armor. One of the shots disintegrated a plate of Ditzzy's armor, the sickly yellow-green light of her irradiated ghoul body shining out of the hole in the black carapace.

I kicked the StealthBuck out of my PipLeg, giving the turrets and soldiers another target.

Thunder rumbled through the hangar from outside as one of the Pyrocumulus' cannons struck something vital in the Altostratus.

Calamity and Ditzzy Doo shot out of the hangar, several pegasi in hot pursuit.

I felt the first scorching blast lance off my Canterlot police armor, sizzling it, as I reached the landing platform. I wrapped myself in my magic, making myself weightless, and jumped.

Beneath us, the canted form of Raptor Altostratus was bellowing smoke, its left-side thundercloud dispersed, gaping holes glowing in its framework as it dropped slowly out of the sky. One of the Pyrocumulus' belly cannons swiveled and fired on the ruined warship as it crashed into Friendship Bridge, tearing apart catastrophically.

I triggered the detonator. Behind me, light and heat erupted from the hangar of the Pyrocumulus, a draconic roar building with the cascade of explosions. A blast of fire buffeted me, sending me spinning through

the sky, my magic imploding as the bomb racks went up like a volcanic armageddon, magical fire rending the Enclave warship in half.

This time, it was Ditzzy Doo who caught me. Her Enclave armor was perforated, her helmet gone. Glowing ichor seeped out of numerous painful wounds. But she was grinning, one of her eyes staring at me as she gave a squeaky victory cheer.

My heart lifted at her jubilation. But then sank again as I looked out at the burning Pony of Friendship, the smoke of an incinerated city and murdered ponies blackly bellowing out of glowing wounds carved by destructive magical energy.



We almost made it into Fetlock before the Enclave caught us.

It was the dead of night. Thunderclouds above rumbled angrily, still threatening a terrible storm.

We had fled Friendship Island (after magically snatching up the crate with all our belongings), drawing off as many of the remaining Enclave soldiers as we could. Most of them had abandoned the fight when all of their warships had fallen, but a few had been determined enough to continue “mop up”, and were engaged by the remaining security ponies.

Thanks to our help, a little over a quarter of Friendship City’s population still survived. Radar and Chief Lantern were not amongst the living. Both were killed when the Pyrocumulus took out their sniper platform. Calamity had become withdrawn and laconic since the news.

The survivors were still trapped on the island. The Pyrocumulus had destroyed the docks and boats. The crash of the Altostratus had wiped out a section of the bridge. Once we got back to Stable Twenty-Nine, we intended to enlist the aid of the Applejack’s Rangers. I was certain that the needs of nearly two hundred suffering ponies would draw Velvet Remedy out of her shell.

But Ditzzy Doo was wounded. More than she let on. And as we drew close to the edge of Manehattan, she had begun flagging. So we landed in the ruins of a building which, based on the plate-and-silverware design still visible on the badly deteriorated and half-buried sign, had once been a diner. (Or, from the horseshoe motif running along the top of its one standing wall, possibly a shoe shop.)

When the ruins had turned up empty, Calamity had taken Spitfire's Thunder and had flown into the rubble of the apartment building next door, searching for food, RadAway and anything else he could find. This left me sitting on the edge of the ruins, staring across the street. Ditzzy Doo had discarded the ruined Enclave armor and was splashing playfully in a glowing puddle of radioactive waste spilled from the back of a wagon bearing the M.A.S. logo.

I couldn't help but smile at her antics as the glowing ghoul rolled in the waste, the radiation healing her wounds. This wasn't helping her condition, but now that the doctors of Friendship City had taught her how to relieve herself of the build up quickly, Ditzzy Doo was considerably less worried.

Catching my eye, she shook herself off, flinging glowing goop all over the wagon and the rubble around her, then began to trot back to me, closing her eyes and concentrating as she did so. Her body pulsed with a flash of radiation that drove her face-planting into the broken asphalt of the street. She stood back up, her eyes reeling in different directions, then giggled at her own clumsiness.

As she reached me, she set down her chalkboard, scribbling out, "*Absolutely Everything* does not have boats. Must fix."

"Don't worry," I assured her. "We'll get those ponies to safety."

Ditzzy Doo nodded happily and kicked her chalkboard up, dipping her head and expertly catching the neck loop so that it hung again against her fleshy breast.

"Do not move," the armor-augmented voice cut through the darkness. I immediately cursed myself, bringing up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle up. **"We have you surrounded."**

There were red lights all over my compass.

I looked towards the crate that still held most of my weapons. I had retrieved Little Macintosh, but the zebra rifle and sniper rifle were still inside. I did a quick mental calculation of how many armor-piercing bullets I had left for my favorite gun, how long it would take to reload, and the chances they would kill my now-unarmored ghoul companion before I could take them down.

With a heavy sigh, I responded. "We surrender."



Ditzzy Doo poked at the blue field of our magical energy cage with her hoof, making an "ow" sound. (Something she didn't need a tongue for.) I stared through the field at the Enclave soldiers milling about outside. A technician pegasus sat next to the terminal which controlled the energy cages -- there were others, but ours was the only one occupied. I noted glumly that it had a cloud interface. Next to it was an Enclave crate where Little Macintosh was imprisoned.

My PipBuck was clicking steadily. Being locked in here with Ditzzy Doo was bathing me in radiation. I noticed gloomily that the scrapes and bruises I had acquired in Friendship City were all fading away, and that my stomach was beginning to churn unpleasantly, threatening to divest me of my precious lunch.

Poke. "ow." Poke. "ow."

"These ponies aren't from the attack on Friendship City," I observed with a whisper, watching an Enclave officer toss her emptied bottle of Sunrise Sarsaparilla into a trash bin that was beginning to overflow. I had glimpsed an Enclave antenna array as they marched us to the cages.

"They've been camped here for a while now." I looked to Ditzzy Doo. "Any guesses as to what they're up to?"

Ditzzy Doo looked to me and shook her head, the last wisps of her mane flapping about. Then she turned back to the blue, cracking wall in front of her. Poke. "ow."

A mustard-coated pegasus in the light Enclave combat armor (identical, I noted, to the armor I had first seen Rainbow Dash showing off to her friends) stopped his walking patrol to lift his visor and glare at Ditzzy Doo. "Would ya cut that out?" he growled. "Y'all are givin' me a headache."

Poke. "Ow!"

"Hey," he barked to me. "Can't ya make yer little monster knock it off?"

"Nope," I replied, as I caught movement in the corner of my eye. Gazing out, I saw Calamity moving up on a high ridge of rubble. Our cavalry had arrived.

I shifted away and lowered my head, trying to look forlorn and pathetic, burying my face in my hooves to allow myself to serendipitously watch Calamity without alerting any of the ponies keeping an eye on us.

Calamity shifted Spitfire's Thunder into position, peering down the scope at the pegasi all around us. I waited, my nerves alive with anticipation.

Calamity stared at the other pegasi. And did not fire.

"Calamity?" I whispered to myself.

Slowly, Calamity pulled back, sliding Spitfire's Thunder away, and disappeared.

Ditzzy Doo dropped her chalkboard next to me: "He isn't going to rescue us?"

Calamity? I thought, feeling apprehensive and a little hurt. *What are you doing?*



Two pegasi in fearsome onyx armor marched Calamity into the camp at the tips of their viciously sharp tails. The rust-colored Dashite walked in front of them, wings held high.

Oh dammit, Calamity!

“Up you go,” one of the pegasi ordered as the technician lowered the field around one of the magical energy cages. She prodded Calamity up onto the platform. He cantered around to stare at her as the blue field washed up between them.

I moved as close to him as our cage would allow. The shielded cage was beginning to feel uncomfortably warm. “Calamity,” I hissed. “What...?”

Calamity just looked at me sadly. “Sorry, Li’lpip. Ah... Ah jus’ couldn’t.”

“Even after what they just did? Are you serious?”

Calamity shifted uncomfortably and nodded, offering no explanation. But an explanation was forthcoming.

“Well, look who we ‘ave here!” It was the pegasus buck who had growled at Ditzzy Doo. He was trotting up, looking like a colt who had just gotten his cutie mark. “If it ain’t my little brony!”

His little what now?

“Hello, Pride,” Calamity said sourly. “Ah see they’re lettin’ just anypony into the Enclave these days.”

“Hey,” the mustard-coated pony hissed. “Ah ain’t the traitor here.”

“No,” Calamity jabbed. “Y’all just washed out. Three times, no less.”

“You know him?” I asked.

Pride turned to me with a grin, “Oh, are y’all friends?” He looked from Calamity to us and back in exaggerated astonishment. “Well, what d’ya know. Li’l Calamity actually managed t’ make some friends.” He rolled his eyes, adding, “A munchkin mare an’ a monster.”

Pride smirked at us. “Y’all should really chose a better friend,” the Enclave buck said nastily. “Calamity here’s a flyin’ disaster.”

Leaning close to me just beyond the blue field, Pride nickered like he was about to tell me a secret. I stood up, glaring through the energy

barrier at him. “Ya know why father named him Calamity?” the buck asked far too loudly.

Father? Pride was Calamity’s brother? No wonder he wouldn’t shoot!

I suddenly flashed back to the first argument Velvet Remedy had with us about eating meat.

Oh, we c’n eat meat all right. Jus’ don’t much like to. Ain’t really good for our diet, Calamity had asserted. *Muh brothers used t’ challenge me t’ hotdog eatin’ contests. Which mostly meant them shoving the disgustin’ things down muh throat.*

Calamity’s brother grinned maliciously, “Cuz he killed our mother comin’ out.”

I dropped back on my haunches, the cruelty of Pride’s claim knocking the wind from me. The little pony in my head cried at the pain such vicious words must be causing my best friend.

But Calamity only looked bored. “That again?” he drawled, unimpressed. “Ya ain’t seen me fer six years, an’ in all that time, ya ain’t come up with anythin’ new?” The orange-maned pegasus shook his head. “Back when Ah was a blank-flank colt an’ y’all would tell me that, Ah’d bawl fer hours. But case ya ain’t noticed, that was a long time ago, an’ Ah ain’t a li’l foal no more.”

Pride sneered. “Really? Strange. Ah don’t see no cutie mark on ya, baby brother.”

Calamity rolled his eyes. “An’ ya know why,” he spat.

The mustard-coated Enclave pony laughed, stomping a hoof on the ground. “That Ah do!” He peered into Calamity’s cage at his little brother. “And Ah should be thankin’ ya. Brandin’ that mark off yer flanks was muh rite o’ passage into the Enclave.”

I reeled. Calamity’s *own brother* had branded his cutie mark off?!

“Then again, y’all should be thankin’ me,” Pride snarked. “Who wants a picture of a hammer on their flank anyway?”

He swiveled back to Calamity, "Ow, that's gotta sting, knowin' ya abandoned yer own kind, became a filthy traitor, when all ya had t' do was wait a few more years?"

"Muh loyalty was, and has always been, t' the ponies o' Equestria," Calamity glared back. "Ain't muh fault the Enclave's allegiance is only t' itself. If they were what they pretended t' be, they'd a been down here with me."

"Still spoutin' them horseapple, li'l brother?" Pride jabbed. "We'll, case y'all missed it, we're here now."

"So, Pride," Calamity asked tiredly, "What's this really all about? Cuz it ain't the Grand Pegasus Enclave swoopin' t' the rescue. Ah ain't seen a single civilian. This is a military operation, through an' through."

Pride nickered. "Haven't y'all been listenin' t' the radio? There's a bastard pony named Red Eye who's messin' with shit that ain't his t' mess with."

"Ya mean the Sing..." Calamity quickly corrected himself, "Sustainable Pegasus Project?"

"Ayep. Somethin' he did alerted the higher-ups an' they started diggin' into all the shit he's been doin' with one o' our towers. None too bright, that Red Eye. Left all sorts o' clues as t' what he's been dippin' his hooves in."

I frowned. Careless wasn't Red Eye's nature. On the other hoof, if the Enclave could override DJ Pon3's signal from the M.A.S.E.B.S., they could very possibly be able to access things Red Eye reasonably expected to be secure.

Or Red Eye could be setting them up somehow. From what I saw in Friendship City, the Enclave was sowing the seeds of their own destruction just being here.

And that was before taking into account what my friends and I were going to do to them.

“An’ what’s that gotta do with blastin’ the royal city off the side of the mountain?” Calamity questioned. “Why don’t y’all jus’ fly over and kill ‘im? What’s Operation Caulterize?”

Pride pulled up short. “Where’d ya hear that?”

“Ah have muh sources,” Calamity said cryptically, holding a hoof to his breast.

Pride glared at my friend for a good spell before finally saying, “Don’t do the Enclave no good t’ jus’ kill the bastard. Even if we take ‘im down, somepony else might step into his hoofprints and try t’ finish what he started.”

So, what, they had to take out Red Eye *and* Stern?

“T’ protect the Enclave an’ the pegasi race, we gotta take out Red Eye, those he may have told an’ anypony else who might know ‘bout the Sustainable Pegasus Project,” Pride stated firmly. “An’ get rid o’ the last earth-side hubs o’ the damned Ministry o’ Awesome so’s nopony else c’n ever stumble ‘cross what Red Eye did.”

Goddesses. That’s why they were after Radar. He’d been in the MAw. There would be Enclave troops hunting us down for the same reason.

The gears in my mind started churning. Homage was a target too. Who else? The little pony in my head started piecing together a picture that filled me with dread. The Enclave had tried to wipe Friendship City off the map. *Tends not to leave loose ends*, the voice I now recognized as Commander Thundersheer had said. He didn’t want to just murder Radar; he might have told other members of the science team. And they might have told friends or family. In Thundersheer’s mind, the whole city was “infected” and they all had to perish.

How many degrees of separation before the Enclave wouldn’t consider somepony a threat? How far were they planning to go?

“Y’all are talkin’ ‘bout mass murder,” Calamity breathed. “Ain’t no way the Enclave thinks it c’n be Equestria’s savior after this!” His eyes

narrowed, his gaze sharper than a dagger. "But then, they don't ever plan on rejoinin' Equestria, do they?"

Pride gave Calamity a pitying look.

"So, what's the plan then?" Calamity stomped. "The civilians gotta see somethin's up. The Enclave plannin' t' write this off as a big scoutin' mission? 'Oh we thought that maybe it was time fer us t' descend, but after a prolonged exploration, we realized that jus' ain't feasible. Best we wait 'nother two hundred years?'"

"Somethin' like that," Pride said dismissively.



We sat in our magical cages in silence as dawn began to color the horizon. I was supremely tired, but none of us actually felt like sleeping. Calamity had apologized again, several times in fact, until I had nearly shouted at him that it was okay.

I'd spent the last two hours contemplating how I could levitate the weapons I could get my magic on and use them to wipe out the camp. Right now, while most of it was asleep, I figured I had a good chance of pulling it off.

But then, we'd still be stuck in these cages.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead, trembling slightly. My E.F.S. was warning me that my radiation exposure had reached critical levels. I had to try something, but it would have to be something that worked. I wouldn't survive in here long enough to get another chance.

Ditzzy Doo was huddled on the far corner of the cage, keeping away from me as best she could. But in this small a space, it really didn't matter.

Calamity was laying down in his cage, looking morose.

"I'm sure Pride was wrong," I told my friend through the shields between us. "About your father, I mean. He wouldn't have named you after the death of your mother."

Calamity's muzzle gave me a wry smile. "Ah could never bring muhself t' ask. But, knowin' muh father, he prob'ly did."

Luna's mercy. That was... horrible. "I... I'm sorry, Calamity, but I kinda hate your father right now."

Calamity smiled, sitting up. "That's okay, Li'lpip. He'd be happy t' hear it." I winced. "Everypony hates muh father. That's his job. Most loathed bastard in all the Enclave."

"Your father is Enclave too?" I breathed, my mind suddenly conjuring images of Calamity's father as a member of the Enclave High Council. Possibly even the stallion behind Operation Cauterize. Goddesses... don't put Calamity through that. It's not fair!

"Ayep," Calamity said, a grim little smile playing over his face. "Drill Sergeant at Neighvarro."

He stood up, raising his wings and dropping his voice mockingly, "A HAMMER? Yer cutie mark is a fuckin' HAMMER? That had BETTER be to HAMMER down yer enemies, boy! Or yer the SORRIEST EXCUSE fer a SON that Ah EVER did see!"

Wow.

Calamity sat back down, chuckling a little despite himself. "Ayep. That's muh dad." He shook his mane, looking at me. "Any surprise all four o' his bucks ended up in the Enclave?"

Suddenly, my mother felt like a blessing.

"So..." I said, trying to strike up conversation while I searched for a solution to our predicament. "Your cutie mark was a hammer?"

Calamity looked up. "Ayep. An' a screwdriver."

"Your cutie mark was tools?" It was not what I had expected. I would have imagined my friend with crosshairs on his flank. Or a bullseye. Although that would hardly be the best thing to be sporting on your flank in the Equestrian Wasteland.

Still, this was Calamity. The pony who delighted in fixing up the *Sky Bandit* and making it fly again. Who put on armor and a pony rack. Who repaired everything from firearms to dresses. I thought of him as a sharpshooter; but thinking about it, I realized that every weapon he used aside from Spitfire's Thunder was a weapon he had modified or built himself. He'd even jury-rigged his Enclave armor to allow him to shoot it without wearing the helmet.

Ditzy Doo trotted up, pressing her chalkboard against the shield, making it crackle.

Calamity peered, reading. "Story?" He looked at me, baffled.

Cocking my head at Ditzy Doo, I guessed, "I think she wants to hear your cutie mark story." With a smile, I added, "I think I do too."

"Cutie marks don't matter," Calamity told us drearily.

"Come on," I encouraged, clapping my hooves on the floor of the cage. "Story! Story!" Ditzy Doo joined in.

Calamity rolled his eyes and shot me a look. "Fine. But y'all gotta share yers too." He tipped his desperado hat, thinking.



"When Ah was a li'l colt," Calamity began, "All Ah wanted t' do was make muh father proud o' me. Which was nearly impossible, even fer muh big brothers. Ah was never gonna be as big or strong as 'em, so Ah practiced shootin'. First year Ah tried the Young Sharpshooter's Competition, Ah came in third.

"Father was so disappointed."

I winced.

"I tried t' tell 'im that Ah tried muh best, but he told me that meant muh best was pathetic. I said it wasn't muh fault. That the old gun he'd given me was all weighted funny an' hard t' aim. He told me that Ah shoulda fixed it better then."

Calamity shook his head, digging a hoof at the cell floor. “So’s that’s what Ah did. Ah spent all year tinkerin’ with that gun. Fixin’ the sights, buildin’ a custom muzzle grip, addin’ weight t’ the shoulder brace so it was more balanced.

“Next year, Ah placed first.”

Calamity looked up at me, tears in his eyes. “Th-that was the first time muh father ever smiled at me. First t-time he ever told me Ah’d done good.”

He stared into the morning sky. The rising sun was painting the clouds with glorious oranges and pinks and golds. “When Ah got home an’ took off muh competitors bardin’, there they were. A hammer an’ a screwdriver. Best day o’ muh life.”

He looked down, reaching back a hoof to ruffle his mane. “Till Ah met ya an’ Velvet, o’ course.”



“I was dead last amongst my peers to get my cutie mark,” I told them. “All the other colts and fillies who had been in my class had gotten their cutie marks a full two years before, and the Overmare wanted to put me to work.”

I explained, “Normally, in Stable Two, we were assigned the jobs we would have for the rest of our lives based on our cutie marks. Without mine, the Overmare couldn’t assign me. So she drew on some ancient bylaw created by Stable Two’s first Overmare which allowed her to have me temporarily apprentice under a variety of positions until something sparked my cutie mark to appear. Mostly, she had me try out a number of administrative and technical apprenticeships, since those were the areas most unicorns were assigned to anyway.”

I looked down at the PipBuck grossly infused into the flesh of my leg. “We were supposed to get our PipBucks after we got our cutie marks and our job assignment.”

Biting my lower lip, I thought back. “One day, while I was apprenticing with the head PipBuck Technician, a worried couple slipped into the PipBuck Technician’s stall. Their son had gone missing. He had run off during his Cutie Mark Party. Somehow, he’d gotten himself lost in the Stable and they couldn’t find him.”

Calamity was staring at me, a little bewildered. He remembered how small and enclosed the Stables were compared to the outside world.

“One of the most overlooked capabilities of a PipBuck is that it can track tagged objects. Mostly, this is used for the automapper. My PipBuck came loaded with a whole slew of preset location tags. I’m still getting surprised by occasional ‘you are here’ messages on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle.” I smiled a little, remembering how astonished I was that my PipBuck knew the name of Sweet Apple Acres. “Every PipBuck has a tag, allowing anypony with that tag code and another PipBuck to locate them.”

“My mentor was... asleep. Which was not uncommon for him. So I hacked into his terminal and downloaded the tag code for the colt’s new PipBuck into one of the ones I had been working on. I took the tools that allowed me to unlock it and put the PipBuck on, bringing up an Eyes-Forward Sparkle for the first time. Keying the E.F.S. compass to the colt’s tag, I slipped through the Stable until I found him.

“The colt had managed to get himself locked in the maintenance shed for the Apple Orchard. It was after hours, and nopony had been around to hear his banging and yelling. I didn’t want to get the colt in trouble, so instead of fetching one of the gardener ponies, I picked the lock and got him out myself.”

I gave a weak grin. “Of course, he went and told everypony how I had ‘rescued’ him, and so I got in trouble for appropriating the PipBuck and picking the lock. But at least my mentor covered for me about the hacking. And the Overmare wasn’t going to press the issue, seeing as my new cutie mark dictated that I would be with him for a good long while.”

Smiling softly at the memory, I concluded, “It was the first time I had ever felt I’d done something useful. Something really... good.”



I don't think either of us had been expecting Ditzzy Doo to join in the storytelling -- hell, we couldn't even tell what the ghoul's cutie mark had been -- so both Calamity and I were surprised when the glowing pegasus dropped her chalkboard at my hooves and prodded me to read. (And then prodded me harder, reminding me to read aloud so Calamity could hear.)

It took a great many pauses while Ditzzy Doo wiped the chalkboard clean and wrote a few more words before her simple story was told:

“Uncle owned a moving wagon company.

“Uncle let me help. He didn't let me do too much carrying. Said I was clumsy. But he let me ride around on the wagon and called me his little mascot.

“I liked it. It was fun to help ponies move into a new home. I liked seeing them happy. Especially families.

“Super especially when they had fillies or colts my age.

“Once, there was a family who was sad about moving. They had a little filly and a littler colt, but they were scared of me because my eyes are different. So I made funny faces and got them to laugh at me. Then they were happy.

“Then I took them back to where uncle kept all the packing supplies, and I showed them the most fun thing in the entire world: bubble wrap.

“They loved popping all the bubbles, especially little Pokey. We had fun all day long.

“Uncle told me that was when I got my cutie mark. But I was having too much fun to notice.”



I had almost come up with a plan when Pride snuck past our cages and to the terminal. Poking it with a hoof, he brought down the walls of magical energy.

Calamity jumped up, leaping off the cage platform. “What the hey?”

“Just go,” Pride hissed.

I whispered to Calamity, pointing at the Enclave crate that Little Macintosh was locked away in.

“Open that,” Calamity said, pointing his hoof, “And we will.”

Pride nashed his teeth in exasperation and went to work on the crate.

“So...” Calamity said as the crate hissed open. I floated out Little Macintosh and the few other items they had taken from Ditzzy Doo and me. “...we escaped?”

“Somethin’ like that. Ah don’t know. But y’all gotta get.” Pride looked around nervously. “Listen, word just came down. Operation Cauterize has been extended t’ all Dashites. Next time Ah see ya, Ah’ll be shootin’ ya. Understand?”

Calamity nodded. “Gee, Ah ‘ave the sudden, unnatural urge t’ hug ya, big brony.”

Ditzzy Doo moved up, holding her chalkboard in her teeth with two words written across it. “New Appleloosa?”

Pride gave us an ugly look. “Red Eye’s favorite tradin’ town? The one that gave ‘im the bomb he set off, assassinatin’ a member o’ the High Council? Enclave dispatched a full regiment there at first light.”

Ditzzy Doo stumbled back at the news, the chalkboard dropping from her open muzzle.

“Monster,” Pride said darkly, “Ah’d be surprised if there’s even a crater left by now.”

Ditzy's eyes were wide, her pupils huge and centered dead ahead, seeing something beyond Pride, a strangled squeak coming from her throat. She didn't need to speak for me to know the one thing on her mind: Silver Bell!

I heard the little lavender filly's voice from two days before, crying out: *Mommy!*

Ditzy Doo broke into flight, headed for New Appleloosa. Calamity scooped me up, giving chase, diverting only far enough for me to telekinetically scoop of Spitfire's Thunder from the rubble where he'd left it.



Four Raptors were positioning themselves over New Appleloosa, squads of black-armored pegasi flying about the sky between them. The town was still standing, but we could see Enclave soldiers swooping to strike down ponies who were trying to flee the walls.

Ditzy Doo pulled up, hovering in the air, a look of dismay etched on her face.

Calamity bristled, his eyes narrowing in anger as a pegasus dove at a running mare, opening up with a rapid-fire burst of light that turned the fleeing pony to glowing blue dust.

"Dammit, Li'lpip! We gotta stop this!" He was near the breaking point. I could hear it in his voice.

Before we could react, Ditzy Doo zoomed forward again, flying right into the heart of the Enclave forces. The pegasi whipped about as the glowing one shot past them. They started chasing her, but quickly stopped shooting after their first blasts missed and hit one of the Raptors.

Calamity set me down and started off after her, but I grabbed him by the tail with my teeth. "Whoa! That's suicide," I knew we were about to lose Ditzy Doo, and probably Xenith and Silver Bell. I was damned if I was going to lose Calamity too. "We need a plan!"

Ditzy Doo had stopped in the center of the Enclave forces. They had her surrounded, but they couldn't shoot without risking hitting their own. Several armored pegasi moved in, their tails curling to strike as soon as they got within range.

PFWOOSH!

The burst of light and radiation from the glowing pegasus sent the encroaching Enclave pegasi reeling as Ditzy Doo shot almost straight up into the air, beating her nearly featherless wings as fast and hard as she could.

The Enclave pegasi gave chase. They started to fire again, but Ditzy Doo repeatedly blasted out radiation, each time blinding her pursuers as it shot her up higher.

Two of the Raptors swiveled their topside cannons around, scorching the air with magical death. But the huge weapons were too inaccurate to hit their quickly ascending target. After half a dozen missed shots, they left the escaping ghoul to the black-armored soldiers chasing her.

The glow of Ditzy Doo illuminated a patch of the dark storm clouds as she disappeared into them. Then the glow faded and she was gone.

The ponies following her stopped, hovering in the air. Several began to turn back.

Inside, I knew that she would any moment break through the top of the cloud curtain and see true sunlight for the first time in probably two hundred years. The little pony in my head shed a tear.

Then reality snapped back. Ditzy Doo had distracted the Enclave. She'd given us a window. And we were missing it!

"Okay," I said quickly to Calamity as I slipped the MG StealthBuck II into my malformed PipLeg. "Here's the plan..."

"Whoa," Calamity said, looking up.

I turned, following his gaze, as a spot of golden-green light dropped out of the clouds. I knew what it was, but I still lifted my binoculars to be sure. The first drops of the promised storm began to fall.

Ditzy Doo had broken back through the cloud curtain, shooting past the top tier of hovering Enclave soldiers before they could react.

The ones who had started back down turned and sped in to catch her.

PFWOOSH! The pulse of radioactive light sent the black-armored pegasi spinning out of control as she shot ahead like a rocket.

The other pegasi were reacting now, chasing after her, firing beams of multi-colored light. Most missed. I gasped as some did not.

PFWOOSH! Ditzy Doo jolted ahead, moving even faster. She was aiming right for the center space between the Enclave's Raptors.

The Raptors were in position now. Their belly cannons were taking aim at New Appleloosa below, preparing to cleanse the town off the face of Equestria.

My plan was forgotten as quickly as I had formed it. All I could do was watch.

PFWOOSH!

Ditzy was beyond the reach of her pursuers now. But not, it appeared, beyond the reach of their weapons. One of the Enclave ponies fired twin missiles at the ghoul pegasus as she streaked by, seeming nothing more than a glowing blur. The missiles spun, magically locking onto her. They spiraled around each other leaving a double-helix of smoke in their wake, as they chased her.

PFWOOSH!

The missiles were undeterred and gaining speed, closing the distance as Ditzy Doo beat her wings, arrowing down at the Enclave about to destroy her town and kill her daughter. She was moving so fast the odd air of the Equestrian Wasteland seemed to be warping about her. Her body was glowing brighter and brighter as she focused, building up for another burst. The sickly light pouring from her body was rippling in the air, sheering off of her in washes of unearthly, diseased colors.

The missiles seemed to reach her at the same time she reached the Raptors.

Ditzy Doo exploded.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: Touched by Taint (3) - Exposure to Taint has further altered your physiology. You are 20% faster and stronger whenever you're basking in the warm glow of radiation. Your Action Points regenerate faster and faster the higher your level of radiation sickness becomes. Your natural lifespan has increased dramatically.

CHAPTER FORTY



SONIC RAD-BOOM

"If you're feeling lonely and you're still searching for your true friends, just look up in the sky. Who knows, maybe you... are all looking at the same rainbow. "

Loss.

The war had come with thunder and death. And all of the Equestrian Wasteland seemed in mourning. We were deep in our darkest hour, just praying for a ray of light.

We had all suffered loss.

My friends and I had lost one of our own, SteelHooves. He had finally found rest, finally been reunited with his beloved Applejack and their child in whatever life lies beyond this. But all I felt was the gaping wound of his absence. An abscess in the core of our party, aching and hollow, where SteelHooves should have been. The spectre of his death hung over everything, casting all our individual losses into even deeper shadow. Making us all seem more vulnerable and fragile.

I was struggling with a loss of my very self. I was not who I was anymore. Not Littlepip. I was an alien in my own body, a body warped into something entirely non-pony by taint. And I was a stranger in my own mind, not knowing the truth of the things I had done. Velvet's

words had cut cruelly, not because she was cruel but because she was right. The balefire bomb had been an atrocity. And yet, as Velvet Remedy had assured me, it had been the necessary thing to do. Without my memories, I didn't know if I had simply never thought of the consequences... or if I had and went ahead anyway.

SteelHooves had paid the price. He had lost his life because of what I had done.

I knew I would never watch those memories. Well, maybe the eighth memory orb – my soul needed Homage's every healing touch – but not the others. I didn't want to know how much I had realized. If I had committed a holocaust, I couldn't bear it. It would be the final, fatal separation from self.

Velvet Remedy was suffering a loss of faith. Velvet was hurting more deeply than the rest of us. The foundation of all that she was had been shattered. The wasteland was more cold and cruel and brutal than any pony should have to bear -- too much for a pony whose soul was one filled with kindness and caring for others, whose core desire was to help, to heal and to make things better. To her, it didn't matter if the hurting creature was a pony, a zebra or a monster. Friend, stranger or enemy were all worthy of the same compassion in Velvet Remedy's eyes. I remembered her considering a hellhound a patient and easing the pain of a dying alicorn. Velvet Remedy had weathered all the Equestrian Wasteland had thrown at her, sometimes weakening but never failing in her belief that helping others was the right course of action. And she had done so, fighting both the despair and ugliness of the wasteland and her own inner demons by clinging to her personal religion of Fluttershy. The kindness of the Mare of Peace had been her anchor and her bulwark.

Now, the memories of SteelHooves had revealed the truth to Velvet Remedy, and that bulwark was shattered. And she was drowning.

Calamity was fighting against a loss of all he held dear, and he felt he was losing that battle. Already, one of his friends was dead, and he

could see those he held most dear, including the mare he loved, slipping away into their own darkness.

And that horror was playing out against the backdrop of the end of his world. After meeting one of Calamity's brothers (and seeing hints that the rest of his family were as bad or worse), I found Calamity's "policy" and his personal horror over Bucklyn Cross were brought into sharp focus. Calamity was my closest friend, and I was only now beginning to understand and truly know him. And now the Enclave had descended upon us with "Operation Cauterize". It was one thing for Calamity to have rejected and left the Enclave, but it was quite another for him to witness the Enclave rise up as the greatest threat to Equestria.

Like us, Applejack's Rangers had lost SteelHooves. He had been their Elder and their center, the figure around whom they had gathered. Now, the fledgling force for good faced a harrowing fight to survive.

And it was not only us. All of the Equestrian Wasteland was suffering. With the destruction of Canterlot, the ponies of the wasteland had lost the greatest symbol of the fabled past of peace and tranquility that was the era before the war. It was as if the final strands of the past had been severed with the death of SteelHooves and the destruction of that city. The proof of what we had once been had carried with it the silent promise that we could, possibly, be that again. Now, we were adrift in a sea of darkness.

Within the same day, the wasteland had lost more than an icon; we had lost one of our greatest centers of ponykind with the bloody massacre at Friendship City. We had lost what little peace the wasteland had to offer. We had lost the assurance that even those living within the walls of a fortified city would live another day. All across Equestria, ponies mourned for the dead and feared for the living.

As if these wounds were not deep enough, the ponies of the wasteland had lost the voice that called out to them in the darkness, bringing truth and hope: the voice of DJ Pon3. But in this, at least, the loss was not absolute. Homage was out there, fighting back, and DJ Pon3's

voice would occasionally cry out within the darkness, bringing a flicker of light before it was silenced.

And even our enemies had suffered great loss.

The alicorns had lost their Goddess, their guide and compass. They had lost the Unity which connected them and gave them purpose. They had lost the constant voice in their heads to which they had been subservient. And even now, many were beginning to lose their minds.

The hellhounds, the most vicious and deadly of all monsters in the wastelands had the heart of their civilization torn asunder, and the bulk of their kind annihilated in a single blast of necromantic green fire. Psychotically territorial, now they no longer had a home of their own.

And the Enclave themselves. They had lost one of their leaders and a great many of their ponies in what was, to them, a cowardly and heinous terrorist attack. How much of their overkill was fueled by the rage and grief of a wounded nation?

Operation: Cauterize was costing them more than they were ready to lose. They had not anticipated the resistance they would encounter, either from without or within. Their victories had been pyrrhic at best. The pegasi were facing not only loss of forces, and possible defeat, but for many a loss of ideology as well. And it only promised to get worse the longer they stayed here.

Of all those in the wasteland, perhaps only Red Eye had not yet suffered loss. But that would soon change.

Loss. It doesn't bring out the best in us, or the worst, although it can do either. It doesn't show us who we truly are. It just hurts. And it makes us all the same. Even the most sadistic raider, immune to empathy, who draws joy and strength from the suffering of others, will feel grief over a loss they suffer themselves.

In the black pit of loss, we all pray for light.



Ditzy Doo exploded... and the explosion was *massive!*

The center of the explosion was a glorious greenish-gold so bright it seemed to sear my eyes, lingering in my vision long after I had looked away. From that epicenter erupted a ring of spectral light, riding an enormous shockwave, rippling with strange colors like a toxic rainbow.

The missiles chasing Ditzzy Doo were bucked backwards, exploding in the air yards behind her. Molten payloads discharged in plumes of eldritch hellfire, burning the sky above and below Ditzzy Doo; but even as they missed, the force of the twin detonations slammed into the ghoul like she was made of rags. Ditzzy Doo's body somersaulted, peppered with shrapnel, and plummeted -- unconscious or dead -- towards the ground. She was no longer glowing.

But the bursts of fire and energy from the missiles were barely noticed in the fury of what Ditzzy Doo had unleashed. The ear-splitting crack of her feat drowned out their pitiful explosions. The shockwave blasted through the air, tearing off roofing from the few buildings in New Appleloosa not made of train cars, scattered debris, and tore the Enclave pegasi out of the sky.

Well, there's only one way t' clear an area that big that fast, Calamity had told me when I asked about removing part of the cloud curtain. An' that's with a sonic rainboom.

The realization of what I was seeing struck me, half-formed in my brain, as the shockwave knocked the four Enclave Raptors away from the city as the ring of unearthly light washed over them, tearing away their clouds. The Raptors used clouds as integral components for their locks, their computers, structural elements... and the storm clouds that kept them aloft. The mighty Enclave warships crumbled as they fell. Three crashed down just beyond the city's walls. The fourth was not pushed so far away, its corpse dropping towards homes and ponies below until a caramel-colored field of levitation magic caught it and nudged it away just enough that it struck down on a durable assemblage of boxcars just left of Turnpike Tavern.

Even as my mind was putting a name to what I was seeing, I lashed out with my magic, tossing a levitation net under Ditzzy Doo's limp body,

wrapping her in it. She was falling so fast I knew I would never be able to stop her from splattering against the ground, but I had to try.

Two more levitation fields wrapped around my own. A powerful one of that familiar caramel color, and a weak glow of palest silver. Even the three of us could not stop her fall, only slow her down just a little.

Just enough for Calamity to catch her.

Even as Calamity burst through our levitation fields, forelegs outstretched, the body of Ditzzy Doo cradled within them, the shockwave reached the heavens, tearing open the sky. Sunlight, the purest and most brilliant light imaginable, illuminated New Appleloosa in a warm glow. It was as if Celestia Herself had descended from the heavens and was giving the city a hug.

Shimmering colors floated in the air, the heavy storm clouds releasing their moisture as they dissipated. My PipLeg began to click with gentle warning. The rainfall was irradiated. Toxic.

While I could not see it for myself, I now know how far Ditzzy Doo's miracle reached.

Inside the walls of New Appleloosa, Xenith stood transfixed at the edge of a scrap metal walkway, the hood of her cloak down, her eyes lifted upwards towards the wonder above us. She was too distracted by the marvel above her to stop the little lavender filly, her newly-grown horn glowing with a pale silver light, as she dashed between the zebra's legs, galloping towards where Calamity was just now landing. But her ears caught the filly's cry.

"Mommy!"

Ditzzy Doo's sonic radiation boom did not stop at the edges of New Appleloosa. I spun, watching the expanding ring of Ditzzy Doo's explosion, a rainbow of glorious and diseased colors tearing outward, riding the shockwave that carried dust and detritus with it like a storm.

The sonic radiation boom blasted over the Everfree Forest, clearing the smoke and fanning the flames it didn't blow out. The shockwave rattled the windows of the Cathedral. I am sure that, in that moment,

Red Eye paused to look up into the sky, realizing something important had happened.

The blast was felt in Ponyville, driving the beleaguered town's newest inhabitants underground. The toxic rainbow flashed out over Splendid Valley, driving a great radioactive wind before it.

The wash of strange light fanned out beneath the clouded sky. Looking up from the gravestone before which she was grieving, a charcoal-coated unicorn watched as the light mirrored across the lake behind SteelHooves' shack.

The thundering crack of the sonic radboom echoed through the grey canyons of the Manehattan Ruins. Staring out through his office window in Tenpony Tower, a mottled brown unicorn with a scroll on his flank watched as sunlight spilled down on a town far away, the golden glow reflecting in his glasses.

Even amongst the cold, windswept crags of Shattered Hoof Ridge, where the storm clouds were unleashing a flurry of summer snow, the glow of Ditzzy Doo's sonic radiation boom was visible on the monitors inside the base station of the Shattered Hoof Ridge Tower, lighting up part of the horizon in a pulse of weird luminescence.

And just outside of town, this little unicorn mare with a PipBuck on her flank was finally feeling the pieces of that great puzzle slide into place in her head. I had spent my life searching for who I was, trying to find meaning in my existence. As a filly, I yearned to discover my cutie mark, needing to know what made me different and special... if anything at all. Outside, my search evolved into a quest to find my virtue and ultimately my place in this vast and cruel wasteland.

Now, in the light given to us by Ditzzy Doo, I began to see. As each piece slid slowly into place, they began to reveal to me what I had spent my life longing for: purpose.



I levitated myself over the wall of New Appleloosa. I didn't care that I was banned from the city. Not now. Calamity had just landed inside, cradling Ditzzy Doo. My heart was screaming; I didn't know if she was alive or dead. I had already lost SteelHooves just two days ago. I didn't think I could bear to lose another friend. Not so soon.

I landed on the puddle-covered ground inside, and galloped towards where Calamity sat on a set of railroad tracks, bathed in sunlight, Ditzzy Doo's body resting in his forelegs. There was ichor bleeding from innumerable small wounds. Silver Bell and Xenith were gathered close to him, and others were beginning to circle. If Railright wanted to kick me out, let him try.

My heart was pounding as I reached Calamity, my eyes filling with tears as I watched the pegasus ghoul, praying to Celestia and Luna for any sign of movement. Of life.

My mind flashed to Velvet Remedy holding SteelHooves and the sobs started.

The rainout felt strange against my coat, but the warmth and true light of the sun was too majestic to take cover inside. My gaze drifted upwards to the crystalline blue of the hole above us, a yawning up-ness that that went on forever. Unlike that starry night sky which I first glimpsed through breaks in the clouds on my first wasteland night, this sky was wonderful and embracing, inspiring none of the terror I had felt before.

"No," I whimpered softly to myself and to the Goddesses. "Please no. She has to be alive. She has to see this. She deserves to see this."

The ponies of New Appleloosa were coming out of the homes and shops where they had taken refuge. They were all staring up at the sky, seeing sunlight for the first time. Most seemed shell-shocked, but slowly many began to smile.

A few specks of color swirled through the bright blue above. Some began to drift downward, chasing each other. Pegasus ponies from the world above the cloud curtain, drawn by the phenomenon.

“W-what just happened?” I heard a buck ask somewhere to my left.

“I think... Ditzzy Doo just saved us,” a mare responded.

I watched those pegasi fly down towards New Appleloosa, hesitant, curious. The brightly colored pegasi didn’t look like Enclave ponies. They didn’t wear the dark colors of the Enclave nor move like they intended attack.

They ain’t bad ponies, Li’lpip, Calamity’s voice whinnied in my memory. *If most o’ the ponies up there saw fer themselves what’s goin’ on down here, they’d buck the damn Enclave and pony up t’ help.*

I hope so, I thought, my eyes falling back to Ditzzy Doo. Silver Bell had stepped forward and was nudging her gently, whimpering.

Poke. Ow.

“M-m-mommy?”

Oh Goddesses, please no...

Behind me, a young colt’s voice called out, “Ma! Didja see it? Didja see? Derpy saved us! And... and Derpy’s hurt!”

“I know, Trolley,” the colt’s mother said softly. “I saw.”

She deserves to see this, I cried out in prayer, my vision blurring badly as Ditzzy Doo continued not to move.

Please!

A shift. A slight fluttering of her eyes. One rolled to meet Silver Bell. Then Ditzzy Doo whispered something... almost unintelligible, but that sounded to me, despite her missing tongue, a lot like “Sorry, love. Mommy’s sleepy.”

I collapsed, crying harder than ever. But now the sobs were of relief and of joy. She was still alive!

“Mommy!” Silver Bell jumped and hugged the ichor-coated ghoul fiercely. Unable to lift her forehooves, the pegasus limply wrapped her wings around the rapturous filly.

“Mommy,” the little unicorn gushed happily, “You made everything so pretty!”

Sunlight poured over us. Towards the horizon behind us, the toxic rainbow was breaking up and fading away



Silver Bell had climbed up onto Ditzy Doo, her hooves slipping against the ichor bleeding out of the dying pegasus' many wounds. I had wrapped her in a magical cocoon and was floating both of them towards Ditzy Doo's store where Pyrelight was perched just outside on a rain barrel.

We just need to get her inside, I was thinking. Lay her down next to Pyrelight. Find some bandages... there will be bandages inside. There has to be. It's *Absolutely Everything*.

“I am sorry,” Xenith was saying. “I tried to keep her inside, but your daughter can be... evasive.”

“Are you coming home now, mommy?” Silver Bell begged. “Miss Xenith is... okay. But she's not a mommy.” The little filly lowered her voice, whispering into a ragged, ghoulish ear, “And she's kinda creepy.”

Xenith's eyes widened just a moment, then coated with steel as she gazed away, Silver Bell's words becoming another brick in her conviction that she was unfit to be a mother to her own child.

I winced a little. I knew Silver Bell meant no cruelty; I could only imagine how strange and remote Xenith had been. She was still wearing her zebra stealth cloak; I imagined she spent most of her time with the filly invisible to avoid trouble with the townspanies. But those words had done damage nonetheless.

Looking askance, Xenith offered, “Have you considered training her in the Fallen Caesar Style?” I found myself wondering about Xenith's upbringing and her former tribe that her response to an evasive child was to suggest honing those natural talents with an art of killing and incapacitation.

Ditzy Doo dismissed the offer with a shake of her head and hugged Silver Bell close again with her wings.

My PipLeg was still clicking, but I couldn't tell if the radiation was from the pegasus ghoul or the puddles of irradiated water. I suspected that Ditzy was still shedding minor levels of radiation, even after the sonic radboom. But not at levels which threatened the unicorn filly. Nothing that RadAway (blech!) wouldn't cure. And right now, they needed to be able to hold each other.

The click-clicking jumped as Pyrelight landed on my head. Unwilling to wait for us to get inside, the balefire phoenix began bathing the wounded ghoul in golden-green radiation.

"Nuh-uh!" Silver Bell insisted, responding to Xenith's offer. "I'm gonna be painter! See?" The lavender filly pointed, and my eyes followed her hoof. One of the nearby boxcar houses had a crude but colorful portrait of New Appleloosa painted across it.

This wall has a mural.

I cantered in a circle, really seeing New Appleloosa for the first time since my last visit. The painting was not alone. The child's paintings decorated many of the train cars around me, as well as barrels, carts and anything else the folk of New Appleloosa would allow Silver Bell to beautify. I could see the progression of her skills from one storefront to the next. Between the sunlight and the colors of her paints, the town felt more inviting than anyplace in the wasteland.

The light sparkled off the irradiated puddles. The warmth of the sun massaged me through my coat. I could feel the bright rays touch my soul, the sunlight breaking through my defenses, all the clouds of pain and loss that layered my heart. The breath of the sun rekindled hope, and made all the darkness of the day before seem bearable. My heart twinged, wishing SteelHooves was here with us, wanting him to see this.

A gruff-looking pony with a spiked mane and a cutie mark of a skull impaled by a bloody dagger galloped past me, a shotgun in his mouth.

My gaze followed him as he reached one of the fallen Enclave pegasi. She was just starting to get back up when the buck reached her, rearing up and slamming his hooves into her head, driving her back against the ground. "Ansf shay down!" The pegasus' visor was broken and I could see her purple eyes staring upwards at him in shock. The buck leveled the shotgun at one of the pegasus' wings, keeping a hoof on her head and an eye on her dead tail.

I heard a clatter of metal as another pegasus in ominous black carapace armor emerged from a pile of rubble that ten minutes ago had been a tool shed. Shadows blocked the sunlight above me as three more Enclave soldiers flew in over the wall and hovered overhead. All of New Appleloosa stood in silent awe of the sun... foals and the elderly were stepping out of their homes to marvel at the sky... but the Enclave pegasi had lived above the clouds all their lives. They had grown numb to the warmth and wonder of the sun, forgotten how to notice it. All they saw was the town that had once again struck them a devastating blow.

This battle wasn't over.



Bzzzzack! Bzzzzack!

I crouched in the doorway of *Absolutely Everything* as beams of colorful light struck the doorframe and dissolved Ditzzy Doo's front door into a mound of slag. The heat coming off the melting door seared my coat.

Outside the door was chaos. We were fighting in the sunlight. It felt terribly wrong. Disgraceful. The little pony in my head worried, hoping that the good ponies of the town would not come to associate something so generous as sunlight with the ugly hurt of battle.

I fumbled telekinetically, trying to get my earbloom into my ear as I fired back with Little Macintosh. Applejack's trusty revolver was the only firearm I had left. I realized with a twinge of loss that both my sniper rifle and the zebra rifle were still sitting in a crate somewhere in Manehattan. If they hadn't been looted already.

“...mission objective has not changed.” a stallion’s voice boomed over the Enclave’s military frequency; I was almost certain it had to be coming from one of the downed Raptors. New Appleloosa was being attacked by dozens of Enclave soldiers rather than hundreds, suggesting that either the pegasi in those Raptors were trapped inside, or that beyond the city walls, the Enclave was having internal struggles. **“We are here to disinfect Equestria of this terrorist encampment. Fly steady, soldiers! For the Council. For the Enclave!”**

The black-armored pegasus darted behind an overturned pedal trolley. One of my bullets splashed into a puddle behind her, another burying itself in the trolley’s woodwork. The pegasus flapped her wings, rising up to fire again.

Ditzy Doo’s griffin bodyguard had produced a lightning rifle and disappeared upstairs. Calamity was further inside the store along with Pyrelight, both tending to Ditzy Doo as Silver Bell fetched medical supplies. I glanced back to see the lavender filly balanced precariously on several boxes as she tried to reach a key sitting on an upper shelf. I caught the filly and the key as the whole shelf came tumbling down, spilling cameras and teddy bears everywhere.

Distracted, I gave the attacking pegasus an easy shot, and she took it. I grunted in pain as part of my flank barding heated up, but the Canterlot Police Barding protected me from severe injury.

CRACK! White lightning arced out of a second-floor window above me. The pegasus mare screamed as she dropped, her black magically-powered armor fried. The mare was probably still alive, but without its spell matrix, her armor was too heavy to move in.

Beyond, I could see the bodies of the raider-like buck and the purple-eyed Enclave pegasus. They lay together, having traded lethal blows. Her purple eyes stared out lifelessly. His body was still impaled with the blade of her tail.

“Trolley, get inside *NOW!*” The voice came from somewhere outside and to my left.

I slipped out of the doorway, instantly alarmed. I'd seen too many foals die. The weight of the bottled ashes pressed against me through one of my saddle bags. I wouldn't let anything happen to that little colt.

Trolley's mother, whose straw sunhat and floral dress were soaked with irradiated rain, stood protectively between her colt and one of the Enclave soldiers. She had no weapon, but she stood firm, shielding her colt as he leapt up from where he was cowering behind her legs and ran for the nearest open door. I took aim at the pegasus as the magical weapons on the Enclave buck's armor crackled.

Please can't I go just a day without having to kill another pony? the little pony in my head pleaded sadly with the wasteland.

A streak of blue and white struck the ground between the mother and the buck just as (*Bzzzzack! Bzzzzack!*) the Enclave soldier fired.

The white pegasus with a mane and tail in a multitude of blues had landed, facing the Enclave soldier, her mouth open, the sentence dying before it could be spoken as one of the beams of lethal energy struck her square in the breast, the other searing through the mother's sunhat, blasting it into ash.

BLAM! BLAM! Click

My shots staggered the Enclave pegasus, one of the bullets piercing his armor, as the white pegasus mare crumpled to the ground. From her distressed breathing, the shot had torn and possibly vaporized one of her lungs.

I found myself calling out for Velvet Remedy before I remembered that she wasn't with us anymore.

The Enclave pegasus froze for a moment, staring through his visor at the mewling white pegasus, stunned.

"Commander, we have Citizens here," another voice called out over the Enclave's military frequency. **"Suggest withdrawal for a Shutterfly operation."**

I scrambled back behind cover, reloading Little Macintosh as a familiar khaki-coated buck with a vanilla mane raced out of a nearby train car and fell to the side of the white pegasus. One of the trio of young heroes whom we had met at Fluttershy's Cottage.

"Somepony help me get her to Candi!"

Sparks and the ring of metal on metal erupted across the pegasus buck as he came under fire from a rooftop. I looked up to see a scarred, mane-less mare in raider armor firing railroad spikes from what looked like a homemade, steam-powered rifle. The town's mayor Railright had taken cover behind an overturned workbench, a bundle of spikes between his teeth, prepared to reload.

More voices poured through my earbloom:

"...meeting unexpected resistance..."

"...not like previous encampments. There are foals here. Families..."

The Enclave soldier pivoted towards them, opening fire. A second black-armored pegasus swooped overhead, raining a cluster of magical energy grenades down on the mayor. I focused, magically redirecting the grenades back up to the attacker. They exploded with a frenzy of multi-colored light, ripping the pegasus bomber apart in the air. Blood and entrails splattered down on Railright. I felt nauseous. The bloody white intestines glistened in the sunlight.

"This is Commander Winter of the Raptor *Nimbostratus*. Remember, these are the terrorists who supplied Red Eye with the megaspell used to murder hundreds of Enclave citizens in their cowardly sneak attack! The unprovoked slaughter of Harbinger and so many of our brothers and sisters is a day that will forever burn in infamy ..." the voice on the Enclave command frequency growled. I was struck by the dichotomy between what they told their own soldiers and the propaganda they polluted the Equestrian Wasteland with. **"...and their flagrant use of illegal and horrific warfare tactics today shall only strengthen our resolve."**

More of my Canterlot Police Barding heated, the top layers melting as two magical energy bolts struck me. Another hit Ditzzy Doo's sign (Yes, I do deliveries!), obliterating her offer of free Wasteland Survival Guides.

Searching for the source of the attack, I spotted a pegasus in black armor landing on the balcony around Turnpike Tavern. Somepony else had spotted her too, as a green field of telekinetic energy wrapped around the pegasus, lifting her up and twirling her around. The little pony in my head winced, realizing the unicorn's mistake a moment before the pegasus spread her wings and pushed herself out of the telekinetic sheath with a single flap.

Spinning her about had merely helped the targeting spell in her armor locate and lock onto the offending New Appleloosian; and even as my own targeting spell locked onto her, the pegasus vaporized the surprised unicorn with a rapid-fire lightshow from her integrated magical-energy minigun.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

I squeezed Little Macintosh's trigger as quickly as I could. Several of the bullets were stopped by the pegasus' black carapace, but one struck home in her wing. The pegasus lost control of her flight, spinning wildly before crashing into the New Appleloosian crane with a sickening crunch.

"...Fly steady!..."

The Enclave pegasus rebounded from the metal neck of the crane and crashed to the ground below. My eyes traveled upwards along the crane to the platform it held dangling high above the city, a platform stacked with railroad rails.

Somepony else had a similar idea. Caramel-colored magic flashed across the bolts beneath one side of the platform and the chains snapped free, the platform swinging down and dumping the mass of rails onto the pegasus just as she was getting back to her hooves. The sound of all those heavy metal beams striking ground and metal rolled across New

Appleloosa like the percussion from hell's own orchestra. I cringed away, covering my ears.

“...And do not forget that your actions here make your brothers and sisters, your families back home, safe once... Red? What are...?” The transmission in my earbloom suddenly went dead.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a unicorn mare weeping over a fallen guard buck. I saw her expression shift from inconsolable loss to red rage as an Enclave soldier landed in the street nearby, nuzzling the unmoving body of another armored pegasus. I knew what was about to happen; my little pony cried out a warning that never made it to my own lips as the unicorn floated the dead buck's machinegun battle saddle into the air, took aim and fired.

The first bullets struck true, puncturing the Enclave soldier's armor and scrambling his insides. But the kick of the battle saddle knocked it out of the mare's magical hold, the gun spraying wildly, several bullets ripping through the poor unicorn herself. She stood, blood pouring down her side and flank, her eyes wide with a look of uncomprehending surprise, for at least three long seconds after the battle saddle had clattered to the ground behind her. Then she swayed and fell over the body of the guard buck she had been mourning, the life fleeing from her eyes.

Death was breathing over New Appleloosa. The grim reaper ponies were having a feast.



“STOP IT!” Calamity cried out, shooting through the doorway past me as two more Enclave soldiers flew over, firing swaths of burning plasma into the streets below, drawn out by the screams of ponies burning alive in agony. Calamity's voice was filled with rage and sorrow, sounding heartbreakingly fragile as he bellowed, “STOP KILLING PONIES!”

Horried, I commanded my targeting spell to ignore hostiles and instead start locking onto friendly targets. The ponies in those plasma fires could not be saved. I couldn't bear to let them suffer. I wished

Velvet Remedy was here, yearned for her anesthetic spell. But all I could offer were bullets.

BLAM...

...BLAM.

My targeting spell allowed me to aim perfectly through the flames. One shot each, to the head. It was a mercy, and I hated myself for it. I felt like my coat was writhing, wanting to crawl off my body in disgust.

“Attention, Enclave personnel!” a new mare’s voice burst into my ear as the Enclave military frequency crackled to life once again. **“This is Acting Commander Red Glare of the Raptor *Nimbostratus*. Commander Winters has been relieved of his command. As of this moment, you take your orders from me.”**

The fury of the battle waned a moment, many Enclave soldiers pausing to listen and reload.

“This battle is over. I am invoking the Shutterflight Protocol. All Enclave forces are to withdraw immediately and assist.”

And just like that, it was over.

The Enclave soldiers stopped. Turned their heads to the sunny blue of the sky above. And then, almost as one, flew upwards and away from us. Like demons fleeing hell.

It took the ponies of New Appleloosa several minutes to stop firing at them. But the pegasi were fast, and all but one had managed to get out of range before the townsfolk could strike them down from below. That single mare came pirouetting downwards like a falling shadow. She hit a rain barrel, smashing it, her blood tinting the irradiated water as it rushed away from her.

I fell against the doorway, my strength leaving me. My revulsion and horror gave way to a numbness that felt even worse. Beneath that numbness, I realized I was shaking.

Ditzy Doo had saved New Appleloosa. Without her, this town would be nothing but a smoking crater. But all around me, the dead and the crying drove home that this victory was not without grievous loss.

I watched Calamity land next to the fallen white pegasus with the fantastic blue hair. Her side was rising and falling -- she was struggling to breathe but still alive. (As I watched, I noticed that she wore a belt strap with a PipBuck dangling from it. It was locked closed, undoubtedly taken from the corpse of a previous owner; unable to open it to wear it herself, she had slung it over her like it was a canteen.) Calamity helped the khaki pony slide her onto a piece of sheet metal and carry her towards Candi's clinic. There were several more ponies converging on the same building. Candi had already run out of room inside and was directing everypony to line up the wounded on the porch surrounding her clinic.

I shifted my gaze away, looking into the darkness of Absolutely Everything. Ditzy Doo's griffin bodyguard was still perched in the upstairs window, watching the ascending pegasi like a hawk... or, well, a griffin.

Alarm shot through me as I realized nopony was tending to Ditzy Doo. I could see her in the back, illuminated by Pyrelight's glow, unmoving. (*Unmoving is okay, right?* the little pony in my head asked frantically. *Doesn't mean anything. Ghouls don't move much. SteelHooves would stand still for hours... oh Goddesses, SteelHooves.*) Silver Bell was sitting beside the ghoul's cot, the balefire phoenix wrapped in her forelegs. The little pony in my head stopped crying over my lost Ranger long enough to wince, remembering just how unhealthy that was for the filly. I prayed to the Goddesses that Ditzy Doo hadn't lost her entire supply of RadAway when her delivery wagon was annihilated.

I tried to pull myself to my hooves, intending to gallop over to them, but my legs refused to bear my weight. I glanced at the medical display in my E.F.S., believing I hadn't been wounded that badly in the battle. My armor had protected me, yes. But I was exhausted, emotionally brutalized, and I hadn't slept since before the funeral. The light of the

sun was the only thing giving me the spiritual strength and energy to keep going, and even that had been spoiled.

And then that light began to dim.

I lifted my gaze towards the skies. Far above, the Enclave pegasi were zooming back and forth across the circle of blue above us, drawing parallel lines of clouds across the opening. Strangely, I remembered an old story about skaters scoring the ice during Winter Wrap-Up. But then, as the thin lines of clouds began to thicken, expanding towards each other, filling the gaps of blue between, I realized it looked a lot more like somepony slowly closing the blinds over a window. The pegasi were once again locking up the sun.

Shutterflight.



My thoughts felt warm and melancholy and slightly fuzzy like little teddy bears that I wanted to hug as I went to sleep. Medical treatment at Candi's was one part butterscotch rum.

Calamity had found me collapsed in the doorway, trying to worm my way towards Ditzzy Doo, and had insisted on hauling me to the clinic. I had protested; I wasn't wounded enough to warrant taking attention away from the other ponies. But I hadn't needed to worry. I had been given a cot about half a block from the over-filled clinic, been stripped of my barding, and had been given a "canteen of healing" that smelled strongly of butterscotch.

The sounds of moans and crying drifted over me like layers of smoke. The air smelt like alcohol, blood and burnt flesh. In the cot next to me was an elderly green-coated earth pony. He had stepped outside to see the sun only to have his hindleg melted. Candi was telling his plaintive grandchildren that their grandpappy was in a "deep sleep" and might not wake up again for a long time. The young filly wrapped her forelegs around the slightly younger colt and held him as she broke into sobs.

I wanted to sob too. For SteelHooves. For Velvet. For the little filly whose ashes I kept in a jar. For Ditzzy Doo... even though I still had hope she would survive this. And for all those who did not. But I couldn't. I was too tired to cry. And there were too many ponies around. The little pony in my head told me that my pain, my grieving, was a private thing. I could cry with Calamity. Or with Homage. But not here in front of all these ponies.

Calamity laid down next to me, staring into the dirt, his hat tilted sadly. He wasn't crying, not externally at least. But my friend couldn't hide his pain. My heart reached out for him in a way my legs refused to.

"We'll fix this," I assured him.

Calamity stirred. He didn't look at me. Instead, he looked towards the row of pony-shaped lumps under stained sheets.

"You can't fix dead."

His voice was flat, defeated. I wanted to bury my head, hide away from that voice.

My mind conjured the image of SteelHooves walking solemnly amongst the sheet-covered bodies, bearing solemn witness to the fallen. *He should be here*, my little pony mourned. Then my cruel imagination envisioned SteelHooves as one of the bodies under those sheets. I choked on a breath and had to look away.

I gazed over at Candi, my eyes tracing the white earth pony in her yellow-and-pink striped nurse's dress. I had fancied her once, and she was indeed fanciable; but now I only regretted that she was not Velvet Remedy whose skills here were badly needed.

Or Homage. That was a selfish wish, but I allowed myself to have it anyway. Homage could heal and comfort me far more than a canteen of weak healing mixtures and rum. Homage was my sun. Her mere presence would warm me, her soft words would banish the dark shadows in my head. Her tongue, licking down to...

My thoughts were interrupted by the approach of Railright. The grey and black stallion was accompanied by the bald, scarred mare I had seen with him before. Her raider armor revealed just enough to make out her cutie mark: a black, needle-like dagger dripping blood.

My eyes narrowed.

"You gave Red Eye the balefire bomb," I spat as he approached me, opening his muzzle to proclaim something. His muzzle snapped shut abruptly. The air between us felt brittle and charged with tense, unseen energy.

Calamity stood up, leveling a dark look at the mayor pony.

The bald pony cut in, either oblivious to the discord between myself and the mayor or unable to give a shit. "Wow. I get you now," she announced. "Feels damn good t' be a goddess-damned heroine for once. Fight on the side of the angels and all that."

"Who the hell are you?" I groused. She looked like a raider. Sounded like one too.

"Stiletto," she grinned savagely. "Shattered Hoof Raiders... although I guess we ain't raiders no more. We're protecting the waste for fun and profit."

Gawd's ponies. Shattered Hoof was hiring out mercenaries. Meshed with the spike-maned pony I had seen earlier and Ditzzy Doo's griffin bodyguard. Last I knew, Gawd had been consolidating her forces, but also contemplating what to do with the "bad eggs" amongst them. Maybe this was her solution for those ex-raiders not vile or untrustworthy enough to meet her talons but still undesirable to have around the house?

"And ya blew it up for him," Railright said stonily.

"He threatened Homage with that bomb!" I hissed. Then, realizing the name meant nothing to him, "He threatened all of Tenpony Tower. Thousands of ponies!"

“Yer actions put me in a rather tight spot. Ah needed t’ show Red Eye that New Appleloosa weren’t against him,” Railright glowered a moment before glancing around. “Besides, would ya have preferred we keep an undetonated balefire bomb sittin’ here in town? No pony would do that. That would be insane!”

I felt my nerves jangle with energy. Despite my exhaustion, it was taking extreme effort (Be Pleasant) not to put a hoof through his face.

“Besides, it would seem y’all are workin’ for Red Eye anyway,” Railright whispered. The stallion smiled oddly. “From wipin’ out his slavers to wipin’ out his enemies... Ah couldn’t ‘ave seen that comin’.”

Extreme effort. Calamity bristled, neighing warningly.

“An’ he seems t’ have plans fer ya.”

What now?

Stiletto had apparently grown bored. She trotted away, sitting down and sharpening the spikes on her armor, her eyes watching the skies.

“What do you mean?” I asked, not sure I wanted the answer.

Railright shrugged. “Not sure. But Ah’ve come t’ tell ya that y’all are allowed back in New Appleloosa,” he told me. “No point keeping ya out when Red Eye considers ya an asset. Not t’ mention how unpopular that decision has made me amongst the DJ Pon3-loving herd.” Railright grumbled, “Ah’m rather lucky t’ still be mayor.”

Stiletto clopped over and poked the mayor with a forehoof. “Griffins inbound. Looks like the big boss.”

I turned my eyes towards the sky. The cloud cover had been completely restored; with over a hundred pegasi working on it, the breach had been sealed in under half an hour, casting the wasteland once again into heavy gloom. A far-off flash lit up the undersides of the storm clouds, echoed by a second flash a little closer. This flash illuminated a flock of griffins, two smaller ones flanking the flock leader as she guided them towards New Appleloosa.

Heavy raindrops began to fall.

Cold, clean water sprinkled from the blackened clouds above. Raindrops rippled the surface of the irradiated puddles, broadening and diluting them. The soft metallic clatter as the rain beat upon all the metal boxcars sounded like funeral drums. The rainstorm that the sky had been threatening began slowly, but soon Candi was corralling every volunteer she could to move the wounded inside before they were completely soaked.

Calamity moved to one end of my cot, then stopped, glowering at Railright and Stiletto. "One o' ya is gonna grab that other end an' help me take 'er into *Absolutely Everything*, or so help me..."

"Yeah, yeah," Stiletto quipped before picking up the opposite end in her teeth. "You're a tough buck. Very impressed and shit. Shaking, even."

I wasn't alone in my trip to Ditzzy's. Absolutely Everything had one of the larger interiors in New Appleloosa, and over half a dozen cots were floated, carried or dragged inside within minutes. "Well, that was an anti-shortcut," I mumbled as my cot was placed near the doorway to Ditzzy Doo's room. The ghoul didn't look like she had moved. Silver Bell was curled up on top of her, sleeping fitfully. An emptied packet of RadAway lay on the floor beneath them, a little bit of the glowing orange juice dribbling from the sleeping filly's muzzle. Otherwise, Pyrelight's radioactive glow ensured that Ditzzy Doo had the room to herself.

"Is she going to be okay?" I asked Pyrelight. I was surrounded by ponies yet there was no one else to ask. Xenith had disappeared again.

The softly glowing bird hooted gently. Once more, I wished Velvet Remedy was here. I wasn't sure she would be any better with ghoul physiology, but at least she could interpret Pyrelight's musical notes for me.

I felt a hoof punch my shoulder. "Why didn't you tell us who you were?"

I turned to see the amber mare and khaki buck whom we had helped back at Fluttershy's Cottage. The attacking hoof was from the mare,

who managed to look both star-struck and cross at the same time. I found myself blushing, and the little pony in my head quickly insisted the extra heat in my cheeks was from the rum and definitely not from embarrassment or being hit by a pretty mare. Oh yes, the canteen. I should drink more now. Easier than responding. Yep.

“I was gushing all about the Wasteland Heroine and you were right there and didn’t say anything!” the mare protested.

Was she mad at me? “I’m not...” I tried to argue, “I mean... I’m just trying to do the right thing. Like anypony would.”

“Oh yes,” the mare chimed, rolling her eyes. “Like anypony would. Because just anypony would risk their life trotting into the home territory of the most dangerous monsters in Equestria to set off a *balefire bomb* and clear them out.” She smirked.

My eyes widened. My muscles stiffened in alarm. “What? How... You know... but...” I felt my words stumbling over each other. Of course everypony knew. DJ Pon3 had seen to that. But that wasn’t something I should be *praised* for.

“Yeah,” the buck added. “Way I see it, you can’t have an undetonated megaspell bomb in the wasteland without some evil asshole using it to murder a fuckload of ponies.” I flinched. “But not only did you get rid of it so it couldn’t be used to hurt anypony, but you wiped out... what, hundreds? Thousands?... of monsters that hunt ponies for sport.” His voice oozed sarcasm as he added, “Just like *anypony* would have done.”

My mind reeled. I felt as if my world had been nudged off-axis. I felt messed up, the memory of what I had done merged into a vision of SteelHooves standing on erupting ground and slashing claws that tore through his armor, severing his neck.

A stallion three cots away from me woke up and began to scream, thrashing violently. Two bucks moved to hold him down while Calamity pulled painkillers from Ditzzy Doo’s stock, tossing bottle caps on her counter. Beneath the stallion’s screams, I heard Mayor Railright announcing that Ditzzy Doo’s medical stock was being confiscated for emergency use. The little pony in my head stomped at that. I couldn’t

imagine anypony, much less sweet Ditzzy Doo, trying to *sell* medicine at a time like this, but I still wanted the mayor to ask permission. Not that he could.

The door banged open, letting in a spray of rain as two colorful, unarmored pegasi pushed into the crowded store. The stallion's screams began to weaken as Calamity jabbed him with a syringe full of painkiller and pushed the plunger slowly with a hoof. One by one, the other ponies turned to stare, their conversations dropping to hushed tones or dying away. In one corner, a wife continued to sob over her bloodily-bandaged husband, but even she stole a look.

"I'm sure they brought her in here," the first pegasus -- a sunflower yellow mare with an excessively curly crimson mane and a smiling sun for a cutie mark -- said before stopping, her eyes widening at the stares she was receiving. Behind her, a buck with a coat the color of jade and a short-cropped teal mane looked like he was about to drag her back out by her poofy tail.

"Are you crazy?" he hissed, trying to keep his voice low. But it carried anyway. "They're going to kill you! They've probably already killed her. For all you know, this is their *kitchen*!"

The mare gave a nervous smile, a bead of sweat falling from her forehead as she looked over the staring unicorn and earth ponies. She lifted a hoof in a timid wave as she threw a harsh whisper back at her companion, "They can hear you."

The amber mare next to me stomped and nickered. "I'm rethinking that thing about how pegasuses are cool."

The pegasus mare's eyes looked back and forth over the room before coming to rest on a nearby bookshelf. "School Special: all pencils and notepads fifty-percent off," she read softly before turning to her companion. "Not a kitchen. Unless you think they're offering a hearty school filly salad with a scrumptious pencil cobbler for dessert."

I heard a few grudging chuckles. To me, the comment just brought up disquieting visions of Arbu.

"They're joking about eating fillies?" the khaki buck breathed, appalled.

"They're joking about what they think *we're* like," the amber mare answered.

At the door, the jade-colored buck took the pegasus mare's mane in his teeth and gave her a tug. "We need to go!" he insisted with a stomp. "The air's poisonous down here, remember?! She'll be dead before she can fly again. Hell, we're probably already dead."

"I'm not dead yet," a weak voice called out. A white hoof raised in the air. I shifted to spot the wounded white pegasus. "And according to my PipBuck, the air's not poisonous, Tracker."

"Of course it's poisonous," the jade pegasus, Tracker, spat back. "You're using that wrong. You always have. They don't work when you don't wear them!"

Actually, I wanted to interject (feeling a moment of pride in my expertise), radiation monitoring would still work, just like the radio. Although, admittedly, health monitoring wouldn't. My thoughts fell apart before the desire could manifest as more than a vague wish. Between the "medicine" and my exhaustion, I was flirting with incoherency.

"If the air was poisonous," the yellow pegasus challenged, "how come all these ponies are still alive?"

"They've grown resistant to it," the buck shot back. "Don't you *ever* listen to the science station?"

Their argument was interrupted by a rust-colored pegasus in a black desperado hat. "One," Calamity said authoritatively, "There sure as shit are places where the air is poisonous, but this ain't one o' 'em. Two, y'all can't go back anyway, so best be thankful fer that."

The buck's eyes widened in alarm. Then narrowed. The white pegasus gasped. "What do you mean, we can't go back?" she wheezed. "I've got to go back. Those soldiers were attacking unarmed civilian ponies. Elderly and foals! When my Senator hears about this..."

When her what now?

Calamity turned towards her, his expression gentle and a touch remorseful, but his voice firm. "The Enclave 'ave seen y'all down here. Reported it. Y'all were on the wrong side of a Shutterflight an' 'ave interacted with the locals. Unofficially, y'all are contaminated," Calamity informed them sadly. "Officially, y'all are probably dead already."

"Don't listen to him," the jade pegasus blurted out.

"By the weekend, the Enclave will 'ave delivered condolences and new birth-approval certificates t' yer families..." Calamity continued.

"Sunglint, Morning Frost: Don't. Listen." Tracker pushed forward. A few of the ambulatory New Appleloosians stood up and took a step towards him in response. "He's a Dashite! His words are all lies and infectious ideas!"

Calamity stared at Tracker, unwavering. "Jus' tryin' t' tell ya like it is. Save ya the heartache o' tryin' t' go back."

"You think I don't recognize you?" Tracker accused, "You're Deadshot Calamity. You murdered your troops and fled beneath the clouds to escape punishment. I've seen your wanted poster!"

Calamity sighed slightly, glancing back towards me as he muttered under his breath, "History rewritten yet again." Looking back at the buck, my friend said reasonably, "Believe what ya want t', but trust me when Ah say ya don't wanna be headin' back." He looked at the two pegasus mares. "That won't end well fer any o' ya."

"We've got to try," the white pegasus with the incredible blue mane stated as she held up her PipBuck. I assumed she was Morning Frost. "I've got recordings here."

"I like her," the amber mare next to me stated, echoing the little surge in my own heart. Good girl!

"Are you saying you're innocent?" Tracker sneered. "Then why did you run?"

Calamity lowered his head and pulled on one of the straps of his battle saddle. The other straps came undone and the whole battle saddle slid off to the floor. “Ah don’t deny Ah’m a Dashite,” he said. “Though the rest o’ that Ah take issue with. But then, if Ah escaped justice, how d’ya figure they branded me?”

“Yeah, that don’t make much sense,” assessed the yellow mare (Sunglint, I presumed). “Maybe the Enclave... lied.”

“They can’t lie to us,” Tracker stated in voice you use to state basic facts to slow children. “They’re the government.”

I sensed Calamity’s desire to facehoof radiating off of him. This Enclave... it didn’t make sense to me. My own thoughts swam, clutching for an anchor. I realized it was past time to ask my friend about the ponies we were facing. But first, I needed to rest. Sleep. More than that, I needed time to breathe. To mourn. My heart was bleeding from many deep wounds. *Hurt tomorrow, help today*. But today was tomorrow, wasn’t it?

I had lost track of the dialogue between the pegasi. With Calamity amongst them, I felt like a poor friend to have done so. I tried to perk my ears and recapture the conversation.

“...after they did *nothing* about that dragon, the citizens wouldn’t stand for them to be passive about the Splendid Valley Massacre...” Sunglint was saying.

“...can’t ignore me. I’m a member of the Party...” Morning Frost insisted.

“...last time I follow you two anywhere!” Tracker fretted sourly. “With friends like you...”

I gave up, my ears plastering against my head. I lifted my gaze to the spinning fan that hung from the ceiling of Absolutely Everything and tried to let everything go.

I could hurt today, couldn’t I? Cry today. Fight again tomorrow.

The first tear stung my eye then slipped free to roll down my cheek. I tried to blink it back. Not here. I should be alone.

“Hey,” the amber-coated mare spoke, startled. She put a hoof on my shoulder. “Hey, don’t cry. Please, don’t cry.”

I turned to look at her.

“If you start crying, then I’ll start crying and it will be a whole messy crying thing.”

Her voice had sincerity behind it. I wasn’t the only pony hurting. And not the only one trying to hide it. I gave her a weak smile.

SteelHooves always hid his pain, the pony in my head reminded me. SteelHooves was always silently strong for everypony.

But that wasn’t necessarily a good thing, was it. My soul felt like it was swimming in darkness, barely treading water, and if I didn’t let out the tears, I’d drown in them.

“Who are you ponies?” a voice on the far side of the room spoke out. Before anypony could answer, the avalanche started.

“You’re the Enclave, right?”

“Why are y’all attackin’ us?”

“Was that Celestia up there? Why’ja take Her away?”

Some ponies were curious, most distraught. There was an ugly undertone building with each question.

“Now everypony jus’ calm down,” Calamity said loudly, raising a hoof.

“Ain’t ya one o’ ‘em, Calamity?” somepony asked poisonously.

Calamity stammered, “Now y’all listen here...”

I heard a thud and a high-pitched yelp. It sounded like it came from the next room.

Somepony in the crowd pointed towards me. Past me. Other ponies turned. The steadily raising voices petered out.

Ditzy Doo was standing in the doorway. My heart soared just seeing her upright again. It was like she was her own little beam of sunlight. She looked weak, frail... like she wasn't quite standing on her own power. Her body canted slightly making me suspect she was leaning on an invisible zebra. But she was alive and awake. One of her eyes tilted towards the ceiling fan, but the other stared at the ponies gathered in her shop. Slowly, she lowered her head, dropping her chalkboard, then wrote on it.

Lifting it back up for everypony to see:

Be nice.

Absolutely Everything reserves the right to buck out ponies who aren't nice.

PS: Healing supplies now for muffins later.

Smiles are free.

Everypony was quiet.

Then the amber-coated mare, whose name I realized I still hadn't learned, walked up to Ditzy Doo and gave her a thankful hug.

Within seconds, Ditzy Doo was surrounded by ponies, hugging her and professing their thanks and their relief at her recovery. So much so that an invisible zebra was no longer needed to hold her up, nor even able to stand nearby.



"Can I get you anything?" the young amber heroine offered. "Soda? Squirrel on a stick? Anything?"

My first inclination was to decline. But on second thought, "Water would be nice. Thank you."

I watched the mare and her friend get up and push their way through the crowd of ponies who had come to see Ditzy Doo. The poor mare was mobbed.

Ditzy Doo was alive.

She wasn't healthy, not even by any definition that applied to ghouls. But she was alive. And she would continue to live. Probably even make a full recovery according to Candi. Probably.

There was also a good chance she'd never regain full health, never quite have the energy and vigor she used to. But she had saved the town. Saved her daughter. Performed a miracle. As prices went in the Equestrian Wasteland, this was a small one, easy to bear.

"Ya hangin' on, Li'l pip?" Calamity asked as he landed next to me.

The answer was no, and we both knew it. So instead of lying, I asked, "Her Senator?"

Calamity whinnied. "Ah admire 'er courage, but it's suicide. The Enclave Skyguard will have standin' orders t' shoot 'em on sight..." My friend grimaced in pain. "...t' prevent 'em from spreadin' contagion, of course."

I moaned, closing my eyes. "I'm sorry. Can you convince them?"

"Ah dunno," Calamity admitted. "But Ah gotta try. Look, Li'l pip, Ah need t' take off fer a li'l bit. Railright is demanding our new pegasi friends join him in his office for 'polite questioning'."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"Ah intend t' be there with 'em the whole time," Calamity stated with a stomp. "Whether the mayor likes it or not."

I weakly shifted a leg to touch his breast. "Good. Keep them safe." I didn't really expect Railright to hurt them, but I suspected he wasn't above throwing them in jail for "their own protection", and I doubted his interrogation would remain friendly without Calamity present.

"What's a Senator?" I asked.

Calamity tilted his hat back. "Member of the Senate. Low Council. They make the policies."

"And the High Council?"

“Enforce the policies. They’re the highest judges and generals...” Calamity paused, looking at me. “Li’lpip, is this really the best time?”

I let out a groan. “No. But I need to know. I need to understand.” There had been a time I had been thankful I didn’t know about pegasi politics. But that time was passed. It passed when they started killing wasteland ponies.

My friend frowned, closing his eyes. “Folk down here don’t have anythin’ like the Enclave. It’s not really an easy thing t’ explain. Much less t’ somepony who lived ‘er whole life in a Stable.”

“Railright’s going to want to know too.”

“Yeah, Ah know.” Calamity took a deep breath, bulwarking himself. “Okay, Ah know this is gonna sound bizarre t’ ya, but bear with me.”

I nodded, listening. I shouldn’t be doing this now. I was too tired, too frayed and too full of butterscotch rum. But part of me felt like it was now or never. And part of me thought it might do Calamity some good to explain this to a friend before having to help explain it to the mayor.

Calamity was silent, his eyes shifting. I could tell he was looking for a place to start. “You mentioned committees before?” I suggested.

“Okay, yeah,” the orange-maned pegasus said, grasping that. “The Enclave runs the pegasi government through committees. The councils are pretty much jus’ large committees o’ ponies elected t’ make national decisions. The councils then appoint smaller committees t’ handle more localized or specialized... ah hell, mostly, it jus’ means nothin’ ever gets done.”

I was already confused. “So... the Enclave... is it the country, the military or the government?”

Calamity laughed wearily, shaking his head. “Aw hell.” Flicking his tail, he mentally backed up. “Okay, the Enclave is... well... it’s not the country. All pegasi are citizens whether they’re part o’ the Enclave or not. All pegasi get t’ vote fer who they want t’ represent their cities in the Low Council an who they want t’ sit on the High Council. It’s just

that only members o' the Enclave are allowed t' run fer government positions."

"And... how does a pegasus become a member of the Enclave?"

"Aw shucks, Li'l pip. That's easy," Calamity smirked. "They enlist."

So... only ponies who served in the military were qualified for government? I tried to wrap my brain around that, but it made my head spin. The Enclave grew out of an isolationist movement, pegasi not wanting to fight in the war.

"Hell, Ah figure they reckon anypony who c'n survive three years o' military education an' three months o' basic trainin' with muh father has the fortitude t' help run the country."

Ugh. The Enclave was quickly ascending to the top of my list of things that made my head hurt. It had already surpassed rock farming and was working on overtaking train engines.

"How do you even have a military when there hasn't been a war in two hundred years?" I blurted, trying to sort through my confusion.

"Oh, there've been little skirmishes," Calamity noted. "The drive to take the griffin skies was back in Radar's time. But mostly, the military acts as internal security and cloud curtain patrol."

I shook my head. "I still don't get it. Who is your Overmare, then?" Flashing back to Stable Twenty-Four, I added, "Or Overstallion, if that's what you have." This was a government. A country. Somepony had to be in charge. Somepony had to be the Princess.

Calamity let out a long sigh. "There isn't one, Li'l pip. That's the point."

I scrunched my forehead, trying to comprehend that, but it went against everything I knew about how communities were run. The idea of the councils sounded a *little* like Friendship City, but so massive and convoluted that I couldn't build a frame around it.

Calamity glanced over his wings towards the door. Railright was prodding the two ambulatory pegasi out while Stiletto stood by Morning Frost's cot. "Li'lpip, Ah gotta go."

I waved him away. "Go. Help them." As best you can, my friend.

Calamity rotated, flapping his wings and lifting into the air. The breeze from his wings cooled me.

"Calamity?" I called up to him as he began to move. He stopped, looking back at me.

"We will fix this," I assured him again. At his pained expression, I admitted, "You're right... we can't fix dead. But we can make their deaths meaningful."

"How, Li'lpip?"

"I don't know..." I admitted. "Yet. But I promise, we will. We can make this the start of something better. Something worth dying for."

Calamity smiled. It was a thin smile, but with genuine warmth. "Ah'm gonna hold ya t' that."

I smiled to him. My first friend. "Thank you."

Calamity glanced towards the door. Railright, Tracker and Sunlint had already left. Stiletto was having some difficulty getting Morning Frost maneuvered around the other cots.

I watched as Calamity's gaze traveled from cot to cot. The elderly buck who had lost his leg was in here. A colt, his body wrapped in blood-stained bandages -- a victim of shrapnel, was crying into his mother's breast. One of the ragged pieces of explosion-thrown debris had slashed through his cutie mark, less than a week old. The stallion three cots away was sleeping, heavily sedated. His wife had been in the street that the Enclave hosed with burning plasma. She was probably one of the burning ponies I had shot out of mercy. The stallion had injured himself badly trying to get close to her, but his burns were less painful than the anguish of seeing the pony he loved screaming in agony,

engulfed in plasma fire... of having that image seared into his mind as his last memory of her.

For once, I was the least wounded person in the room.

"But what do we do until then?" Calamity asked, not looking back.

I bit my lower lip, my body trembling. I could sense the tears coming, but I tried to fight them back. Not here. Not now.

"We do what SteelHooves would do," I said. "We soldier on."

After he left, I stared once again at the ceiling fan, my mind spinning just like its blades.

We soldier on. Until we can find a way to make this right, to make things better, we endure. We persevere. We keep helping ponies however we can.

It's what SteelHooves would have done.

"Got your water," the amber mare's voice rang out as she trotted towards me. I felt the soft impact of the canteen on my chest. I heard a pop and hiss as she opened a bottle of Sunrise Sarsaparilla for herself. The sound caused a memory to flash through my head.

Are we on a date?

A memory of SteelHooves. Oh Goddesses, I missed SteelHooves.

And with that, the floodgates blew open. It didn't matter where I was, or who was around me. I curled up and began to cry. Deep, wrenching sobs. For how much Velvet Remedy was hurting. And Calamity. For Ditzzy Doo, who had nearly died. I sobbed for the husband who had lost his wife, the old buck who had lost his leg, the town who had lost the joy of sunlight to bloody battle.

I wept for the little filly whose ashes I kept in a cola bottle. And for Star Sparkle.

But most of all, I cried for SteelHooves.



Swiftly exhausted, Ditzzy Doo had moved upstairs with Pyrelight, leaving Silver Bell to “mind the store” and her griffin bodyguard to mind Silver Bell and make sure nopony wandered upstairs after her. While everypony else was preoccupied, Xenith tugged my cot into Ditzzy’s room, giving me a bit of peace and privacy.

Cry today. Rest today. Fight again tomorrow.

I had wept for hours. Xenith was keeping vigilant guard at the door, her efforts primarily needed to keep the three young heroes from barging in to try to “help”. I didn’t need or want help. I wanted to cry some more. I needed to sleep.

I was out of tears. My body was exhausted. My mind incoherent. Still, I couldn’t fall asleep. I was too tired to sleep. The gears in my mind had become detached, spinning free. They whirled in my head at the speed of thought, producing nothing.

So many lives were on a razor blade. So many would die while I slept. Red Eye and the Enclave... there was so much to do. Too much for my brain to grasp it. I needed a way to make it right. To make it all matter.

I tried to focus, believing that if I could just corral my thoughts, railroad them, then maybe I could finally rest.

But my thoughts did not want to go to happy places. Instead, they returned again and again to Splendid Valley and that little place just beyond its rim.

My memories fixed on the sensation of being floated out of the safe room, the super alicorn pulling me to safety. Ditzzy Doo had found me. Twilight Sparkle had saved me. At least, I really wanted to believe...

She’d stared at my saddle bags. I hadn’t really noticed it then, but I recalled that now. She’d seemed fixated on them.

In a rush, I suddenly yet absolutely knew that it was Twilight Sparkle, or at least what was left of her, riding that alicorn. Controlling it. And I knew how she had found me.

Be Strong! Be Pleasant. Be Unwavering! Be Awesome!

She hadn't been saving me. I found myself doubting that what was left of Twilight Sparkle even realized I was there. She was saving her friends. Saving them from a fate that literally was her own. Or maybe (Be Smart) she had just sensed herself. And, in the grip of some nightmarish déjà vu, she had come to her own rescue.

I couldn't be sure.

My thoughts slid into more jumbled memories at the sound of erupting earth.

Didja' find anythin' this time? Calamity's voice rang in my thoughts as I pictured SteelHooves' head rolling away from his body.

I choked, forcing my mind away, only to have the scene replaced in my mind's eye by Velvet Remedy clinging to Calamity, sobbing.

We fight and hurt and bleed to try to make Equestria better. But you can't stop something until you take away its reason for being that way.

I couldn't stop the raiders. They were born of the horror and harshness of the wasteland. All I could do was keep killing them until I drowned in their blood, history's greatest mass murderer.

Red Eye. The Enclave.

Red Eye claimed that he was going to remove himself from the equation. As strange or foolish as it might seem, I believed him. He was an honorable bastard of sorts. But the Enclave... how could I stop something as mighty as a whole army? A whole government, if I understood half of what I thought I did about them?

Only time they c'n act as one is when they're feelin' threatened.

Gaaaah! I just wanted to sleep! I was going to go crazy.

Surprisingly, I found myself thinking of Rainbow Dash. And remembering the rings of crackling, electrified smoke fanning out over the table map of Equestria.

That would start rain. I designed it after the contrails of the Wonderbolts! Rainbow Dash had boasted. *Everything about the Single Pegasus Project goes through me, and it doesn't get my hoof of approval unless it's cool!*

Start. I wasn't sure why, but my mind caught on that word.

Start. I could hear the metallic drumming of the rain on the roof of *Absolutely Everything*. Start. The store shook at the rumble of overhead thunder.

The towers could start the rain. Equestria-wide if they were ordered to. That meant they could also stop the rain. Make it a sunny day. Equestria-wide.

I felt the gears in my head fitting back into place in a new configuration. A new mental machine building a new picture.

Agriculture, yew silly 'corn, Radar stated. *Without the towers... the Enclave falls.*

The only way to stop the Enclave... to save Equestria... was to take control of the cloud curtain. Peel it back. Give sunlight once again to Equestria. Not only would that break their power, it would reveal their lies and show the pegasi what was really going on down here.

That was what the Enclave feared. And for good reason. If the cloud curtain was lost, it wouldn't just destroy the Enclave, it would force the pegasi to return to the surface. They would no longer be able to sustain themselves. Ultimately, it was all about agriculture.

The pegasi would either reunite with the earth ponies and unicorns, or try to invade. Judging by the three pegasi I had seen today and trusting Calamity's word, most of them would want to help.

Even so, it could get really ugly, really fast. Red Eye, however, probably considered that acceptable. He had plans for a massive agricultural base in the Everfree Forest, but that was years away from being a reality. Until then, ponykind would be struggling to survive on remaining scraps. And who knew if there would be enough?

But... there was something else. One other chance that Red Eye didn't know about.

It wouldn't take an army to stop the Enclave. Just one pony. One *expendable* pony. A pony who wasn't necessary to make things right again.

You've never been forced to give up your principles for the greater good, Red Eye had once told me. To sacrifice yourself and become a monster because it was the right thing to do.

Suddenly, I knew. I knew my purpose.

Bringing back the sun.

Rings of crackling, electrified smoke, the pony in my head pondered. But what about when the towers stopped the rain and cleared away the clouds? What would that look like?

Not the same. *Same is boring*, Rainbow Dash had said. At least, she had in my dream. Calamity's words echoed through my head:

Well, there's only one way t' clear an area that big that fast. An' that's with a sonic rainboom.

Despite my overwhelming weariness, I bolted upright.

Sunshine and rainbows.

"I'll be damned."



Somewhere in the other room, a rush of excited voices rose and fell, followed by somepony turning up Ditzy Doo's radio loud enough to distort the voice of DJ Pon3.

"...back, children. But not for long. So there's a few things I gotta tell you about.

"First, our hearts and prayers go out to the folks of Friendship City and everypony who had relatives there. Late yesterday, in their most horrific attack yet, that airborne plague callin' themselves the Enclave brutally

slaughtered Friendship City. The city's gone, children. Hundreds of ponies dead. If you didn't believe me before, believe me now. The Enclave ain't here to save anypony. They ain't our friends.

"But I'm not bringing you a dark cloud without a silver lining, children! Here's the good news: the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland are standing up against them. And I'm not just talkin' about our Bringer of Light, although she's been right in the thick of it. When the Enclave came for Friendship City, she struck back at them. Thanks to our wasteland heroine, the Enclave lost everything they threw at Friendship City; and more importantly, a couple hundred ponies survived that attack.

"But she ain't the only hero standing strong against the Enclave. Remember those renegade Steel Ranger outcasts I told you about? Well, they call themselves the Applejack's Rangers now. And even as I speak, the Applejack's Rangers are working 'round the clock to ferry survivors off of Friendship Island, protecting them on the way to new homes.

"Where can they find new homes, you might ask? The answer is everywhere they go. Even that normally stuffy Tenpony Tower has opened its doors to refugees... after a hoof-full of unicorns rose up and kicked the Enclave's sorry tails out of their tower. Yee-haw! Score one for the good ponies!

"And I've got more reports coming in. Heroes all the way from Shattered Hoof to Hoofington have been holding the line against the nightmares from above. I have a tale here of two such heroes taking down one of those warships just south of Stalliongrad. Left a calling card: Lion & Mouse. Well, tell you what, Lion and Mouse. Drop by Tenpony Tower sometime. As soon as my assistant is back from her vacation, I'd love to have her sit down with you for an interview. And to the griffins and ponies who fought off the Enclave at Shattered Hoof: damn fine work.

"But the biggest strike against the Enclave has come from none other than our own beloved author of the Wasteland Survival Guide, Ditzzy Doo. You all saw it. Hell, I could see that glow all the way from Shattered Hoof Ridge. We don't even have a name for what the wasteland's favorite pegasus managed to do this morning. Sonic Radboom? Toxic Rainboom? Well, whatever you call it, I call it a miracle."

So do I, love.

"Now don't worry children. I know I just kinda let my location slip. But the Enclave already knew. I saw a whole murder of them flying this way from the tower monitors before I started broadcasting. They'll be at the door any moment. And I don't think they plan on inviting me to tea. But don't worry about me. I'm not a fighter. Never really have been, not even when I was a wasteland explorer. I was more of a hacker and repair pony myself. Fixing things up, building off of schematics, making the technologies and magic of the old world work for me. I can barely shoot a gun. But that doesn't mean I'm going to lay down and let them take me."

Any chance of sleeping evaporated at those words. I lay in my cot, my nerves crackling, anxiously straining to hear every word. Every background sound that came over that radio. It took me a moment to remember my own earbloom and tune into the broadcast on my own PipBuck-leg-thing.

"So, two things before I leave you again. First, I want to dedicate this broadcast to the late Elder SteelHooves, founder of the Applejack's Rangers. I know, with all the death we've seen, it might seem odd to single one pony out. But SteelHooves wasn't just any pony."

"SteelHooves was a hero. A protector of ponies. He put his life on the line saving others, and he inspired other ponies to do the same. A whole legion within the Steel Rangers broke away to follow his example."

"SteelHooves was a companion to our wasteland heroine as well. She was stonger with him at her side. Her victories were often his victories as well."

"When I first met SteelHooves, he was making sure Chief Grim Star died a hero in the eyes of the ponies under his care. I came to know him fairly well over the last few weeks."

Of course she had, I thought. She'd watched my memories.

"I'll tell you the truth: SteelHooves was not without his flaws. He was not always a good pony. He meted out justice as he saw fit, and I did not always agree with whom he chose to play judge and executioner. But that is the harsh law of the Equestrian Wasteland."

“But he never faltered. He held true to his love and his principles, fighting until the day he died. SteelHooves had lived an impossibly long life. His death was swift, painless and in battle. It was the death I believe he would have wanted. And now it is our turn: to hold true, to fight and to never falter.”

Tears trickled down my cheeks. I was weeping again.

“And with that, children, I have a confession to make. This broadcast? It’s not exactly live.

“And I have a message for the black-armored soldiers who just burst into the station at the Shattered Hoof Ridge Tower: that thing you’re looking at with the glowing blue light? A little homebrewed surprise rigged to the spark battery from a weapon made by the motherfuckin’ stars!”

“Farewell, you...”

The broadcast cut off with an abrupt blast of static. It wasn’t replaced by Enclave Radio. The airwaves just went dead silent. And remained so for the ten longest minutes the Equestrian Wasteland had ever experienced.

From the cot in Ditzzy Doo’s room, I had only the darkness and Homage’s words to hold me. I could not know that my love had struck the deepest, most vital blow to the Enclave yet. I did not realize Homage had pulled the entire power supply from that alien weapon and rigged it to a bomb. I did not see the brilliant blue explosion that obliterated more than just the base station and the dozen heavily-armed Enclave pegasi inside. For two hundred years, the nearly fifty towers of the Single Pegasus Project had stood, impervious to everything the enemy and the wasteland could throw at them. I was not a witness on that snow-swept ridge as one of those towers cracked, shifted, and came tumbling down.



I awoke, disoriented by the sense of having lost time. I did not remember falling asleep. But my body was rested. I could get up, walk

around again, and I did so. The metallic pattering of the rain sizzled in the air above me.

The ghosts of dreams returned to me, faded and fragmented. Dreams of sunshine and sonic radbooms.

I was hungry. And thirsty. I had a slight headache and I needed to relieve myself.

Stumbling into the store, I was surprised to find it devoid of medical cots. Instead, the store had been taken over by griffins.

Outside, thunder rumbled.

Gawdyna Grimfeathers was talking to Ditzzy Doo's bodyguard. There were two smaller griffins present, adolescents if I was sizing them up right, similar enough in build and stature to make me suspect they were twins. One of them was talking to Calamity, a discussion that seemed to focus on a pair of odd pistols she carried in holsters strapped to her breast. She had one of them out and open, holding it carefully in her talons for Calamity's inspecting eye. The griffin was of similar build to Gawd, but slimmer, and would definitely be appealing if it weren't for the suspicion she was at least five years younger than me. I could tell she'd grow up to be very pretty. If the wasteland let her. The other griffin was leaning against the shop counter, a bemused expression on his beak as Silver Bell tried to sell him one random item after another. He had apparently already bought an iron, three billiard balls and an empty tin can just to keep the little filly happy.

Ditzzy Doo was hovering over her workbench (literally), working on something that looked a lot like my Canterlot Police Barding. At my appearance, she scooped up the barding, taking her chalkboard in her mouth, and fluttered over to me.

The ghoulish pegasus offered me the barding -- it was indeed my armor, but Ditzzy had repaired and reinforced it, making it stronger and more protective than before.

Her chalkboard read: It was looking a bit shot up.

I blushed. "Th-thanks. How much do I owe you?"

Ditzy Doo seemed to laugh. She set down the chalkboard, rubbing it clean with a hoof, then wrote: No charge. The Wasteland Heroine wears armor by Ditzy Doo. You're good advertisement.

The ghoul smiled at me. The smile was grim, showing too many teeth and too much of her gums. But I felt the warmth of it. She wanted to help. The advertising was an excuse.

I threw my forehooves around her, giving the ghoul a (squishy) hug. She tensed just a moment, then hugged back. Squishily.

"You're a good friend," I whispered to her. "And a good pony. One of the best this world has to offer. Thank you."

She pulled back and looked at me oddly. Then shook her head and pointed a hoof at my chest.

My guess was that she was saying "not me, you". (Either that, or she was starting an impromptu game of tag.) Before I could respond, Silver Bell ran up, her little horn glowing with a faint silver light as she floated a small pile of bottle caps up to Ditzy Doo.

"Look, mommy! I made a sale!"

A gentle, crystalline melody, like the chiming of a dozen silver bells, wafted through the store.

Calamity approached me, followed by the young griffin woman with the pistols. "Li'lpip, you're awake!"

Part of me wanted to run to him and tell him I had a plan. That I had somehow had an epiphany and I knew just what we needed to do. What *I* needed to do. It wouldn't make everything right, but it would be a massive start.

But I wasn't ready yet. I needed more information. I needed to know how the Enclave was going to react to what happened here. To what Ditzy Doo had done. And I really needed to pee.

"How long was I out?" I asked, noticing a lack of light through the windows. The store shook slightly with another rolling percussion of thunder. The thudding in my head grew a little worse.

“About twelve hours,” Calamity admitted. Most of a day!

I needed to take care of a few things. I needed to borrow a bathroom and maybe some painkiller. But before I could excuse myself to care for either, Calamity wrapped a wing around me and ushered me towards the two younger griffins. “You’ll never guess who.”

“um...” I said uncomfortably.

“Littlepip, this is Kage and Reggie,” he said, pointing to the male griffin first. He smiled wryly as he put his newly purchased tin can into his saddlebags. “Kage, Reggie, this here is Li’lpip...”

I lifted a hoof in a timid wave.

“...Bringer of Light and heroine of the wastelands.”

My hoof dropped as my face went red. I hated Calamity so much right then.

“I’d say ol’ Derpy did more light-bringing today than you, Li’lpip,” Kage chuckled, offering a set of talons. I hesitated, feeling both embarrassed and vaguely offended to hear someone other than a small colt use that nickname, even though Calamity once told me she found it endearing.

I lifted my hoof and he shook it with mercifully gentleness, a good thing since his talons were painfully *sharp* even in a gentle grasp. I drew my hoof back, checking for spots of blood, sure he could have taken my hoof off if he had wanted too. I shifted my attention to the pretty young griffin, extending my hoof with a slight wince. I felt myself blushing slightly more.

“Kage and Regina Grimfeathers,” Calamity whispered into my ears.

I froze. My jaw dropped open.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Reggie smirked. I could see Kage already rolling his eyes. “We’re the children of Gawd.”

Gawd had *kids*?!

The little pony in my head started running around in circles, protesting: *I was not checking out your daughter! I was not checking out your daughter!*

My gaze shifted to Gawdyna, who was now talking to both Ditzzy and the other griffin. Ditzzy Doo was holding up one of her chalkboards -- I couldn't see the writing -- and Gawd was answering, "Well, I can't rightly go chargin' the town fer protection if we don't show up t' protect it, now can I?"

Gawdyna is running a protection racket on New Appleloosa that comes with actual protection? The little pony in my head chuckled affectionately, *that is so Gawdyna!* Loyal to the contract.

Of course I hadn't been looking at Regina like *that*. She was a little young for me, not to mention she was a griffin. (*Gawd's a griffin*, my little pony pointed out.)

Okay, sure. I once found Gawdyna to be fanciable... for a griffin. But that was before Homage. And I was really lonely...

My eyes took in the griffin as if trying to assure myself that it was just a passing fancy.

Yes, she is strong, and beautifully built, and the scars actually really add to her presense... (*and apparently I really like older mares*, the pony in my head taunted). But Gawdyna didn't look old. (*First Velvet*, my little pony jabbed, *now mommy griffin?*) I wanted that little pony to shut up so badly. Gawdyna wasn't old. Adult, yes, but... (*What, did she have them when she was three?*) ... *not* old. She still looked vigorous and built and... did I just have no sense of age when it came to griffins?

"Oh. My. Gawd!" Reggie exclaimed loudly, taking her mother's name in vain (!) like only a teenager could. "Littlepip's hawt for mother!"

Luna's moaning moonheat!

That burning in my cheeks exploded over my entire body. "What!? No! I... but..." I saw Gawdyna looking back at me her eyebrow lifted high over her good eye. "GAAH!!"

I collapsed to the floor in pure embarrassment, trying to bury my head under my hooves.

Kill me now.

“And here I was going t’ say yer boyfriend was waiting for you outside,” Gawd called over to me, mercifully giving me the excuse to dash out into the rain like I was being pursued by a pack of hellhounds.



I leaned against the train engine that made up part of the hodge-podge construction of *Absolutely Everything*. It was the dark, dead hours of the early morning. That hour where the darkness lays most heavily on the soul and the hungry monsters outside claw at your door.

Rain poured down, turning the streets into rivers, washing away the radiation and the blood. The lights of New Appleloosa cut beams through the rainfall, making the falling water shimmer and shine in the blackness. Water spilled from rooftops and gurgled down gutters to splash into overfilled rain barrels. I was quickly soaked to the bone.

Nopony was outside. My utter, devastating humiliation took a backseat to the need to pee. I trotted around the side of the building, glancing around to make sure I wasn’t watched, and started to relieve myself into a streamlet.

“Hello, Littlepip...” a voice said from absolutely nowhere and about two yards in front of me.

I jumped up, my heart trying to leap out of my chest. Embarrassment, annoyance and shock fought each other for dominance as I recognized the mechanical voice of Watcher.

“...oh. Sorry. I’ll just be over here.”

“A little late now!” I grumble-shouted. Dammit! I should have used my Eyes-Forwards Sparkle to check the area.

With a deep sigh, I brought up my E.F.S. and located the sprite-bot. “Are you all right?” I asked. Might as well talk with him. Wasn’t like I was going to be able to finish after that anyway.

“Me? Yes. But...” Watcher sounded hesitant. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.” And guilty. “Are you?”

There were so many ways the answer to that should have been no. But instead, I chose to cut to the chase. “What’s wrong?”

Watcher was silent for a minute, the sprite-bot bobbing in the rain. “I goofed up, Littlepip.” My mind strained trying to imagine a huge, ferocious dragon saying the word *goofed*. But this was Spike. “I’ve put you in danger.”

I closed my eyes. Danger wasn’t exactly new. “What happened?” Somewhere behind me, I heard a door open and close.

“Li’lpip?” Calamity called into the night.

I lifted a hoof, motioning for Watcher to hold his thought. “Over here,” I called to Calamity.

The sprite-bot waited silently until Calamity had trotted up next to me, his hooves splashing in the streamlet that I had been using a couple minutes ago.

“The Enclave has security footage of you guys in the Ministry of Awesome. And High General Harbinger managed to get a transmission out of Maripony before it went up. They’ve put two-and-two together.”

Not exactly unexpected. And was I the only pony who found it exasperatingly wrong that “high general” was an *elected* position?

Watcher continued, “The Enclave have sent their best hit squad after you and your friends.”

“Aw hell,” Calamity moaned.

“Who?” I asked.

“The Wonderbolts,” Watcher informed us.

I blinked. “Wait. *Who?*” The Enclave had named their best pack of hunters the *Wonderbolts*? There was something in my heart (Be Awesome!) that wanted to kick their asses just for using that name. “That is *so* wrong.”

“It gets worse,” Watcher admitted. “One of the Enclave Skyguard ponies who saw you two in my cave was a junior member of the *Wonderbolts*. He recognized you, Calamity. They came to my cave...”

“Gutshot,” Calamity muttered.

I remembered the pegasus: *That's Deadshot Calamity. Winner of the Best Young Sharpshooter competition four years running. You don't forget the pony who beat you.*

One of the *Wonderbolts* (I so wanted to awesomely stomp them!) was second only to Calamity as a sharpshooter? And Calamity *never* missed!

My eyes widened in sudden alarm. “Spike!” I gasped, forgetting myself. “Your cave! Did they...” No no no! Please, don’t let the Enclave have destroyed the Gardens of Equestria!!

“It’s safe,” Spike said through the sprite-bot, filling me with relief. “But... well, you understand why I had to get them out of there as quickly as possible, don’t you?” His voice, even though synthetically manufactured, still managed to sound plaintive.

Calamity exhaled a long sigh. “What did ya tell ‘em?”

“And I’ve never been very good at being interrogated!” Spike continued.

“What did ya tell ‘em!” Calamity said sternly.

“Nothing much... really... Just...” Spike paused as if steeling himself. “I told them you had been in Ironshod Firearms.”

Calamity blinked. “Huh?”

“Old weapons factory,” I told him. “I met Watcher outside of it once. Long time ago,” I asserted even as I realized that it wasn’t that long ago

at all. Two months. But those two months had been a lifetime. “Before I met you.”

“Okay...” Calamity pondered. Then, “Ah don’t get it. So what?”

But I knew what Spike was worried about. My mind was flashing back to when I learned that the Steel Rangers were after Stable Two, and my fears that it was somehow my fault. That when I had hacked the door for Stable Twenty-Nine, I had left something behind...

And I was a lot less careful or experienced back at Ironshod Firearms. I’d hacked into that office computer like a careless amateur. Left my virtual hoofprints all over it.

“How... technically proficient are the Wonderbolts?” I asked slowly.

Calamity frowned, shifting his position. “Depends.” He took a deep breath and addressed the sprite-bot. “Do the Wonderbolts still have Windsheer and Lensflare?”

“Who?” I questioned, figuring they were names I might need to know.

Calamity rustled his wings. “Windsheer is my eldest brother,” the rust-colored pegasus told me, adding, “Dad’s favorite. Master of communications technologies. Top of his class. Graduated with honors. Made corporal. Member of the Wonderbolts...” He shook his head. “Only one of us dad ever seemed to approve of. But then, why wouldn’t he be dad’s favorite?”

I winced. “And Lensflare?”

“Windsheer’s best friend, rival, occasional lover,” Calamity said. “Expert repair pony, especially when it comes to magical energy weapons. Taught me a few tricks I used to build the novasurge rifles in my Enclave armor. Also top of his class, focused in arcano-tech.”

Crap. We were in trouble. First and foremost, how could we go to war against Calamity’s big brother? Then again, considering what I had seen of his family so far, pummeling the buck might be highly therapeutic.

“Windsheer left the Wonderbolts several years ago,” Watcher told us, immediately making me feel much better about the situation. “Followed other promotions according to the press release.”

“Press release?” I questioned.

Calamity leaned close and whispered, “The Wonderbolts are the stars of the Enclave. Spend as much time putting on shows at patriotism events as they do actually hunting.” He added, “Probably more.”

Celebrities. The best hunter-killer pack in the Enclave... they tracked down and murdered ponies for a living, and they had fans. They put on shows. Ponies lined up for their autographs. There were press releases whenever they had a roster change. How fucked up was that?

“But Lensflare is still with them. He was one of the pegasi who visited my cave yesterday.”

My face fell. We were dead.

Calamity saw my expression. “Li’lpip?”

“They can get my tag from the computer in Ironshod Firearms,” I told him, my voice resigned. “And as soon as they do, they’ll be able to use their armor to locate me no matter where I go.”

“I’m sorry, Littlepip,” Spike said remorsefully. “But... you can just take your PipBuck off, right? Lead them astray?”

I lifted my foreleg, showing the sprite-bot how my PipBuck had become grossly melded to my body.

Watcher had the wits to say nothing.

“I could cut my leg off,” I thought out loud. I might even regrow it. “Or I could just leave. Draw them away.” I looked at Calamity. “Keep you safe.”

“Aw hell no!” Calamity gave a stomp. “Nothin’ doin’, Li’lpip. We stick together.”

“But...”

“But nothin’!” Calamity said sternly. Then he smiled. “Besides, Ah got muhself a plan,” Calamity grinned, poking my nose with a hoof. “Trust me, Li’lbait.”

This wasn’t going to end well.

Footnote: Maximum Level

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



TOWARDS HOPE

“For many of us, the road is a difficult one, but the path is always there for us to follow, no matter how many times we may fall.”

Madness.

I stood there, the streamlet flowing behind *Absolutely Everything* washing over my hooves, and stared at Calamity, my jaw unhinged. There was simply no other word. Calamity’s plan was insane.

Hell, it wasn’t even a plan. Plans have... plan stuff. Calamity had a bunch of ideas and vague hopes tied together by multiple points of “and then something happens”. We didn’t have who or what we needed to even try it. I doubted we could get them.

“Well?” he asked, earnestly seeking my approval.

“I’m beginning to agree with Velvet Remedy,” I told him, recalling her reaction to his actions in the Zebratown Police Headquarters.

“So... yer willin’ t’ give it a try?” Gawddammit. Calamity was staring at me with the eyes of a foal, hoping for my acceptance, my support of

this... madness. This plan... it was something he needed to try. Needed like a starving pony needs food.

I manufactured a smile. "I don't have a better plan," I admitted. "Sure." We were all going to die.

Watcher's sprite-bot bobbed in the rain beside us, silently listening.

Finally, the mechanical voice that disguised Spike plaintively asked, "Is there anything I can do, guys? I'm really sorry."

I thumped my rainsoaked forehead with an even wetter hoof. Think. Think, you silly mare.

"Yes," I asserted, looking sidelong at the spritebot, "Yes, there is."

"What?" Spike asked.

I waved a hoof. "Just wait there for a moment. First, I need to talk to Gawd."



"What I don't understand," I told Calamity as we started to walk back towards the front of *Absolutely Everything*, "Is why the Wonderbolts haven't already hit us? The Wonderbolts are fast, right?"

Calamity looked askance. "Fast. You could say that, yes."

Lightning flashed across the sky. "Shouldn't they have gotten to Ironshod already," I reckoned, talking above the rumbling thunder. "It wouldn't take long to get my tag..." Not if Lensflare was as skilled as it sounded. And New Appleloosa was an awfully short flight from Ironshod Firearms.

"They're probably caught up in committee," Calamity snurked wryly.

I halted, my hooves growing muddy, and gave Calamity a confused look. Surely he wasn't saying they had to, what, file a hunting plan? Were all the ponies in the sky crazy?

Calamity turned the corner, almost knocking over Railright. I heard the two stallions mumble apologies as I caught up. Railright was standing

under the eve of Ditzzy Doo's store, apparently waiting for somepony. At the sight of me, he nodded, then cast a furtive glance towards the lights along the city wall.

Last I had seen Railright, he was escorting away several ponies who had dared to come below the Enclave's cloud cover. "Where are the new pegasi?" I asked the sheriff/mayor, wondering just how much I'd slept through.

Railright glanced at Calamity before answering. "Ah've put them t' work assistin' the community. In return, they 'ave a place in the common house till they c'n better situate themselves."

I looked to Calamity questioningly. My pegasus friend frowned, his tone sour as he informed me, "Enclave Radio broadcast an offer o' aid to 'misplaced citizens'. Tracker accepted the offer at face value an' flew off, promisin' t' contact Frost by her PipBuck soon as he was skyside. That was over six hours ago."

"Calamity here was wormin' some sense into the two mares when that broadcast came on," Railright added. "That mare with the PipBuck is some kinda ex-military, Ah think. Somethin' 'bout that broadcast spooked her proper."

I found myself feeling distinctly worried for Tracker.

"An what brings ya t' Ditzzy's porch, sheriff?" Calamity asked, trying to sound casual.

Railright shook his head at the pegasus' suspicion. I tried to remember that Railright and Calamity had known each other for years. Their relationship had always been cordial, if not downright friendly, before balefire bombs and rogue pegasi got thrown into the mix.

"Getting a weather report from the Grimfeathers," Railright told him. "Thunderstorm spreads from the shores o' Bucklyn all the way t' the edge of Hope. Storm's cleansin' the air o' the smoke from Everfree, and there's nasty rainout all over Splendid Valley."

"Cuz that place needs t' be more toxic," Calamity nickered.

“Just our luck that the broken weather over Everfree is keepin’ the storm out,” Railright added. “It’s almost like that place *wants* t’ be on fire.”

“Hope?” I asked Calamity.

“Ayep,” Calamity agreed. Then, seeing my confusion, “Ya been there b’fore, Li’lpip. The rubble that used t’ be Hope is only ‘bout a few hours down the tracks.”

“The town with that old weapons factory,” Railright clarified. Ironshod Firearms. I remembered walking through the playground of Hope. I’d seen my first Ministry of Morale poster there. I just hadn’t known the town’s name. “An’ ya got the Array few miles back from it, towards Everfree.”

“The what now?” I asked, confused. “Array?”

“Hope Solar Array,” Calamity told me, sounding a little bored. “Big bunch o’ dishes pointed up at the clouds. Best Ah c’n gather, the ponies o’ the old world tried all sorts o’ crazy ways t’ get power when the coal supply got strangled.”

Now that I didn’t see. Granted, the only time I’d been up high enough to have glimpsed it out of a factory window, I was a bit busy outrunning collapsing catwalks. I paused to process this. Technology for turning sunlight into energy? Made sense considering Twilight Sparkle’s ministry had even been working on weaponizing sunlight.

And this Celestia One, or Celestia Prime, or whatever they’re calling it can’t even be cast unless it’s sunny. I can’t tell the Princess that the only defense we have against those missiles can be defeated by a cloudy day. What if the zebras decide to attack us at night?

Clearly, there were still bugs to be worked out. But even the hope of power for the wasteland was just one more reason Equestria deserved and needed to see the sun. Old generators and spark batteries weren’t going to last forever.

Calamity was reaching his hoof towards the door when it swung open, Regina Grimfeathers framed in the doorway. My friend backed up as

the griffin pushed her way out, nodding to all of us. The gun-toting adolescent griffin leaned against the wall where Ditzzy's sign had been and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. *Absolutely Everything's* porch was getting crowded.

"Any of you see where that little unicorn ran off to?" Reggie asked casually as she lit up a cigarette. Since I was standing right there, I assumed the little unicorn she was talking about was Silver Bell.

Calamity had come to the same conclusion. "Silver Bell's missing?" She'd been inside just minutes ago.

Railright bit his lower lip. "Ah think Ah saw her headed up t' the toilets."

Oh. "Um... let's not form a search party then." I was mentally glaring daggers at Watcher as I added, "Give her some privacy." Coming swiftly on the hooves of that thought, the realization that New Appleloosa had public bathrooms struck me across the forehead like a nailboard. Ow. Dammit. Of course they did. What had I been thinking?

"Now whatcha blushin' 'bout, Li'lpip?" Oh thank you, Calamity. Couldn't let that go unasked, could you? Nope.

"Y-you were... um... saying something about... committees?"

Calamity mercifully took the hint, jumping back onto the former topic like he had never left it. "Remember Ah told ya that the Enclave keeps pegasi who c'n do the sonic rainboom real close? Well, now ya c'n see why. With all the cloud-tech the Enclave relies on, not t' mention the cloud curtain, they view the sonic rainboom as a weapon of mass destruction."

I looked towards where one of the Raptors had come down on the town. Worklights had been set up, illuminating it through the pouring rain. The silhouettes of ponies moved about it in the downpour, scavenging.

"Ya gotta realize, Li'lpip, that when the pegasi closed the sky, we'd lost one city. Just one. Granted, Cloudsdayle was the biggest, but that still

left several more that survived pretty much untouched by the war. All that pre-war technology and magic... they've been repurposing and recycling all that stuff fer centuries."

Lightning split the sky. Thunder pounded down on us like it was trying to drive us into the mud.

"But they can't make more," Calamity shouted. "Pegasi can't make magic items like unicorns or zebras. And there ain't nothing up there t' build with 'cept what was left from the past. An' clouds. Clouds make fer good pegasi homes, they ain't so useful fer makin' armor an' bullets."

I remembered how my hoof passed right through the Enclave terminal interface.

"The few mountains that rise above the clouds have either been stripped of their resources or are homes fer nasty things that the Enclave would rather not piss off." Like Spike. "The Enclave invaded the griffin skies a few generations ago jus' t' get at their mountains."

Calamity nodded to Reggie, who took a long drag on her cigarette and spat a curse at the sky.

"When the war ended," Calamity added, "The pegasi had 'bout fifty Raptors, only four Thunderheads, and no ability t' make more. Includin' the four Raptors that ya took out with the balefire bomb an' the one downed near Stalliongrad, the Enclave 'as lost a dozen o' their warships in under a week. More than they've lost in two hundred years. An' four o' 'em were taken out by Ditzzy Doo's toxic rainboom."

Calamity gave me a meaningful stare. "The Enclave must be 'bout pissin' themselves right now."

I wished he hadn't used that particular phrase. "Good," I said firmly. Then asked, "What does that have to do with the Wonderbolts?"

Calamity rolled his eyes. "Ain't it obvious, Li'lpip? Ah told ya: the Enclave keeps all pegasi who c'n do the Sonic Rainboom real close."

Oh. Now I got it. The Wonderbolts. Any pegasus who proved capable of performing a Sonic Rainboom was drafted into the Enclave's celebrity hit squad.

That meant that the ponies hunting us were all *that good*. I liked Calamity's plan even less.

"And when the Enclave saw what Ditzzy did..." I guessed, putting the pieces together, "...they pulled the Wonderbolts into..." I searched for an appropriate phrase, "...emergency tactical meetings, calling on their expertise to try to get a handle on this new threat?"

Calamity nodded. "Somethin' like that. They have no idea how many ghoulish pegasi live down here," he stated, causing me to think back to the flock of zombie pegasi we had run from in the Cloudsdale outskirts. "And if Ditzzy Doo could do it, theoretically just 'bout any sufficiently-radiated ghoulish pegasi should be capable of pulling off a toxic rainboom."

Yes. The Enclave really must be pissing themselves.

"Upshot is, Ah reckon we got a few days before the Wonderbolts are hot on our tails."



Gawd was talking to Ditzzy Doo when I entered the store. Kage and the bodyguard were next to them, huddled around a spool table, playing a game involving rectangles of hardened paper. My curiosity urged me to divert long enough to peek in on the game. Each griffin held a number of the colorfully marked papers in their talons, and there were six more piles of papers face up on the table as well as two face down that they seemed to be drawing new papers from as they played. I would have watched longer, trying to understand the rules, but I didn't want to leave Watcher waiting. (And besides, the game was clearly not for ponies. A unicorn might be able to hold those little papers fanned like that, but why learn a game you couldn't play with your pegasi or earth pony friends?)

Trotting up to Gawd (who was nodding at something Ditzzy Doo had written on her chalkboard), I interrupted as politely as I could. Ditzzy Doo stepped back, nodding with a smile.

“Gawd, there’s something I need from you.” I wanted to ask this as a favor, but the little pony in my head reminded me that favors weren’t how Gawd worked. Gawd respected the contract.

The gruff female griffin looked down at me with her one good eye, her expression unreadable. “Sorry, kid. But you ain’t my type.”

Bwah? Arrguh! She thought I was...? But then, what else would she think after her daughter (!) caught me *looking* at her. “It-it’s nothing like th-that!” I stomped, recovering.

Part of me wanted to bury myself and hide until I drowned in my own embarrassment. But this was too important. And besides, I wasn’t interested in her like that. I mean, sure... but I had Homage. And it was very likely I wasn’t going to be around much longer. The last damn thing I was going to do in my remaining days here was cheat on Homage.

The little mare in my head whimpered, *I’m not?* Not helping.

Gawdyna raised an eyebrow.

Well of course not, I mentally hissed at my little pony. She’s a griffin. With children. Which highly suggested that she was interested in other griffins. Male ones. And why was I even having this discussion with myself?

Trying to get this back on track, I asserted, “You have a contract to protect this town, right?”

“Yes,” the griffin said slowly, her face shifting into the stern expression of negotiation.

“But you didn’t protect it. Ditzzy Doo here did.”

“Yes,” she said again, even more slowly.

“And now, there’s a really good chance that the Enclave will come after her. And they’ll probably wipe out the town to get at her if she’s here.” I could see Ditzzy Doo’s eyes widen. Gawd hadn’t been in Friendship City. But Ditzzy Doo had seen the horrible lengths the Enclave would go to.

Gawd was looking at Ditzzy Doo and frowning. “She’s hired Gilgamesh as her personal bodyguard. But I take it you think I need to do more.” I detailed what I wanted Gawd to do. About halfway through my explanation, her good eye widened and she turned to me in shock.

“Are you insane?” Apparently, all the ponies in this town were crazy. Including me. “I was with you until the dragon cave. But I think asking me and my griffins to fly Ditzzy here above the clouds and int’ the home o’ a *dragon* is stretchin’ the contract I have with this town a mite bit too far.”

“The dragon won’t be hostile. Not to you. I promise.”

“You do, do you?” She fixed me with an appraising look. “Your relationship with dragons seems to have changed since last I saw.”

“This dragon doesn’t eat ponies,” I asserted. “Or griffins.” At least, I was pretty sure Spike didn’t eat griffins. What did Spike eat, anyway? Just gems?

“Well, if you want me t’ liberally interpret the contract t’ include dragon visitin’,” Gawd suggested, “Then maybe you can see yer way t’ liberally interpretin’ what we’re getting’ paid.”

I was going to be broke after this. But it was worth it to keep Ditzzy Doo safe. And Silver Bell. “Okay. But you’ll have to take both of them, Ditzzy and her daughter, as soon as... where is Silver Bell anyway? Shouldn’t she be back by now?” I looked to Ditzzy Doo.

Somepony should be watching that filly. The thought struck me swiftly, “Where’s Xenith?”

Worry became panic when Stiletto burst in, looking nastily smug. “Hey, Derpy. That ditzzy filly o’ yours is up at Railright’s station. Needs you somethin’ bad.”

The bodyguard, Gilgamesh, was fast. Ditzzy Doo was faster. She'd flown out the door, leaving paper rectangles swirling through the air from her backwash, even before my mind could process what the Shattered Hoof Raider had said.

Shooting Stiletto a nasty look (and a "Then why aren't you helping?"), I raced into the night's storm after her. Gilgamesh was in front of me, Calamity behind. I heard Gawdyna ordering Kage to watch the store just before the door banged closed behind me.

Yep, this was what wet felt like. I thought I was wet a few minutes ago. Wow, was I wrong. The rain was heavier now, falling in sheets that drenched me to the bone before I'd gotten into the street. But I didn't care. All I cared about was Silver Bell. The pony in my head was biting her hooves, insisting that I should have gotten the two of them to safety sooner. Why did I have to fall asleep?

My hooves splashed in the river beneath me. Calamity and Gilgamesh were faster, reaching the station house that had been claimed by New Appleloosa's mayor/sheriff. Ditzzy Doo was already at the front door.

The lights were out. Not good.

I floated out Little Macintosh, kicking on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. I tried to call out to Ditzzy Doo, to urge caution, but I was too late. The ghoul pegasus spun in the air and bucked the door open, revealing blackness inside.

My E.F.S. compass lit up with dozens of lights just as Ditzzy Doo pivoted back and flew into the dark maw of the doorway. It was a trap!

I lifted Little Macintosh in front of me, galloping as fast as I could to catch up.

Wait. None of the lights on my E.F.S. compass were a hostile red.

A flash-flood of light poured out of Railright's station as dozens of colorful New Appleloosians shouted in unison.

"SURPRISE!"

I nearly shot a balloon.



A cake floated into view, surrounded by a caramel-colored field of magic, followed by a familiar yellow unicorn pony with an orange-and-beige striped mane. The cake was baked in the shape of a giant muffin, echoing the many muffins on the nearby table beneath a glittering banner.

THANK YOU DITZY DOO!

Ditzy Doo stood in the middle of the room, wide-eyed, stunned. “Do you like it?” Silver Bell asked anxiously. “It’s a party!” The filly seemed nervous. “For you!” she added. I could tell from her wide, glistening eyes (and by many of the decorations) that the little lavender filly had done most of the work on this surprise thank-you party. Probably planned it. There was still a touch of Pinkie Bell in her, and at some level this must be triggering odd emotions in the young girl.

Ditzy Doo made those fears evaporate as she flew to Silver Bell, scooping the filly up against her breast and lavishing her with kisses until the girl was crying with happiness.

Soon, everypony was enjoying the party.

“Hello, Crane,” I said, turning to the yellow unicorn. “I thought I saw your telekinesis out there yesterday morning.” Crane grinned. “Thanks for the catch.”

“Thank *you*,” he insisted. “Couldn’t ‘ave done it without yer help! An’ that li’l filly’s,” he added, looking over at Silver Bell who was trying to regain her ability to stand after a dizzying round of hugging. “That was the first magic that li’l gal managed since getting’ her horn back. Ah honestly think seein’ mommy there do that radboom is what did it.”

Somehow (Be smart), I was certain he was right.

We spent the next hour catching up, which mostly involved me regaling him with all the telekinetic tricks I’d managed in the past two months. To my delight, Crane was duly impressed with my creativity.

But it wasn't until I told him about telekinetically flying that I managed to surprise him with my telekinetic prowess.

"Dayumn, girl," he said, wide-eyed. "That took me years o' work t' pull off." I felt a little crestfallen that I hadn't managed something unique. But Crane wasn't considered the best telekinetic in the Equestrian Wasteland for nothing. And at least my learning curve was faster. "How far c'n ya get? Ah can manage one lap o' New Appleloosa b'fore muh juice runs out."

"I... don't really know," I admitted. I'd made it from the ground to Calamity's shack. But I'd never tested to see how much farther I could push it. "I'm afraid that I'll burn out again if I push too hard trying to find out."

"Ya been burning out?" he asked. I nodded. "Way ya been pushin' yerself, Ah'm not surprised."

We both jumped as something in the room exploded in confetti.

"Good news is, there's a remedy fer that," Crane told me as he floated all the bits of confetti off the two of us, depositing them in a wastebin. A cure for burnout? He had my full attention. "Sadly, the wasteland might not have it fer much longer. Requires a few plants that only grow in the Everfree Forest. Reckon they're all burnt up now."

Oh. Well, crap.

"Might be willin' t' part with one o' my bottles o' it though," Crane said slyly. "Fer a favor."

Right. Should have seen that coming. Plus, Crane's last favor involved a Stable full of chimeras.

"I'm a little busy being hunted right now," I admitted. "If I live through this, I'll keep your offer in mind." Maybe the first time ever that I had turned down a distracting quest. But I really couldn't spare the time. Unless... "This favor -- is anypony in danger?"

"Nope," said Crane. I felt a wash of relief. "Least, not that Ah know of." Well, that was something, at least. "There's a farm out on the edge

o' the Everfree Forest near the Hope Solar Array. Close 'nuff t' Everfree fer the ground t' be farmable."

A farm near Everfree? Maybe it was something in the air. Maybe the crazy was contagious.

"Sprung up outta nowhere last spring. No idea who built it. Seems like some ponies went through a lot of effort, then abandoned the place. Or, more likely, got 'emselves slaughtered by somethin' wanderin' outta the forest." Crane shrugged. In the background, I spotted Ditzzy Doo enjoying a muffin. She had one ear cocked, and I suspected she was listening in.

"We could sorely use the crops, 'specially now," Crane stated. "But local folks have weird rumors 'bout the farm. First pony who tried t' move out that way came back t' town a few times sayin' it's haunted. Then he stopped comin' t' town at all. That was a while ago. Could use a pair of eyes scopin' the place out, lettin' us know if it's safe to move inta." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Assumin' ya ain't afraid o' the headless horse."

I mulled it over. "Tell you what. If I'm out that way, I'll poke around, see what I can find, and let you know," I told him, adding, "For the remedy. But my plate's pretty full right now."

Ditzzy Doo trotted over. She had scribbled a new message on one of the chalkboards hanging around her neck:

Don't worry because they say the farm is haunted.

No reason to avoid the place.

Ghosts don't exist.

Just landmines.

I blinked. "Landmines?"

"Ditzzy Doo's pet theory," Crane explained. "Given the bloody body parts and the places where the ground looked like it had exploded."

Meanwhile, Ditzzy Doo was wiping off her chalkboard. A moment later, she offered:

Bring me any mines you find, please. I'll trade for caps and grenades.

Yep. Definitely contagious.

Silver Bell galloped up excitedly. "C'mon mommy! Xenith has started Pin the Tail on the Pony! Wanna play?" The blonde-maned filly started tugging Ditzzy Doo away before the ghoul could answer.

Wait. *Xenith* started a game? Then, on second thought, regaining orientation and maintaining accuracy while blinded did sound like an exercise the zebra would be familiar with.

I perked my ears, taking a moment to look and listen to the party around me. There was music playing from an old record player similar to the one Homage had, only in far worse condition. The songs were happy and carefree. All the furniture in Railright's living room had been pushed back, and there were ponies dancing with each other. It felt like a touch of the sun's light had been captured and was alive in this room.

Pyrelight was perched on Railright's hat rack. She was bobbing her head, letting out musical whistles as she stared at her colored and distorted reflections in a cluster of balloons. I suspected she'd gotten into the spiked punch.

Spike! Crap. I still needed to tell him about Gawd and Ditzzy Doo.

"Excuse me, Crane," I said hastily. "I'll be right back."

"Take yer time," the yellow pony claimed. "Ah got somethin' that needs doin'."

As I galloped out the door, I passed Gawdyna. She was standing outside, listening to the party. I stopped, skidding a bit in the mud. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "You've got a deal. Five hundred bottle caps, and I'll have those two snug away in a dragon's cave by tomorrow evening." She shook her head. "Hope you know what you're doing. Those two... they deserve a good life."

I had entertained a fleeting worry that the party had upset her. It would have been easy to be angry over the flash of panic those ponies had caused. (*How could I have ever doubted you?* a little voice in my head asked. *It could have happened to any of us*, another answered. The little pony in my head started looking around for the source of the other voices.)

I shook my head to clear it of the strange thoughts. No, the truth was that seeing Ditzzy Doo and Silver Bell together had touched the gruff griffin commander, and she'd stepped outside to think.

"Thank you," I told her. I started to turn back towards where Watcher was waiting, but halted again. "What is your type?" I found myself forced to ask.

"Unattached," Gawdyna Grimfeathers told me bluntly.

The answer brought a smile to my face. From a certain perspective, I supposed that having a marefriend was like a contract. Gawd respected the contract. And couldn't respect somepony who didn't.



"Come on," Silver Bell coaxed with big, bright eyes, trying to pull me away from my conversation with Candi. "Come an' dance with me!"

I looked at the adorable little filly being so earnest and... adorable. How could I say no? I glanced up towards her mother, wondering how she managed; the wall-eyed ghoul was watching her daughter lovingly and gave me a sympathetic smile.

Waving goodbye to Candi (who notably had been responsible for bringing the "adult punch"), I followed the little lavender unicorn out onto the dance floor.

The party went late into the night.

Exhausted from dancing, I found an empty table and plopped my tail down next to it, floating over a glass of "adult punch". It had a peculiar and delicious berry flavor and shed just enough radiation to make my

PipBuck click. I'd made the mistake of asking about it. Mutfruit punch tasted better when I didn't know what it was.

Xenith joined me. "The little one has fallen asleep," she stated. "We have put her to bed upstairs in the mayor's room." Better that than taking her home in the rain. Plus, it kept her and Ditzzy Doo close. "The guard griffin is watching her."

I wondered if Gilgamesh ever slept. From something I had overheard, I knew I wasn't the only pony in town to ask that.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"I am not a mother," Xenith said. "I can be a guard. A protector. But not more. I envy them."

"Maybe you can't be a mother," I said as I recalled how Xenith stayed to help the zebras of Glyphmark learn the arts of stealth. How she instructed them in making Dash. "But you can be more than just a guard; you can be a teacher."

Xenith didn't know what to say to that. So she drank her mutfruit punch, and I drank mine.

At the table nearby, a familiar trio of younger ponies were spending the party discussing what they should name their group. The olive pony was suggesting the Wasteland Rangers.

"No, no," the amber mare said. "That would sound like we were trying to copy the Applejack's Rangers. We need something more original."

"I know," the olive-coated buck said, raising a hoof. "How about the Ouroboros?"

"The what now?" the amber mare asked, confused.

"It's a snake eating its own tail," the buck explained.

"Ew. Why would we want to call ourselves that?"

"No, no," the buck clarified. "It's an old symbol about renewal. And we're trying to help Equestria renew itself, right?"

"You sure about that?" the khaki-coated buck asked.

“No,” the amber mare insisted, shaking her head. “No snakes of any kind. There’s nothing heroic about snakes.” I thought she had a point. What kind of group of friends would name themselves after snakes?

Leaning over, I offered, “If you want something heroic, how about Crusaders?” I watched the young heroes’ eyes light up. “I happen to know the name has a pretty illustrious history.” Not to mention, they seemed to come in threes.

“oh, oh yeah!” the amber mare exclaimed. “The Wasteland Crusaders!”

I was smiling as I turned back to my drink, the conversation at the other table having become more excited as the young heroes plotted how they were going to change Equestria. I still didn’t know their names. Although now I sorta did.

Calamity joined me at my table, followed by Reggie, both smiling and chatting. Struck by a suspicion, I asked, “You two have met before, haven’t you.”

“Ayep,” Calamity told me as a pale blue unicorn mare trotted by, offering cake and muffins. I took a plate of cake and nibbled at it. Yep. Muffin-flavored.

“Calamity here built my guns,” Reggie smirked proudly.

“Ayep. Met her a couple years ago. She an’ her brother were flyin’ protection fer caravans ‘tween New Appleloosa an’ the Republic,” Calamity said again. Then assured me with a grin, “Didn’t know she was related t’ yer feathered fantasy though.”

I moaned, my ears flattening and my cheeks turning red as Reggie didn’t hold back her snickering. I was never going to hear the end of this, was I? “You’re worse than Velvet!” I immediately regretted the reference, seeing the pain it brought.

It was contagious. I found myself thinking of Velvet Remedy. And of SteelHooves. And how much I wish they were here, able to enjoy this party with us. Without them, the party seemed...

Reggie yanked our thoughts away from friends no longer with us by pulling out one of her pistols and setting it on the table. I'd never seen a design quite like it before. "Calamity here took two .223 rifles, cut 'em down and modified 'em into the most boss pair o' pistols in the Equestrian Wasteland."

I gave an appreciative whistle, wondering how they stacked up against Little Macintosh.

"I'm hoping Calamity here can fix me up with some more quick loaders," Reggie added, pulling out a cigarette only for Calamity to hoofwave her to put it away. "Lost a few when the Enclave attacked Shattered Hoof."

"What happened?" I asked, remembering DJ Pon3's mention of the attack on the radio.

"Lame-ass party if you can't even smoke," Reggie grumbled. Then shrugged. "They attacked. We fought back. We kicked their metal tails t' the moon. What's t' know?"

Seeing we weren't satisfied, she sighed. "Fine. Apparently, somepony high up in the Enclave has got some brains," she admitted. "Cottoned onto the idea of sendin' their soldiers on strikes against raiders first. Set the right first impression, paint the right picture o' what the wasteland is all about, an' those bucks an' mares won't hesitate when they tell 'em t' wipe a town."

Not like previous encampments, the attacking pegasus had said. *There are foals here. Families!*

Calamity was staring despondently at his cake. "Makes sense."

"Yeah," Reggie claimed, "And at the rate they're goin', they're gonna wipe the wasteland clean o' raiders by the end o' the month." She grimaced. "Problem is, nopony told 'em that Shattered Hoof wasn't a raider stronghold anymore. Well, problem fer them..."

The young griffin grinned broadly. "They didn't send in any o' those warbirds, but they sent in a whole flock o' troops. At least three dozen.

And we wrecked ‘em. All that fancy armor and firepower ain’t worth a shit in the sky if you don’t have the experience t’ back ‘em up.”

I blinked. That was certainly a new take on the threat of the Enclave. But then, the Talons were professional mercenaries, heavily armed and with years of wasteland experience.

Reggie pushed herself away from the table. “Anyway, scene’s gettin’ stale, an’ I promised Kage I’d bring him some cake, so I’m bailin’.”

The griffin had walked about two yards away from us when she spun around, moved back, and jabbed a sharp talon into our table. “Oh, an’ just so you know, wherever you’re goin’ next, Kage an’ I are goin’ with you.”

“What?”

“No argument. I don’t know what you all are up to now, but all of Equestria tends t’ benefit from your victories.” Reggie looked us over, dropping her voice. “Mom ain’t never gonna admit it, but she’s damn thankful fer what you all did out at Splendid Valley. The Goddess? Her plans for griffins weren’t exactly pretty.” No Unity for griffins. “Once all the ponies were her children, anything that could challenge them was on the chopping block. Half the reason Red Eye’s got so many of our kind working for him, why some o’ us like Stern are so loyal t’ him...” Xenith was drinking punch from a bowl cup which clattered to the floor. “...is because they knew he was plottin’ against the Goddess.”

Calamity, Xenith and I looked at each other.

Reggie continued, “Way my bro and I see it, you’re the best hope this wasteland’s got going fer it. And you’re two soldiers down, includin’ your heavy gunner, just as things are gettin’ their most dangerous. You need us.”

This was... surprising to say the least. And not how Talons operated. Or, at least, not how Gawd did. “But, we haven’t hired you.” The thought was immediately followed by, “What does your mother think?”

“Y’all might change yer minds when ya hear what we’re headin’ into.”

“Don’t much care,” Reggie insisted. “We’re hirin’ ourselves t’ do this. Less you lot think you can outrun us.”

“We will gladly take all the help we can get,” Xenith stated. Then looked to me, “Am I not right, little one?”

I looked at Calamity again. Maybe, just maybe, we’d be able to survive his plan after all.



In the cold drizzle of dawn, I saw the four dozen forms of black carapace armor rise up over the city gates and fly into town.

For a moment, I felt panic and rage. The Enclave was attacking again! But that notion fled as I noticed the shimmer of caramel-colored magic surrounding the suits of Enclave armor and realized there were no ponies inside.

The heavy gate rumbled open and Crane entered New Appleloosa. He was not alone. Walking just behind him was a haggard-looking charcoal unicorn, streaks of scarlet and gold in her white mane. She was wearing Rarity’s battle dress and yellow medical boxes for saddle bags.

Her.

Velvet Remedy halted, eyes widening as she saw me. We stared at each other through the haze of rain between us, a muddy river of a street stretching between us.

She flinched back as I broke into a gallop. There was pain between us. But the emotional hurting was eclipsed by the hope I felt seeing her again. She tried to backpedal, but I had her in a hug before she could escape.

“You’re here?” she asked meekly. “Of course you’re here.”

“Goddesses, we’ve missed you!” I told her, not letting her go. “Please tell me you’re back.”

“I... I came to help,” she said hesitantly. “I was... visiting SteelHooves and... I saw the explosion.”

"She got here late last night," Crane told me. "Been helping tend t' the pegasi too wounded t' fly back home."

Of course she was.

Velvet Remedy didn't ask if they were the good guys and who were the bad guys. She stopped to help the first hurting ponies she came across, didn't matter who they were. I hoped her kindness to the enemy left a lasting impression on them.

"Ah been collectin' their armor," Crane said, motioning upwards with his horn. "Reckon it's a fit gift fer Ditzzy Doo. Help repay what the town owes her." I found myself loving Crane just a little bit right then. "She's the one who took 'em down, after all."

Sensing an opportunity to change the subject, Velvet Remedy pointed a hoof at Crane. "This one's been claiming he's the best telekinetic in the wasteland," she said indignantly. "Obviously, he hasn't met you."

Crane and I exchanged looks. He chuckled. I gave him a respectful little bow, which he returned.

"Or I was wrong, as usual," Velvet sighed, watching us.

"Crane was my teacher," I explained. "Taught me how to... unlock my... telekinetic potential?" Goddesses, that sounded lame. I blamed it on reading too many *Sword Mares* comics. Too much being one.

Xenith whispered (where did she come from?) into my ear, "You must say: and now the student has become the master."

I blinked, still processing Xenith's stealth appearance. "What? Why?"

"It is expected," she whispered earnestly.

I shook my mane. "By who?" The zebra didn't seem to have an answer.

Crane walked on, floating the several dozen suits of scavenged armor towards *Absolutely Everything*. Xenith stepped back, seeming to fade into the weather. Silver Bell was right -- the zebra was kinda creepy.

Velvet Remedy and I were alone in the rain.

"Velvet..."

“Littlepip...”

“No, you go first...”

“Go ahead...”

We stopped trying to talk. The silence stretched awkwardly, scored by the metallic hiss of rain against railway cars.

“Littlepip, the things I said...” Velvet began again. “They were so horrible.”

I took a deep breath. Her words still felt fresh, the pain cut deep. But, “You weren’t wrong,” I told her. “And you tried to protect me. You were hurting so much and you still warned me away, tried to get me to go,” I said, realizing it was true. “It’s my fault. I wouldn’t leave. A mare who keeps poking a hornet’s nest deserves to get stung.”

I wondered briefly if hornets still existed in Equestria. I had only seen them in books.

Velvet Remedy shook her head, her striped mane flapping wetly. “No. They were cruel. And... hypocritical.” She shrugged off her medical boxes. The yellow boxes with their pink butterflies sank into the brown water. “I’m not worthy to follow Fluttershy. Or to be your friend.”

I saw she was trembling. Fatigue and cold were certainly part of it. She must have galloped all the way from Fetlock. It was not a short journey. I put a hoof under her chin, looking into her eyes. It wasn’t just the rain. She was crying.

“But I want to,” she continued. “I let the wasteland poison me. I know that. And I was right, most ponies don’t deserve to be helped. But that’s not the reason to do it.”

I understood. I knew what it was like to have your faith in the goodness of ponies shaken. I felt it back in the Pitt -- all those slaves I was trying to save cheering for my death. But unlike Velvet, that had never been the primary foundation of my urge to help.

“I know it’s up to me. I want to be stronger than the wasteland. Not let it poison me anymore...” She faltered. “But I’m not sure how.”

Homage was right: *the Equestrian Wasteland is hard on heroes. No... it's brutal to them. It beats them down. It tears them apart. Eventually, every hero falls. Inevitably, every hero fails. The true mark of a hero is not that they never fail, never fall down... No, you know a true hero by what they do after they fall. By the way they pick themselves back up again, shake themselves off, and throw themselves back into that good fight.*

"Velvet, Fluttershy would be proud of you," I started. I was unsure if I was saying the right thing, but it came from my heart -- that had to count for something, right? "She would want you by her side. It doesn't matter if you've stumbled. We've all done things we regret. You know I have. No pony is perfect. No pony is strong all the time.

"Do you think Applejack never lied? That Rarity was never greedy? Or that Pinkie Pie was never sad? Even Fluttershy had her Gardens of Canterlot." I gave her a tender and hopefully uplifting smile. "What matters is that you don't let your failures stop you."

Velvet Remedy stared at me a long time, tears streaming down her eyes. There seemed to be a battle raging inside her.

"Thank you. I don't deserve friends like you," she said finally. Pulling her head away, she stared at the muddy water concealing her hooves. After a pregnant pause, she let out a trembling whinny. "It's my fault SteelHooves is dead."

"What?"

She looked up. "I'm sorry. I... when you didn't come back, SteelHooves wanted to move. But I knew that clearing was where you would expect us to be. The others thought you were dead, but I refused to believe it." Her voice was slowly rising, touching on hysteria. "I insisted that we stay close, believing that if you did survive the balefire bomb, you were fighting to get to us. And we had to be there for you when you finally made it."

Trembling, she wailed, "I'm the reason it was so easy for the Hellhounds to find us. I made us keep camping so close to the same spot every day!"

Velvet Remedy broke down, sobbing. I wrapped my hooves around her, holding her tight, understanding her pain. Forgiving it and thanking her for what she had done because of why she had done it.

"Please tell me you'll come with us again," I whispered finally. "We love you. We need you. Being without you is like walking with an open wound." I hugged her tightly. "We miss you so much."

"I..." Velvet began. She pushed back, breaking out of the hug, and stood staring at me, only falling raindrops between us. "Littlepip..."

Shwaaaaaawham!

A rust and orange streak plowed into Velvet Remedy, knocking her out of sight as she was driven into the mud with Calamity on top of her.

"Velvet!" Calamity cheered, nuzzling the exceptionally muddy mare.

"Good to see you too," she said weakly. Calamity stepped back, looking at his mud-covered love.

"Oops," he said, blushing. "Let me help ya." Before Velvet or I could say anything, Calamity had flown across the street, grabbing a rain barrel from in front of Railright's station.

SPLASH! Calamity dumped the barrel over Velvet Remedy.

Velvet sighed. "Well, at least I was already wet." And she wasn't muddy anymore.

"It's good to have you back!" Calamity told her, never questioning that she was.

Velvet Remedy splashed a hoof timidly. "If... you'll have me."

"Who's being a silly pony," Calamity chided.

Velvet looked up at him. "I want to be back. I want to help." Her voice was shy of pleading.

Calamity lowered his muzzle into the muddy water and pulled out her medical boxes, putting them back over her. I watched as she thanked him and he teasingly threatened to kiss her with his muddy muzzle.

“It is like things are finally going right again, is it not?” Xenith asked, having ninjaed up beside me.

I nodded. The rain was beginning to stop.

Suddenly, looking at Velvet Remedy and Calamity, I knew. The very last of the pieces fell into place. Kindness and Loyalty.

Was there ever any doubt?



The heavy black thunderclouds had shifted to a lighter grey but were still heavy with rain as the *Sky Bandit* approached the shattered ruins of Manehattan.

Calamity was pulling the passenger wagon. Our two griffin escorts flanked us.

“Ever consider mounting a magical energy turret on the top o’ that thing?” Reggie called up to Calamity, eyeing the *Sky Bandit’s* rack where SteelHooves had stood in past battles.

Calamity wasn’t quick to answer. Like me, I think he felt that mounting a weapon would be too much like we were replacing SteelHooves. It was a silly and impractical response, the sort that Calamity had always dismissed in the past, being the first to scavenge Stables and the corpses of Steel Rangers. But this was different. This was SteelHooves.

“Ayep,” he finally said. “Ah think SteelHooves would want it that way. Want us t’ protect ourselves.” He kept flying straight. “Jus’ ain’t had the time.”

Kage flew close on the other side, talking to Velvet Remedy. “So, you follow the pony who all the medical supply boxes are made to look like?”

“Yes,” Velvet Remedy stated, beginning to get her hooves back under her. “Her name is Fluttershy, and she was the best pony.”

Kage considered that. "But... you said she was the one who created the megaspells?" Velvet Remedy had been surprisingly forthcoming with that bit of information. A reaction, I suspected, to our attempts to keep it a secret. "Which caused the apocalypse," Kage added. "So... you're a follower of the apocalypse?"

Velvet Remedy needed only a heartbeat to answer. "If that is the name ponies want to use for anyone who aspires to the kindness of Fluttershy, then I will own that title. Without reservation."

Suddenly, Calamity dipped low, flying just above the rubble of the city streets. Our griffin shadows took a moment to change direction, swooping in towards us as Calamity brought the Sky Bandit to a rapid halt, pulling us into the cover of a hollowed-out Radio Prince store.

"What's wrong?" I asked, leaping out of the passenger wagon as Calamity kicked the quick release on his harness.

"Did you not see it?" Xenith asked, her exotic voice seeming incredulous.

I didn't have to wait long to know what she meant. About ten minutes later, as we crouched in the cover of a broken sales bench, the pale grey light from the clouds was blotted out by the massive form of a black, anvil-shaped Enclave mobile fortress. Four great thunderclouds spanned out from it, two on each side. The ruined Manehattan street was rendered in stark black and white as massive bolts of lightning arced between them. Attached to each storm cloud was a Raptor. On each Raptor, one of the clouds holding it aloft had merged into one of the flying fortress's broiling thunderclouds. The undercarriage of the massive ship bristled with weapon turrets. I could make out several large doors capable of dropping war chariots or bombers or troops by the scores.

"What. The. *Hell*...!?" Couldn't we, just once, get a break?

We got a sonic rad-boom, the little pony in my head reminded me. What more do you want?

Even Pyrelight let out a low whistle.

"That's the *Glorious Dawn*," Calamity said in soft awe as the huge ship passed over the Manehattan Ruins.

Noticing that we were all staring at him, Calamity coughed. "Thunderhead-class mobile siege platform," he explained.

"You said the Enclave only had four of those," I pointed out, hoping I didn't sound accusatory.

"Ayep. An' two o' 'em are permanently assigned. One's at Neighvarro an' the other is the home o' the High Council."

I did the math. Both Calamity and Pride had referred to an Enclave "regiment" as four Raptors and accompanying troops -- the amount that could be carried and deployed by a Thunderhead. A full regiment had descended on Maripony just before the bomb went off, bringing a member of the High Council with them. Probably the regiment attached to the High Council's own personal Thunderhead. Hundreds of ponies, Commander Winter had said.

I felt a little sick.

"If they're committin' Thunderheads t' Operation: Cauterize, that means they're gettin' ready for their big offensive," Calamity warned. "They've lost too much, too quickly. They need big victories fast or their whole invasion falls apart, an' a whole lot o' Enclave leaders will be losin' their positions in the next election. They can't play around with the little targets anymore."

"Explains why they haven't amassed another assault on New Appleloosa," Kage reckoned. "Or Shattered Hoof."

"Where do you think they are headed?" Xenith asked as the shadow finally passed, allowing daylight (such as it was) back into the streets.

"By the vector, I'd say they're aimin' fer Fillydelphia," Reggie suggested. "Assumin' they don't plan t' park that thing over Tenpony Tower."

Fuck. Dammit, dammit, dammit!

“Calamity,” I blurted anxiously, “Remember, I told you that we can make this all mean something. Make all the loss count; make this the start of something better?”

Calamity stared at me with an expression that told me he was still holding me to that promise. The others just stared.

“Well, I’ve got a plan. I know how to do it...” I began.

The griffins looked anxious and doubtful, Xenith looked reserved and Velvet Remedy’s face bore an expression of concern. But Calamity’s eyes lit up with hope, a smile on his face. Then the smile faltered as he tentatively asked, “What ‘bout muh plan?”

“Your plan comes first,” I reassured him. My friend looked immediately relieved. “But this new offensive throws a major wrench in mine. I need to know what the Enclave’s timetable is.”

Calamity nodded. He clopped his hoof against his forehead, thinking. “Okay, we haven’t seen the Thunderheads before, so until now they must have been using someplace groundside as a communications center. Someplace to correlate data from all the scattered forces and relay commands.”

I clopped my forehooves together. “Brilliant. We’ll hit the communications center and get ahold of their timeline.”

“Jus’ what Ah was thinkin’.” Calamity pondered the matter a moment longer. “Have t’ be someplace pretty high up. Ah reckon that’s what they were usin’ Tenpony Tower fer b’fore they got kicked out. They’d have a fallback position...”

I remembered how far Blackwing’s little broadcaster had been able to reach. The Talons had been trapped in the best possible place for broadcasting. “Horseshoe Tower.” I was sure of it.



“You. Have a plan.” Velvet Remedy leaned out the front window of the *Sky Bandit*, talking to Calamity. “You.”

Calamity nickered as he guided the Sky Bandit in for a landing on the rooftop of Tenpony Tower. I let out a heavy sigh as his hooves touched down. "I keep coming back," I muttered to myself. "But Homage is never here."

"Now don'tcha say it like that!" Calamity shot back at Velvet as he checked his landing and detached himself from the passenger wagon. "Ya make it sound like doom on a stick."

"And your plan is why we're here?" Velvet inquired.

"Ayep. Need yer friend Life Bloom's help," Calamity admitted freely. I could see Velvet Remedy cringe as she jumped to the obvious and sadly correct conclusion.

"You're doing something with your memories, aren't you?"

Calamity didn't even look sheepish as he nodded. Hell, he looked proud of the idea. "Ayep."

"You're... not going to forget me, are you?"

That struck him. Calamity stumbled a bit. "Aw hell no!" he insisted. "Li'lpip says that Life Bloom c'n take memories without, y'know, takin' them away." He looked to me worriedly. "Th-that's right, ain't it, Li'lpip?"

"Yes. Life Bloom can record memories as well as remove them."

Velvet Remedy looked slightly relieved, but not much. "And collecting your memories is going to help us defeat the fastest, deadliest hunters the Enclave has... how?"

Here it comes. The first horseshoe. "No, no, no," Calamity puffed up, flapping his wings. "We ain't gonna *defeat* the Wonderbolts, Velvet. We're going to *save* them!"



The mottled brown gentlestallion who met us was not either of the unicorns I had been hoping to see, but he was familiar. He had been

the one to inform me of the legal details surrounding Monterey Jack's execution. And he was a member of the Twilight Society.

"...A sonic rainboom!" he was saying as he floated his glasses in front of him, polishing them with a pocket cloth. "Or, more precisely, a toxic rainboom. I believe that is what Resistance Radio is calling it, is it not?"

"Resistance Radio?"

"Oh." He raised an eyebrow as he slipped his glasses back onto his muzzle. "Yes. That is what the local gentry have taken to calling DJ Pon3's little broadcast interruptions."

Resistance Radio. I liked it. Go Homage!

"So, the Twilight Society will help us?" I asked, not for the first time.

"Indeed," the gentlestallion lawyer asserted. "You and your motley band have more than proven both your intentions and your capacity for success. We would be honored to lend our hooves to the fight." Wistfully, he added, "A sonic rainboom. In my lifetime..."

Calamity and I exchanged looks.

"Well, fer now, what we need is Life Bloom. His expertise in memory magic, t' be precise-like."

The mottled brown unicorn nodded, not even looking at Calamity. "Absolutely. I will send for him right away. In the meantime, your usual suite is ready."

"And," I added, "There's something else I needed to discuss with you at your earliest convenience. A... legal matter."

He turned, looking at me over the rim of his spectacles. "Indeed?"

His earliest convenience turned out to be in less than an hour. I was a bit surprised at the Twilight Society's sudden eagerness to lend their aid. I was probably being paranoid, but when things started working out in our favor, it tended to make me nervous.

Meanwhile, we gathered in the quarters provided and waited for Life Bloom.

“Swanky,” Reggie whistled, looking over the fine sheets and marble floor tiles. She poked a talon at one of the posh pillows

Kage moved to check out the window, his eyes darting around like he was looking out for snipers. “No kiddin’. If we had access t’ a place like this, I’d find it real hard t’ go back out into the wasteland an’ start mixin’ it up.” He drew the curtains closed and nodded to his sister who had taken up a strategic spot near the door.

“Uh... Ah don’t think we’re gonna get attacked here,” Calamity suggested. Our griffin guards looked at each other as if Calamity was adorably naive.

“Sparkling water?” Velvet Remedy offered to them, pulling from the complimentary stores in the bathroom. I winced, beginning to feel a little self-conscious.

Velvet floated a chalice to each of them, then sipped from one of her own. “Well, hardly sparkling,” she said, looking at it critically. “But it will do.” This was Tenpony Tower. When Velvet was here, she wanted to be pampered. “If Calamity’s going to be a while having his brain molested, would you like to join me for a trip to the spa, Littlepip?”

“Yeah, you ponies have it hard,” Kage mocked, rolling his eyes.

I pondered that as I stripped out of my armor, heading for the bath. After all the bad, a trip to the spa would be heaven. But right now, I just wanted to feel clean again. I’d forgotten what it felt like. As I dropped my reinforced barding to the floor, Velvet Remedy waved her horn at it, cleaning off the blood and grime. “Maybe, if we have time. But I wanted to make use of that time by sneaking into Horseshoe Tower.”

I had been right about the Enclave’s choice. We had spotted the Enclave antenna array on the roof. The Raptor circling overhead was kinda obvious too.

I looked over my companions, new and familiar. “A stealth mission. In and out.”

"Yeah, cuz yer stealth missions 'ave a history o' workin' out like that," Calamity snarked.

Ignoring him, I continued. "I'll take Xenith and one of the griffins to fly us there. And," I admitted, "to use cloud systems."

"I'll go," Kage offered. "All this fancy makes my feathers itch."

Velvet trotted up to Calamity. "So, this plan..."

Calamity smiled, gazing into her eyes.

"You want to turn the Wonderbolts? Help them see they're on the wrong side? Give them a chance to become heroes?"

"Ayep," he said, his muzzle inches from hers.

"You know, part of me says that's... awesome." She gave him a simpering look, leaning so close they had to be feeling each other's breathing.

"You have never been sexier..."

"That's it!" I jumped to my hooves, floating my armor to me. "Time to go do the thing in the place!"

I was out the door, my armor floating behind me, Kage and Xenith trailing my gallop, before they started kissing.



I stepped up to the ragged edge where sometime in the last two hundred years the ceiling two floors above had given way, crashing down into the floor beneath, which collapsed, smashing through the floor beneath it. Rings of half-rooms honeycombed the internal abscess. Motes of dust floated lazily in the gaping, empty space.

It was just as I remembered it. As I looked down into the pit of rubble, the little pony in my head reminded me that somewhere down there was Pinkie Pie's last party, lost forever in an orb.

Getting this far had been... um, damn. Why was my mind searching for a metaphor for “easy” that involved muffins? Ditzzy Doo was rubbing off on me. (No, not in an icky, flesh-rotting way.)

After a moment’s internal debate, I went with “easy”. Xenith had her zebra stealth cloak, and I’d been using my MG StealthBuck II. Kage was admittedly not as stealthy, but the two of us had been scouting ahead. When things were clear, Xenith would toss back the hood of her cloak and let him know it was safe to move forward. Despite being an adolescent, Kage never appeared bored. He had the sort of level head to not be looking for a fight.

Besides his razor-sharp claws, the griffin was armed with hellhound-claw knives and wing blades. The first griffin I had seen, the one who helped attack the train, had been armed with those. I’d seen them slice the head off a pony. But I worried that they would be ineffective against pegasi in magically-powered armor.

Multi-colored light sprayed across the void, striking parts of the broken ceiling as well as a desk that had been hanging precariously over the drop. The desk melted into goo as it dripped down into the rubble below.

Okay, that was new.

Diving for cover, I kicked up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. We were in almost the same spot that three alicorns had stood the last time I was here. And across from us, almost in the same place I had been, an Enclave trooper was firing across at us with a multi-gem heavy infantry battle saddle.

I pulled out Little Macintosh, locking onto the attacking pony with S.A.T.S., but had to dive away as the spray of his weapon melted my cover.

Two more pegasi launched themselves across the gap from another floor. The trooper was laying suppressive fire while they flanked us.

The first Enclave guard came up behind us through an office to our right. Kage moved to block his path, sweeping at the armored pony

with his wingblades. The attack proved my fears both valid and unnecessary. The wingblades had sparked harmlessly off the pegasus' armor just before Kage sent his hellhound-claw knives plunging into the pony's throat.

Even as the first guard fell, several beams of light struck Kage in the back. His Talon armor took the brunt of it, but one shot speared his right wing. The young griffin collapsed with a grunt, his eyes closed tight against tears.

The second guard had landed on the floor above us. I heard the clank-clank-clank as she dropped grenades down a fissure in our ceiling.

I'd had plenty of experience dealing with grenades. Back up they went.

Maybe not my brightest idea, I realized as the explosion not only killed the pegasus above us, but sent the ceiling crashing down on our heads. My magic imploded as the room above fell on me. Something heavy and searingly hot shoved me to the floor. Pain sprouted from my hindlegs.

I was pinned underneath jagged floorboards and the melted remains of a filing cabinet.

Kage had taken cover in the doorway. I had lost track of Xenith. Fortunately, I was still invisible as the trooper across from us started filling our room with magical energy. The debris was ablative cover at best.

I whipped my head around, desperately looking for where Little Macintosh had fallen.

The spray of rainbow light stopped as the trooper reloaded. My revolver dropped to the floor next to me, a gift from an invisible zebra. I magically snatched it up and locked my targeting spell onto the pegasus again.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!



“Section Twelve clear!” the pegasus barked through my earbloom. **“Cauterizing in ten minutes.”**

With the Thunderheads in play, this place had become redundant. The Enclave had already been clearing out when we arrived. The Raptor above hadn't been here for protection.

We had seven minutes before the Raptor opened fire, eradicating Horseshoe Tower.

“Section Thirteen clear!” another voice replied.

My StealthBuck was drained. But we were almost at the end.

The last room before the roof was a two-level executive bar and lounge. That was where they had their equipment set up. The good news was that our infiltration sped up their evacuation. They were no longer trying to pull out all their equipment, just their personnel. They would let the Raptor's massive guns take care of the rest.

“Section Fourteen clear!” the first voice responded. **“Cauterizing in nine minutes.”**

The bad news was that the room would be a killing zone. All the soldiers left in the building were either on the roof or inside that lounge.

I made sure Little Macintosh was loaded with armor-piercing bullets. Calamity had bought up all the ammo for Little Macintosh that Ditzzy Doo had, but already I was almost out of armor piercing rounds again. Part of me hated the Enclave for using magical energy weapons; their ammo crates never had anything I could use.

I nodded to my two companions. “Here. We. Go!”

I telekinetically threw the doors open, my targeting spell locking on to each soldier as I saw them. An Enclave maneframe dominated the room. Cables snaked off of it, crawling into the backsides of cloud-interface terminals that sat glowing on surrounding cocktail tables. The room was cold. A row of windows lined the right wall opposite the bar on the left. A couple were still intact, but most had been boarded up.

Poorly. Enclave infantry were standing guard, both on this floor and along the balcony above. Grey-clad officers and technician ponies in yellow dresses darted about, rarely landing. Most were headed for the stairs.

Two Enclave soldiers stood ready just inside the door. They were the first to react. I was faster.

BLAM! BLAM! The first went down. **BLAM! BLAM!** The third shot killed the other door guard, the fourth bullet burying itself into a corpse.

Two shots to the head of each opponent. Two, in case one missed or just failed to kill. Two shots and move on to the next. Leave anypony still standing for Kage and Xenith.

Whooooosh!

One of the Enclave infantry on the balcony fired a missile at us. I dove for cover behind the bar. Kage flopped over the bar next to me, half-jumping, half propelled by the explosion.

Xenith, goopy-hooved, charged across the ceiling. The explosion had blown her hood back, and she was bleeding from small shrapnel wounds. Several Enclave soldiers opened fire, blasting apart the ceiling with a prismatic lightshow. Ancient crystal chandeliers came crashing to the floor with an almost melodic tinkling. Xenith managed to dodge them all, leaping from the ceiling to the balcony railing. Her forehooves planted on the railing as she spun, driving bucking hooves into the throat of the infantry pony as he reloaded and tried to aim. I could hear his armor crush into his windpipe. The infantry pegasus pulled the trigger as he collapsed, the missile firing wild, striking the faded painting of a mare in a sultry position which hung above the far side of the lounge. The explosion blew out what was left of the windows.

A damp, early-evening wind blew in from outside, clearing the smoke.

BLAM! BLAM! Reload. My targeting spell dropped only for me to bring it back up immediately, squeezing just a little more out of it.

Another pony with a multi-gem weapon sent a rainbow of light spraying over the bar and tearing into the liquor bottles racked behind us. Most of the bottles were empty, but the racks behind us hissed and exploded as the magical light passed through several still-full ones, boiling the liquid inside. I let out a scream as I was bathed in alcoholic steam. Kage yelled, leaping the bar and trying to charge the attacker before he could reload, his injured wing keeping him from flying.

I tried to give him cover, targeting another infantry pegasus who was aiming for Kage with the twin magical-energy rifles of his armor. **BLAM! BLAM!** One of those shots missed. The other struck home, but failed to penetrate enough to kill the enemy.

The Enclave soldier Kage was charging was just a little too fast; she had finished reloading, and opened fire point blank into the griffin's chest. It didn't save her. Kage's blades slashed deeply through her chest, cutting her heart, even as his Talon armor dissolved. The griffin fell back, smoke rising from a gaping wound in his breast. I stared in horror as the light went out of his eyes.

No! Dammit, no!

With a loud crack, a black-armored body toppled over the balcony, bucked through the railing by Xenith. I looked up for her, but she was invisible again.

“Cauterizing in eight minutes.”

The pegasus I had wounded had taken refuge behind the maneframe. I could see his shadow as he downed a healing potion. At the same time, another soldier flew across the room, landing behind one of the columns that supported the balcony along the near wall. A third knocked over a table and hid behind it, shoving it forward through the room, trying to get closer to me. She yelped as the table caught on one of the cables and flipped, exposing her.

BLAM! BLAM! The battle raged on.



The last pegasus, a grey stallion with a flowing black mane and tail, held up a hoof in surrender. He was neither a technician nor a soldier; he wore a light grey officer's uniform that went smartly with his coat. The only officer to stay behind, making sure other officers and the technician ponies got out safely while the Enclave's troops tried to kill us.

Did kill one of us, I thought heavily. I'd led Gawd's son to his death. I didn't know how I was going to break the news to his sister. I'd never be able to face Gawdyna again. But right now I didn't blame myself. I blamed the Enclave.

"Give me one reason not to shoot you," I growled. "Make it good, because I *really* want to."

"Way Ah see it," the pegasus said, smiling annoyingly, "Y'all c'n kill me, or y'all c'n win."

"Evac complete. Moving off," The voice in my earbloom claimed. **"Cauterizing in five minutes."**

"What do you mean?" I asked, leveling Little Macintosh at the Enclave officer's face. I had my targeting spell locked on for good measure.

"Sir, we've still got one officer inside," another pegasus said over the military channel.

"Cauterizing in five minutes!" was the cold response.

"Well, Ah reckon y'all didn't come all this way jus' cuz ya like bein' shot at," the officer reasoned. "I'm guessin' what ya came fer is in that maneframe. But now, ya only got 'bout four minutes left t' get yer tails outta this building, an' yer down the only person ya had who coulda accessed it."

Fuck! Celestias fiery hemorrhoids of solar-flarin' death! Kage died for *nothing!*

"So Ah'll make ya a deal," the officer said. "Y'all let me go, an' I'll download what ya need inta that Pip-what-the-fuck ya got there."

“And why would you betray the Enclave?” Xenith asked. “Why would you help us?”

“Well, two reasons,” the pegasus said, still smiling but with an earnest tone in his voice. “One, cuz y’folk are Calamity’s friends. Ah love muh li’l brother, an’ Ah ain’t happy t’ see his name onna kill list. Two, cuz Ah reckon without any fliers with ya, chances are, three minutes won’t be ‘nuff fer ya t’ get out anyway.”

I would have stopped to think about that, to process what he said, but the voice in my earbloom announced, **“Cauterizing in four minutes!”**

“Okay!” I agreed, motioning for the pegasus to get to work. I chose to believe him. Not because of what he said about Calamity, but because he hadn’t lied about how much time we had.

“You’re Windsheer, right?” I asked as the stallion moved to the nearest terminal. Calamity had said his oldest brother was a master of communications technologies. “You were the chief communications officer here?” I guessed.

“Ayep t’ both,” he said and he worked. I caught the password: Restricted.

“Now what ‘xactly d’y’all want? Cuz Ah could give ya everythin’, but that would take longer than ya got.”

“I need to know what the Enclave is doing next, and when,” I answered, the gears in my head spinning. “What’s the chance that two of Calamity’s brother’s would be down here?” I pondered as he started the download.

“Cauterizing in three minutes!” We were cutting it insanely close!

“Ah’d say one-hundred percent,” Windsheer said with a smile, backing away from the terminal. “They put Autumn Leaf in charge o’ Operation: Cauterize, an’ he made sure both his other brothers were part o’ the show.” The grey pegasus chuckled. “Hell, that was the only way Pride was ever gonna see anything outside Neighverro.”

I groaned, hanging my head in pain. One of Calamity's brothers was commanding this entire damn massacre.

"Ah'll be goin' now," Windsheer said. "But ya pass muh love on t' Calamity, won'tcha?"

"Your love?" Xenith asked. "Did you not all treat him horribly?"

Windsheer shrugged. "We were kids."

Xenith stomped. "Not an excuse."

"Look, Pride did it 'cause he was a bastard. An' worse, an incompetent bastard. Unlike Calamity, he was nothin' but a disappointment t' dad. He did it 'cuz Autumn Leaf did it an' he hoped copyin' Autumn Leaf would get him some respect from us." Windsheer added, "It didn't."

The voice in my earbloom spoke again. **"Cauterizing in two minutes!"**

"As fer Autumn Leaf an' muhself? We remembered what dad was like b'fore mom died," he said only half-apologetically. "He was better before that, not always the drill sergeant. We'd lost our mom, we'd lost the best part o' our dad... we were hurtin'. An' Calamity was there."

Windsheer shrugged again. Then flew off towards one of the open windows.

The download completed.

I turned to Xenith, wrapping her first with my magic, then myself. I galloped for the window.

"Cauterizing in one minute!" my earbloom informed me as I leapt out the shattered window and into the cold open air.

The Raptor had backed off far enough that I doubted they could see us. The barrels of their huge magical energy cannons were glowing like miniature suns as they charged up to fire.

The sky split, the air tearing apart as multiple beams of orange-white plasma tore into Horseshoe Tower. Every remaining window exploded outward, shards of glass followed by gouts of flame.

I turned away from the sight, focusing completely on moving us away from doomed skyscraper. Sweat was already pouring down my forehead. I was going to see just how far I could fly after all.



When we arrived back at Tenpony Tower, it was by way of the Celestia Line, and Xenith was carrying me on her back. I was feeling rather proud of myself. I'd gotten us a little over a mile before strain and exhaustion forced me to put us down in one of the Four Stars stations.

Proud and oh so very, very tired. I was ready to take Velvet Remedy up on that trip to the spa now. Only it was very late, the spa would be closed, and I had to face Regina Grimfeathers.

I poured over the data Windsheer had given us. The stallion had been true to his word. We got what I had asked for and no more.

The Enclave was focusing now on what it considered the two biggest threats. First and foremost was Red Eye. They had tracked him to the Cathedral. They had a regiment patrolling the borders of the Everfree Forest, trying to make sure he didn't escape. In two days time, the *Overcast* -- Colonel Autumn Leaf's command Thunderhead -- was going to move in with a second full regiment and wipe the Cathedral off the face of Equestria.

The Glorious Dawn was being dispatched to a rendezvous with the bulk of the Enclave's forces, amassing for an attack on Fillydelphia. And by attack, they meant cleansing. Slavers, slaves, Rangers, scavengers... they were going to kill them all, and reduce the factories that Red Eye had rebuilt to rubble for good measure.

And they could. I'd just seen them turn Horseshoe Tower into a mound of rubble and slag.

I couldn't let that happen.

My blood ran cold as I saw the Enclave's second target. Homage. Somehow, my marefriend had rated as the second biggest threat to the

Enclave. Attached to that assessment was a video file. I was trembling as I pulled it open, but I don't know if it was from fear or rage.

The video was from the security camera of a Raptor. I watched as *Homage* brought down the Shattered Hoof Ridge Tower. The explosion from the star blaster had disintegrated everything it touched; it had eaten the tower's base.

They didn't know she could only do that once. They only knew that she did it. And that made her even more terrifying than *Ditzy Doo*. Almost as much as *Red Eye* and all his armies.

I realized that, strangely, I wasn't frightened or mad anymore. I was proud. Proud of my wonderful, dangerous *Homage*.

And they had no idea what to do about it. Sending more forces after her risked, in their minds, further retaliation. And that could mean the destruction of another tower. Maybe more. So instead, they were sitting on their hooves.

Well, not exactly. They had given lethal sanction to the one group they thought could actually hunt down and kill *Homage* without her being able to strike back. The *Wonderbolts*.

Calamity had been right; the *Wonderbolts* had been drawn into meetings. But those were due to end in about six hours. After that, our hunters had been given thirty-two hours to complete their current assignment. Then they were ordered to focus their efforts on murdering my marefriend.

Thirty-two hours.

I prayed they would do what I so desperately wanted to: sleep. After over twenty hours of meetings, what pony wouldn't want to catch some sleep, making sure they were fresh and revived before they went hunting other ponies down and killing them?

Xenith nudged open the door to our suite and deposited me on the floor with an undignified thump. I yelped as I landed on my scalded back.

Calamity trotted over, looking down at me. "How'd it go?" I was surprised that he was still in the room. Or was it back in the room?

Life Bloom walked up next to him as Velvet gave the gasp we were all expecting and dashed to tend to our wounds, starting with the bloody zebra.

"Windsheer sends his love," I answered.

I winced as a female voice called out from the corner. "Where's Kage?"



Regina Grimfeathers stared down at her twin brother's knives. Then carefully slid them into her belt. "Thank you for bringing these back."

"Regina, I'm so sorry."

"There is no body," Xenith informed her. "The Enclave..."

"Shut it about the bloody Enclave!" the griffin roared.

The room was shocked quiet.

Calamity finally broke the silence. "What now?"

Regina Grimfeathers scowled at him. "What do you mean, 'what now'?" she asked gruffly. "The job ain't over yet, is it?"

"You're... staying...?" Velvet gaped.

"Grimfeathers don't turn tail an' run when it gets nasty," she spat.

The young griffin woman laid down. Her eyes were moist, but she had yet to shed a tear. Almost under her breath, she added, "An' I sure as hell ain't goin' back t' tell Gawd that I quit the job that killed Kage."

Velvet floated a healing potion to me as she magically stripped off my armor and began inspecting me for wounds. It was as if she had never left.

"So," Reggie said finally, "What now?"

Life Bloom spoke up, "Now, I gather together what I need for a trip."

“Say what now?”

The unicorn with the red and scarlet mane looked at us. “Storing a copy of so many of Calamity’s memories was actually the easy part. But the other request...” He turned to Calamity. “I’m sorry, but the Twilight Society simply doesn’t have five recollectors to give you.”

I had been afraid of that.

Calamity’s plan was to divide up the Wonderbolts, incapacitate them through Xenith’s paralyzing hoof and Velvet’s anesthetic magic, and slap recollectors on them, feeding them his memories. Memories of how and why he left the Enclave. Memories of the good ponies down here. Of his time with me, and the good things we had done.

And to trust in the better nature of ponies.

The problem was, it takes as long to experience the memories in a black opal as it took for the person to live them. And Calamity wanted to feed several days’ worth of memories into the Wonderbolts. Keeping them safe and hydrated was a big enough concern, but if we didn’t have enough recollectors to trap them all at the same time...

“Fortunately, I have a better way,” Life Bloom claimed. “There’s a memory spell, one created by Twilight Sparkle herself, which will allow me to cram all those memories into their heads in minutes. It won’t be pleasant...” The white unicorn shook his head. “But it will work.”

“Uh... no offense, but ‘ave ya ever been outside o’ Tenpony Tower b’fore?” Calamity asked. “It’s rough out there.”

Life Bloom tossed his mane. “Yes. I’m a little familiar with the outdoors.”

This was a much bigger commitment for the Twilight Society than just some recollectors. “Are you sure? The last person who went on a mission with me didn’t come back.”

Regina shot a dark glower at nopony in particular.

“You called on us to help. And you were right.” Life Bloom gazed at me. “This is us helping.”

Reggie stood up. "Okay, then. What are we waitin' fer?"

"Well," Velvet Remedy said softly. "Some of us need to sleep." She did her best not to glance my way. I hadn't moved from where Xenith had dropped me.

"Not long though," I insisted, still not moving. Floor was good. Just give me a pillow. "We need to be moving before the Wonderbolts are."

Reggie looked at the ponies (and zebra) around her. Pyrelight gave a tired little hoot, even though she had spent most of the trip napping against Velvet Remedy's flank.

"Fine," she grouched.

My eyelids were getting heavy. But I forced them to stay open. There was one more horseshoe hanging above us, waiting to drop.

"So," Life Bloom asked, "Where are we headed?"

"We will need a place where the Wonderbolts won't be able t' totally own us with their aerial superiority," Reggie pointed out.

Velvet flicked back her styled mane. She'd obviously been to the spa while I was out. She looked perfect. "Well, Manehattan had to have more Stables than just number Twenty-Nine. Do you know of any that are vacant and just laying around?"

"No Stables," Calamity interjected. "Those things are deathtraps, in case y'all ain't noticed. An' even if the Stable itself don't try t' kill us, all the Wonderbolt would 'ave t' do is close the door an' collapse the tunnel. Or do what Li'lpip did with Stable Twenty-Four an' divert a river into it."

Velvet Remedy cringed, looking at me in surprise.

"They don't even need a river," Reggie added. "These are pegasi. They're really good at making it rain." She shook her head, looking at my pegasus friend. "Best rule out underground entirely."

And here it drops, I thought.

“So, we need someplace that the Wonderbolts can’t use their aerial skills against us,” Life Bloom said slowly, “And where we can get them split up. But that’s outside?”

“Ayep,” Calamity said with conviction. “An’ Ah got the perfect place...”

Wheee. Look at it fall.

“...Everfree Forest.”



The first golden rays of dawn were pouring across the horizon as the *Sky Bandit* leveled out, flying towards Hope.

“Remind me why you let Calamity make the plans?” Xenith said. She had taken off her zebra stealth cloak and given it to Life Bloom. The buck would definitely have more need of it. And we couldn’t risk the Wonderbolts taking out the one pony who could cast the memory spell. Or risk the forest taking him out. Or the fire. Or any of Red Eye’s troops who were controlling the fires. Or the Enclave patrols. The consensus was that we were indeed all going to die. But at least it would be an exciting death.

“Well, I’m proud of him,” Velvet proclaimed.

“If we are going into the Everfree Forest,” Xenith said, pulling an ancient and tattered book from her saddle bags, “then there is something I must tell you.”

I looked at the book. The cover was very old leather, warped and cracked. On the front was a large zebra glyph and several smaller ones beneath. The last time I had seen glyphs like that, I was trying to read the Black Book.

“Where did you get this?” I asked, both cautious and curious.

“From my... from Xephyr,” our zebra friend said. “Once, this belonged to my grandparents. They rescued it from the Hut of Zecora deep in the Everfree Forest.”

Xenith opened the book, pointing at strange glyphs. "You wonder what has caused the Everfree Forest to grow so strange and dangerous, do you not?"

I nodded, remembering Calamity's assertion. The Everfree Forest had never been hit. There was no radiation. No taint. That's why Red Eye sought to turn it into farmland.

"Through this book, I have come to learn the reason," Xenith said cryptically. "And it is not a new one, but a very old one."

"And you're just telling us this now?"

"I received this book while you were playing in the Canterlot Ruins. And it took me some time to read it." Time, I suspected, that babysitting Silver Bell had given her. "And... it was not easy to read. There were things I did not wish to understand."

We all listened intently. Even Calamity's ears were swiveled so he could catch the conversation as best he could.

Something flashed in the distance ahead. On the horizon was the Everfree Forest -- still green, still pouring smoke.

"I... believe we may have been wrong about Princess Luna and Nightmare Moon," Xenith admitted, looking down at the book. The zebra was unwilling to meet the gaze of any of the ponies around her. "They were not one and the same."

Velvet cocked her head quizzically. Pyrelight let out a questioning coo.

"Before the war, long before the wasteland... over a thousand years ago, a star fell to our world. And it fell in the Everfree Forest, close to where the Princesses lived."

I knew this story. It had been told to me by Midnight Shower.

"The fallen star's influence warped and twisted everything around it," Xenith claimed. "According to Zecora's writings, even a little exposure was enough to help Luna's inner darkness to take hold and manifest. Only the power of the Elements of Harmony were able to nullify what it had done to her."

The zebra finally looked up. "Forgive me for speaking what may seem ill of your Goddess, but Celestia was never as strong as her sister. When things hurt too much, she would run away."

I glared at Xenith. This had better be going somewhere. I wasn't happy with this sudden and unflattering analysis of the Goddess Celestia.

"She stepped down from the throne in the middle of a war," Xenith reminded us. "And this was not the first time Celestia abandoned something. When forced to banish her little sister to the moon, she fled their castle, leaving their home behind to rot in the Everfree Forest."

Okay, I could see that. And really, who could blame her? The memories that castle must have held... it would be too painful for anypony.

"And she left the Elements of Harmony behind in the castle," Xenith said. "Just... laying there." Xenith stared down at the book, seeming to read from the glyphs. "The Elements of Harmony, the most powerful of all known magics, were left on their pedestal, save one which was hidden, waiting for the spark to reveal it. And in the centuries that passed, the castle crumbled and fell. Moss and vines grew up around the pedestal of the Elements. And they were forgotten, faded into legends and old mare's tales."

"What in tarnation does all that have t' do with the Everfree Forest being all crazy?" Calamity called back impatiently. "Place didn't get so bad until after the war."

Xenith shook her head. "No, winged one. It was getting bad before then. The badness just took time to grow."

"And what caused the badness to grow?" Velvet Remedy asked. "What caused it to get so much worse, if not the war?" It sounded like she was buying this. To me, it was all insane zebra logic.

"From reading this book," Xenith said, "I have come to believe that the infection of the stars was being held at bay for a thousand years. Even during that time, the forest was bad, but it was not as bad as it could be because something in the heart of the forest was hindering it. The

Elements of Harmony, even abandoned and dormant, were holding back the bad.

“And then they were removed.”



Again, my eyes caught something glinting in the early rays of dawn. It was ahead of us, out near Everfree Forest. “What is that?”

“That?” Calamity repeated. “The glow, y’mean?”

I nodded. Then, realizing he couldn’t see me, called out a yes.

“That there’s the Hope Solar Array. Only time o’ day when those dishes pick up enough sunlight t’ shine is the crack o’ dawn.” He chuckled. “We’ll be passin’ right over it b’fore we head inta Everfree, so y’all c’n get a good look.”

I nodded again, this time to myself. I was thinking about something Calamity has said about the Enclave. “Okay, everyone. Listen up. We’re planning to try to separate the Wonderbolts, but there’s a good chance we could get split up ourselves. We need a fallback position.”

“Ya thinkin’ ‘bout the Array?” Calamity asked. “It’s close, but it’s still quite a few miles from the forest’s edge. Long way t’ go out in the open, ‘specially if yer wounded.”

Drat. Think. Think. Okay, backup idea. “I’ve got it. There’s a farm right at the edge of the Everfree Forest. It’s supposedly got landmines or ghosts or something, so be careful.” Possibly a bad idea. But at least it was a landmark. “Go near, not in.” It was either that or Fluttershy’s Cottage. And I really didn’t want to take Velvet Remedy back there.

The others quickly agreed.

We continued to fly, making small talk as the Everfree Forest drew ominously closer.

I had stopped staring out the window. I didn’t really want to see the distance between us and the forest being eaten away. Looking in my companion’s eyes, I could see everyone was feeling the same thing I

was. A sense of wrongness and inexplicable dread, like our skin was too tight. I'd started feeling it the minute I started to smell the smoke.

This was a bad plan.

But the Wonderbolts were on a clock now. They had to come get us. And my PipLeg was drawing them right to me. With any luck, we shouldn't have to camp out in the forest for more than a few hours.

I watched Life Bloom. He looked out-of-place amongst us. Yet our whole plan rested on his memory spell.

Something clicked in my head. I smacked my forehead with a hoof.

"Let me guess," I said, catching the white unicorn's attention. "You watched my memory orbs first, then memory spelled them into the other ponies in the Twilight Society, didn't you?" And here I'd been so smug thinking I would be able to keep them effectively incapacitated for days.

Life Bloom gave me a pompous smile. "Oh absolutely." Then he frowned. "Except for that last one." Memory Orb Eight. "I was quite convincing that it held nothing any of them would want to see." I started to thank him, but he added, "And I swiftly gouged it from my own memory to mitigate the trauma."

Velvet Remedy snickered. I didn't know whether to be relieved or offended.

"Oh?" Reggie perked up, flying closer. "An' why is that?" It was the first thing she'd said all morning. Yay for it being about my sex life.

"None of your business," Life Bloom replied sharply.

The unicorn buck moved across the passenger wagon and sat next to me. In a soft whisper, he confessed, "I meant no offense. Homage and I have been friends for a long time. And that's not the way I want to think of her."

"Attention, passengers," Calamity called back. "If y'all look out yer windows, ya c'n see the Hope Solar Array on yer right. An' if you look out the front, ya c'n get a real good look at the Everfree Forest. We'll be

descendin' t' twenty yards above tree level fer the next part o' our trip..."

I jumped up, shifting to the window. Below and to the right, half a dozen concrete towers rose out of the ground, five of them topped by giant bowls tiled inside with battered and weathered mirrors. A strange fixture rose up in the center of each dish, making them seem a little like flowers, and the array like a giant, artificial garden. One of the dishes had broken off of its tower and toppled face down on the ground next to it, a large crack running up from where it first struck the ground. I floated out my binoculars for a closer look. A wasteland merchant had set up home and shop beneath the overturned dish.

"...Ah suggest coverin' yer muzzles. Air quality is likely t' go downhill pretty dang quick."



The air grew thick, acrid and hazy. Velvet Remedy passed me a scarf to wrap around my muzzle for protection. She had been thoughtful enough to purchase enough for everyone. The one she gave Xenith was striped with red and gold, and simply looked ridiculous.

We almost made it to the treeline when we heard the cracks of thunder behind us. Turning around, I saw five columns of black smoke, crackling with lightning, shooting up out of the Hope Solar Array.

The Wonderbolts.

Calamity yelled and began to flap his wings as hard as he could, pouring on the speed. I enveloped the *Sky Bandit* in my magic, lightening his load as much as possible.

"They are bad hunters," Xenith complained. "They have no stealth. It is as if they want to be seen."

"They do," Reggie called, catching back up. "If they wanted, they coulda attacked us the moment we flew over that place. Or before."

"They're enjoying the chase," I suggested dourly.

“Or they’re drivin’ us into the Everfree Forest on purpose!” Reggie called back.

The haunted farm with all its exploded bits of dirt was passing below us now. Only they didn’t look like the disruptions caused by detonated landmines to me. They looked like the work of hellhounds.

I ran to the back window, staring down at the farm as we passed over. In the yard, partially hidden under a tarp, was an Enclave antenna array. It looked just like the one on the rooftop in Old Olneigh. “Oh fuck!”

I looked back up. The streaks of electrified black smoke had taken a sharp turn and were headed straight for us, catching up fast.

Trees rushed beneath us, obscuring the farm. We were over the forest now. Heat rippled up at us, the world becoming an oven. We were in Everfree.

The unnatural sense of dread grew. It was like bugs walking along my bones.

The miles between us and the Wonderbolts closed rapidly as more of the forest shot past beneath us. I could see the orange of flames burning across the ground between the trees and along the shores of a river turned grey with ash.

What the hell? Something was seriously wrong with this picture.

Calamity gave a shout as a cliff side suddenly rose up in front of us. He turned sharply upward, the passenger wagon tilting steeply. We tumbled towards the back, falling towards the glass-less back window and the forest below.

Xenith splayed out her hooves, catching the edges of the rear window as Life Bloom and I toppled against her. The jolt of panic caused my magic to implode. The sudden weight almost pulled Calamity out of the sky.

BLAM!

One of the Wonderbolts fired a shot. A single shot from what sounded like an anti-machine rifle. A hole opened up in the roof of the *Sky Bandit*, a matching one in the floor.

I heard a strange pop.

Calamity heard it too. With a scream of panic, he pulled us over the edge of the cliff, grassy ground appearing closely beneath us, before kicking the quick release on his harness with a shout of, "Abandon wagon!"

Xenith pulled her legs in and dropped out the back window, followed by Life Bloom and myself. Pyrelight shot out a side window as Velvet Remedy hurled herself out the door.

Xenith hit the grass rolling. I slammed into the forest floor with a graceless thud, small rocks and stiff plants lashing abrasions across my legs and under my chin as I skidded to a halt. If we hadn't been going mostly upward...

Velvet Remedy hadn't even hit the ground when the *Sky Bandit* exploded in a pyrotechnic eruption of wild magic.



I stumbled to my hooves, looking around for my friends. My mouth tasted like wet copper. My legs spasmed. I had bruised all along my stomach and left side, making it hard to breathe. The world canted, throwing me off balance. I fell back to the ground again.

Scattered around us were burning hunks of twisted metal -- the remains of the *Sky Bandit*. Seeing them drove a pang through my heart. Like we had lost a dear pet or treasured heirloom.

Xenith had landed nearby. She had lost her scarf, but looked otherwise none the worse for having fallen out of a passenger wagon just before the flying bomb lived up to its moniker. The zebra was on her hooves and looking much more steady than I thought I would ever be again. Xenith strode over and helped pull me back to my hooves.

A moment later, Calamity swooped overhead.

“Where are the others?” I called up to him.

“Clearing, just ahead,” he shouted down to me before zipping ahead.

I stumbled forward, my legs threatening to give out. My side protesting my every step. Just my luck that we had two healers with us now, and neither of them was with me. I just couldn’t win.

Xenith helped guide me forward, pushing through the foliage. The heat was oppressive. The smoke choked my lungs. But the fire hadn’t made it to this height yet. I was again struck by the sense that something was seriously amiss.

I paused, looking around, trying to put a hoof on what I was feeling. Nothing.

“Ouch,” I whined as a leafy branch Xenith pushed aside came snapping back across my face.

Pushing through the last of the underbrush, I ran into Velvet Remedy’s backside. The impact send me falling back onto my flanks, then all the way down as my forelegs gave out.

I stared in front of me between Velvet Remedy’s hooves.

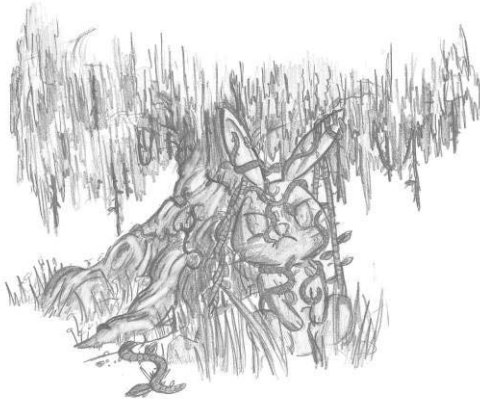
A fiercely determined bunny rabbit stared back at me.

The bunny was made of stone.

Beyond the stone bunny, the grassy knoll rose up to where a massive weeping willow, twisted and ancient, rose above us. The rough bark of the tree was a strange, buttery yellow. Blue vines wrapped about its gnarled roots. Its drooping pink leaves swayed in a wind I couldn’t feel.

The tree was framed by the angry brown sky, choked with smoke. Beyond the tree, the hillside dropped back downward into the fires of Everfree Forest, those flames pushed forward by the dark silhouettes of Red Eye’s griffins, their weapons pouring liquid fire across the ground.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



INTO FIRE AND DARKNESS

“Stay out!! The plants kill!”

“You.”

As if in a trance, Velvet Remedy took a step towards the weeping willow with its buttery yellow bark and draping pink leaves.

“It’s... you...”

The tree creaked and groaned, an eerie wind blowing through the curtains of hanging pink, rustling them with a mournful whisper. The soft and airy whimper caught my imagination. I could almost believe the wind carried words.

Stay away!

Velvet Remedy moved slowly closer. “It is you, isn’t it?” she intoned in a strangled voice. She sounded like she was on the verge of breaking. Or screaming.

I picked myself up off the grass. I looked to my E.F.S. compass, hoping to spot the whereabouts of my friends, but saw nothing. My Eyes-

Forward Sparkle had gone down in the crash. Or had I never brought it up? The fatal explosion of the *Sky Bandit* was still ringing in my ears, and I wasn't thinking straight.

Xenith, crouching low, her belly against the grass, crept up to the stone bunny. She reached out a tentative hoof and touched it, her hoof pulling back instantly as if she had reached out to touch molten lava. The fierce stone bunny statue remained a fierce stone bunny statue.

I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. It flashed a notice at me: new transmission detected. My eyes fell to the compass, which was glowing entirely red. It was as if the entire forest was hostile.

Behind me, I heard Calamity call out, "Reggie, there you are! Seen Life Bloom?"

"No," Reggie called back, her tone just a little snide. "Ain't he the one with the invisibility cloak?"

Xenith reached out and nudged the statue. It wobbled and fell over. Her eyes widened and she leapt back defensively.

The wind picked up. The rustling through the leaves was a haunting sound. It made the weeping willow sound like it was sobbing.

"How... how can this... be you?" Velvet asked, her voice almost childlike now.

Xenith stood up, approaching the fallen bunny statue. With a strangely sad look on her face, she leaned her head down and picked it up in her teeth, setting it back upright. "Doombunny," she said finally. "Turned to stone by a cockatrice. A worthy end for a worthy opponent."

Only a cockatrice can reverse its own magic. I remembered. The one who stoned Fluttershy's pet had surely died, if only of old age, lifetimes ago. He had stood guard here -- unmoving, unwavering stone.

Xenith bowed to Angel. "Doombunny, forever Fluttershy's protector."

The wind picked up, seeming to tear at the tree, the ghostly moans of its branches filled with misery and infinite sorrow.

"I'm here," Life Bloom called out, appearing as he shook the hood back from his head. "Is everypony all right?"

"Yeah, thanks for askin'," snarked the griffin.

The twisted, buttery-yellow tree creaked. The little blue vines shifted about its gnarled roots. Once more the soft, painful howl of the wind seemed to form words:

Get away!

Velvet Remedy took a step closer.

"Get away!" Xenith yelled, charging at Velvet Remedy and striking her with a forehoof hard enough to send her tumbling several yards down the sloped clearing.

Blue vines erupted from the ground in a shower of dirt and grass. Lashes of twisting, sinister ivy flailed after their victim. One of the blue vines brushed Xenith.

Suddenly there was so much blood.

The zebra's body seemed to explode in sick gouts of hot crimson. It was as if each of her stripes had been flensed off her body, leaving gaping wounds of blood and meat.

The vines went after Velvet. Xenith collapsed with a wet thump and a barely audible moan, bleeding to death in a growing pool of dark red.

I had no time to think. I acted instinctively, in desperation drawing on the darkest strings of power. Xenith's blood pulled itself from the grass, dripping upwards, swirling. If I could form a blade, I could form a cast. I spun the blood about her, hardening it into a full-body cast, leaving only her flayed muzzle exposed so that she could breathe.

"...killing joke..." she moaned weakly, "...stay away..." The zebra who had saved Velvet's life slipped into unconsciousness.

Now that the unearthly dread that seemed to permeate the forest had something in my mind to attach to, the fear became palpable. Suffocating.

Scarlet energy enveloped Velvet Remedy, lifting her from the grassy floor as more vines tore up from the ground, seeking to touch. The vines which had attacked Xenith turned their attention towards me.

For just a moment, I froze. I stared at the writhing wave of blue as it whipped across the clearing. I could hear gunshots. Not Calamity. I knew the sound of his battle saddle. He knew better than to try to kill ivy with a bullet. Reggie then. Quick to act and unwilling to hold back.

Jokeblue's a funny name. How'd she get that?

Birth defect, Homage had told me solemnly. Her mother was hit by killing joke while pregnant. Lucky either of them lived.

Xenith had seen the threat and understood it. *Sometimes, I feel as if I am an earth pony and that my stripes are really great wounds.*

The plant had somehow taken some random thing Xenith had said and turned it against her. Suddenly, I understood the plant's name. It was a joke -- a sick, twisted, malevolent joke. The Everfree Forest was home to a mobile, aggressive, sadistic plant filled with transformation magic.

Vines of blue struck through the air and slithered across the ground, colliding against a field of shimmering light that interposed itself between me and them. Velvet Remedy's shield spell. The vines struck at the shield, unable to penetrate, then burrowed into the ground again.

What have I said? I asked myself in mounting horror. *After Arbu, I thought of myself as a monster. Did I ever say that aloud? Does it matter to killing joke if I did? Oh Celestia, did I ever call myself heartless?*

"Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy screamed. The smoky air went a funny scarlet and filled with sparkles, like I was looking at the world through a red balloon dusted with glitter, and I felt myself lose weight, the grass dropping from beneath my hooves. I looked down in time to see blue ivy burst up through the grass I had just been standing on, grass that was rapidly sinking away from me.

Life Bloom started to run, his horn glowing with scarlet energy as he galloped back into the forest, levitating Velvet Remedy, me and the body of Xenith in front of him. Velvet extended her shield spell in a

sphere around us. Pyrelight flew overhead, keeping pace as she weaved between the tree branches that clawed at her.

"Hell of a thing you did back there, Littlepip," Life Bloom called up to me, an indefinable tone in his voice. He jumped a fallen log covered in mounds of blackish-green moss; the ground beneath the log tore open, vines of blue wrapping around it, reaching. "What kind of spell was that?"

"A last resort," I told him as Velvet Remedy wasted no time in mummifying Xenith with healing bandages. Blood poured from the zebra's muzzle. Velvet's eyes were brimming with tears.

More blue vines tore up the ground ahead of us, lashing themselves between trees like a web.

"I got this!" Reggie shouted, shooting forward. She had holstered her pistols and was holding Kage's hellhound-claw knives in her talons.

Panic shot through me. "No!" I cried out. "Don't let them touch you!"

My heart skipped a beat as the Talon griffin drew up short.

"Let me!" I called out, wrapping her brother's weapons in my magic. Reggie nodded, releasing the blades, content to let my magic guide her brother's contribution to our survival. The knives soared through the air at my control, slashing apart the blue vines, clearing the way.

Life Bloom charged past the shredded barrier, jumping over the severed strands of blue ivy. All about us were gnarled, wicked trees and bizarrely-hued plants. Some of the trees were covered in bulging masses of blackish moss which often took on terrifying silhouettes. But I ignored all these, keeping my eyes trained for crawling strings of hateful blue. I had seen killing joke before. There were dead strands of it in Fluttershy's bedroom. This stuff was everywhere in the forest.

Everywhere... but the killing joke was worst, I suspected, back in the clearing we were fleeing from. That place was a trap. And Fluttershy (for I was now convinced that the butter-yellow weeping willow was indeed the Mare of the Ministry of Peace) was its lure. And, more hellishly, its victim. Did Fluttershy ever say something about being

tree-like? Or maybe joked about having a bark worse than her bite? Fuck, maybe she just said she wanted to leave.

Dark branches whipped past us. The smoke was getting thicker. Life Bloom coughed, slowing, as a change in the wind brought rolling waves of heat. We were headed towards the fire. I could see the bright flickers of orange between the thick trees in the depth of the forest ahead of us.

"We can't go this way," Reggie called out as I floated Kage's knives back to her. Life Bloom started to change direction.

Three plumes of black cloud shot past us overhead, lightning crackling across the smoky contrails. I watched as the Wonderbolts flew past us, then split apart and started back.

"Aw hell," Calamity moaned, kicking the lever on his battle saddle to switch ammunition.

Least stealthy assassins ever.

Only they weren't assassins, were they? Nopony had called them that except the pony in my head. And she was trying to force them into the wrong frame. No, the Wonderbolts weren't stealthy. But then, when had the Enclave ever been subtle? Stealth was not the Enclave's way.

Everything we had witnessed pointed to the Enclave operating under a single, over-riding military philosophy: shock and awe. Overwhelming displays of power and dominance, spectacular and terrifying displays of force and skill that paralyze, demoralize and rout the enemy. The Enclave may have rejected Rainbow Dash, but they were still born out of the fighting force she had molded in her own image. And the Wonderbolts were their greatest and most glorified hunters. Not because they operated with a different methodology than the rest of the Enclave, but because the Enclave revered shock and awe, and the Wonderbolts were the *best* at it.

They were running us to ground, weakening us before the kill, trying to make us panic.

The smoke was like tiny daggers in my eyes. Life Bloom coughed again, a bad rattle in his throat. We couldn't keep running much longer, and

we couldn't outrun the Wonderbolts anyway. But the idea of fighting them in this accursed forest seemed more insane every minute.

And the forest wasn't done. Not by a long shot.

The Wonderbolts were being forced low by the smoke, flying at tree-top level. They could trace my tag, but that wouldn't help them track any of the rest of us. And even their armors' targeting spells were virtually worthless in the Everfree Forest. At any distance, my companions just melted into the sea of red lights that was our entire damn environment.

The three Wonderbolts were moving slower and closer now, enough so that I could make out the ponies at the heads of those contrails. They wore modified versions of the Enclave's standard magically-powered armor, their manes flowing out of a trench in the backs of their helmets, their muzzles visible through transparent breathing masks. The rest of the armor had the familiar carapace design, only theirs were a deep blue with lightning-like golden filigree.

Life Bloom poured himself into running, trying to put as much distance between us and the killing joke clearing. The three Wonderbolts (*three? Weren't there five?*) had nearly reached us when dark forms burst from the treetops between us. They were reptilian, like miniature dragons, with leathery wings and wicked claws and strange, beaked heads with red eyes that glinted in malice.

One of them flew right at one of the Wonderbolts. Like it was playing chicken. The elite Enclave flyer didn't flinch, didn't veer off. Neither did the creature. But at the last moment, instead of the two colliding, the thunder cloud contrail stopped, the Wonderbolt falling out of the sky as the creature flew past. Turned to stone.

Cockatrices.

"Jet!" the other two Wonderbolts cried out in unison.

The fiery-maned lead Wonderbolt didn't miss a beat, flipping about in the air and landing on her own contrail, the force causing the smoky cloud to unleash a blast of lightning at the cockatrice. The creature

released a wretched, earsplitting squawk and retreated, tendrils of black smoke wafting off its singed scales.

Four more had launched from the trees. I heard Calamity fire his rifles, and another monstrous cry as his target dropped to the ground, thrashing and bloodied. A second rounded back on Calamity only to be knocked away by a flash of emerald and gold. Pyrelight dug her talons into her scaly, dangerous prey and breathed balefire.

I floated a healing potion out of Velvet's saddleboxes and gingerly tried to pour it down Xenith's throat. Her mouth was full of blood, her healing bandages were streaked with blackening crimson where my blood-cocoon had cracked and split.

The leading Wonderbolt shot overhead, her rust-colored mane whipped by the wind. As she passed us, she spun around, flying backwards. Streams of pinkish light tore from her battle saddle, slashing through the trees and underbrush. Several beams of her magical energy struck against Velvet Remedy's shield, causing rippling patterns that reminded me of the sky over Canterlot in the Butterfly Orb.

Velvet's spell collapsed under the strain. But we were once again too deep under tree cover for the pegasus to finish any of us off. With the shield down, we were blanketed by the ominous crackling and heat of the fires ahead.

Reggie had her guns out, firing bullets at two of the cockatrices simultaneously. Her shots finished the one Calamity had wounded, and winged another that was circling towards the Wonderbolts. Reggie swung her other gun towards that cockatrice as well, but she was denied the kill -- the monster's head exploded, its blood misting the air. **BLAM!** The shot didn't come from any of us, nor any of the Wonderbolts we could see. The Enclave's premier sniper was one of the two Wonderbolts hanging back, out of sight but still very much in the action.

The cockatrice wrestling with Pyrelight twisted and thrashed, trying to turn about so it could look the balefire phoenix in the eyes. Pyrelight's

talons scraped against its scales, unable to claw through the monster's tough hide.

Once again, I wished SteelHooves was with us. The former Steel Ranger would have made us a real challenge for the Wonderbolts. And he would have made short work of the killing joke. I suspect he would have enjoyed the opportunity to avenge one of Applejack's closest friends.

Velvet Remedy cast her shield about us again, sweat beading on her brow. The strain was getting to her. Which was exactly what the Wonderbolts wanted. I saw tears streaming down her cheeks that probably weren't from the stinging smoke. "Dammit, we need to stop running and start fighting them," I called over the sounds of fighting and fire. "Divide and save, remember?"

"We need to go back," Velvet Remedy announced.

"What?" Life Bloom called back, echoing my own thoughts. Go back to the field of transformative torture and death?

Velvet turned to me, her tear-soaked eyes filled with determination and pleading in equal measure. "We have to save her!"

Save who? ...oh! My eyes widened as I realized just who Velvet Remedy needed to save.

The music of magical energy discharges wrenched my attention upward. As we passed between trees, I caught a glimpse of Calamity pegasus-fighting with the fiery-maned Wonderbolt.

Scorch marks covered Calamity's barding and battle saddle; his left hindleg was curled up under him like it was in pain. But the Enclave elite had yet to consummate a fatal shot. She was an excessively better flyer, swooping rings around him, anticipating his every pitch and yaw. But the forest played havoc with S.A.T.S., and without her armor's targeting spell, she had nowhere near Calamity's caliber of marksmanship. Fortunately for the Wonderbolt, Calamity didn't want to kill her. I knew he was just trying to draw her away from the rest,

somewhere where Velvet Remedy or Life Bloom could strike her down with a spell.

A flying ball of thrashing scales and feathers shot through the forest past us. The cockatrice finally managed to pull itself free from Pyrelight, twisting about to turn its petrifying stare into Pyrelight's face.

Pyrelight let out a blast of balefire, melting the creature's eyes away and boiling its brain.

I was trying to pour a second healing potion into Xenith's mouth. Her muzzle had stopped bleeding, scabbing over like a skin of dark crimson leather. Her breathing was ragged, but less so (I thought) than a moment ago.

The ground exploded underneath Life Bloom. Horrifying, pain-soaked memories of SteelHooves' death flashed through my mind as the hellhound erupted from the ground beneath Life Bloom. The hellhound's timing was a fraction off, his helmet slamming into Life Bloom's underbelly, thrusting the unicorn upwards as the hellhound's huge claws slashed at empty air. Life Bloom's magic imploded, dropping us as the pony rolled down the back of the hellhound's armored vest, collapsing on the broken ground behind him, stunned.

I lashed out with my own telekinesis, enveloping Xenith's unconscious form, keeping her from hitting the ground even as I slammed into a nest of fronds on the forest floor. One of the plants slapped me across the eyes. I winced, one eye closed from the pain, and pivoted to look back.

The hellhound blinked in surprise, taking a moment to realize what had gone wrong, then spun around, lifting his claws above the staggered unicorn. Blossoms of red spouted from the hellhound's chest, neck and just below his right eye as Reggie swooped up behind him, firing both of her Calamity-crafted guns as fast as the triggers would allow. Each armor-piercing round punctured the hellhound's armor and hide; only three managing to escape. The hellhound fell.

Xenith's body had come down in the ferns in front of me, but gently thanks to my magic. I didn't know where Velvet Remedy had landed.

The crack of the Wonderbolts' sniper split the sky. I hoped the pegasus had been aiming at a cockatrice.

Three more helmeted hellhounds tore themselves up from the ground about ten yards away and began charging towards us, loping on all fours, magical energy rifles strapped to their backs.

I felt the earth tremble beneath me. *Ground might tremble a bit; that's all the warnin' y'all will get before they rend ya apart.* My heart stopped. There was a hellhound right beneath me!

I wasn't dead yet. In the time it took me to think that, I should have been.

Life Bloom shook himself off and began running towards me. I thought I heard Velvet Remedy doing the same. Overhead, Pyrelight had abandoned her kill and was circling through the trees, looking for her favorite unicorn.

Ghosts don't exist. Just landmines.

That was Ditzzy Doo's belief about the supposedly haunted farm. In a flash, I remembered the hellhounds' tactic at Maripony. There was a reason the other three hellhounds had revealed themselves so far away.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Stay back! Mines!" I wrapped a levitation field around myself and Xenith.

The three hellhounds stopped their charge, ducking behind trees as they drew their weapons. Life Bloom threw the hood of the zebra cloak over his head, vanishing.

"Littlepip, don't!" Reggie squawked. "If you move, you'll set 'em off!"

Purple light speared my reinforced Canterlot barding, knifing into my flank. The armor dispersed most of the magical energy, but that didn't stop the searing pain. Physical hurt gave way to something deeper as I realized the shot had struck my cutie mark, possibly doing permanent damage. I wailed. I'd never loved my cutie mark, but the idea that I might have just lost it, even on just one of my flanks, was an excruciating cut to my soul.

It was all I could do to keep from stripping off my armor to see what damage the hellhound's shot had done. With a voice filled with emotion, I screamed back at Reggie, "We can't stay here!" We didn't need to hold still. We needed to move very, very fast.

"Jus' keep the two of you weightless," Reggie shouted back as she dove behind a rock, taking cover from incoming hellhound fire. "I'll shoot by and grab you the moment..."

A brilliant blast of light from above snatched everyone's attention, making the smoky sky seem to glow. A rust-colored heap with an orange tail plunged into a nearby tree, trailing smoke.

"Calamity!" Velvet Remedy shrieked. Pyrelight winged over, zeroing in on her voice. A black-scorched, reptilian monster launched itself at Pyrelight from a nearby tree. The balefire phoenix jerked around to see her attacker and immediately turned to stone. The stoned phoenix dropped.

Velvet cried out in despair. Reggie spun in the air, taking swift aim. *Only a cockatrice can reverse its own magic.* "No!" I bellowed, my voice rasping from the smoke. "Don't kill it! We need it alive!" That last word was disrupted by a fit of coughing.

Three down. We were losing this!

Four down if you counted the little pony in my head who could do nothing more than prance around in misery, crying: *My cutie mark! My cutie mark!*

The cockatrice dipped a wing, circling back through the trees towards us. As it came into sight, the monster was struck by a blast of magic from Velvet Remedy's horn. It lost control of its body, smacking into a tree branch. The limp body slid from the branch, dropping into a purple fern.

One of the hellhounds kept firing, pinning Reggie as the two others moved to closer trees. Then they opened fire while their companion left cover. The ground squirmed beneath them. A tendril of bright blue

wormed out of the forest floor, wrapping itself around the ankle of the last hellhound...

The hellhound was gone, his helmet and rifle dropping into the underbrush. In his place stood a stunned, blinking earth pony mare, her flowing purple mane cascading over her pristine, pearl-white coat. *She has no cutie mark*, my little pony fixated on.

The earth pony let out a wide-eyed *meep*.

The two other hellhounds spun to see the pony who had apparently snuck up behind them. With unthinking aggression, they jumped at her, claws flashing.

With thoughtless instinct, I telekinetically shoved the new pony backwards. The two hellhounds collided almost comically. Seeming to grasp at least some part of her situation, the pony spun around and galloped into the forest, crying.

The two hellhounds picked themselves up and gave chase. More vines of blue tore themselves from the ground, trying to reach them, but the hellhounds were too fleet of foot to be snagged.

I blinked. My mind conjured the image of the hellhound casually commenting to his brothers "Sometimes I wish I was a pony" ...or something like that. I could see the joke. It was almost comical. *Ha, ha, we got your family to murder you*. Almost comical, yet still fucking sick.

Birth defect. Killing joke had attacked the mother of Homage's closet friend while she was pregnant. Probably killing her, and forever scarring the unborn baby. The filthy notion settled into my head that the plants probably did something that caused the mother to die during childbirth, murdering her on what should have been her happiest day and stealing Jokeblue's mother from her forever.

I realized I hated those plants. Not just feared them. Loathed them with spectacular intensity.

I felt myself yanked away, Reggie's talons digging at my barding, Xenith in her other clawed grip, being held by her saddle-pouch. The

ground shot below me in a blur just before it erupted in a paroxysm of melting magical energy.

Reggie set us down a dozen yards beyond the magical firestorm. Life Bloom appeared almost immediately, his horn glowing as he began to cast medical spells over Xenith. I realized we had completely lost track of the Wonderbolts.

"This... is bad," I moaned. What were they doing? Why weren't they pressing their assault?

"You! Will! Fix! Her!" Velvet Remedy growled, threatening to strangle the barely-conscious cockatrice wrapped in her magic as she thrust it towards a Pyrelight-shaped stone half-imbedded in the forest floor. The cockatrice let out a plaintive squawk. Pyrelight's body slowly became flesh and feathers again, the stone seeming to wash away.

"Don'tcha... let... that... rascal go..."

Calamity dropped out of his tree with a groan. His coat was singed and burned away in places, revealing red and blistered skin. His hat was half-burned, the remains of his mane was still smoldering. My dearest friend was in agony. My nerves cried out in sympathetic pain at the sight. I covered my mouth as I gasped.

"Fucker... weaponized the Buckaneer Blaze..." Calamity complained through gritted teeth as Velvet galloped to him, giving the suspected minefield as little of a berth as she thought safe, the cockatrice hauled behind her. The heat from the fires was oppressive against my own coat and flesh. I couldn't imagine how much it must be aggravating Calamity's wounds.

Gingerly, as if stepping closer to him could cause more pain, I approached Calamity. "Are you..." I stopped before asking Equestria's dumbest question. Instead, I turned to Velvet. "Will he be all right?" The charcoal unicorn was pulling out a super restoration potion. One of our last. Part of me wondered if Xenith might need that even more. A much bigger part of me wanted to beat that part of me up for even asking. I had to trust Velvet and assume that Life Bloom had healing spells that likely put our potions to shame.

Reggie landed next to us. “No sign of our ponyfeathered friends,” she commented. “But the fire line’s less than a hundred yards ahead, an’ Red Eye’s griffins are leadin’ it. My guess, the Wonderbolts are regroupin’. Forest took out one o’ their own before they even engaged us, so they’re prob’ly givin’ their plan a re-think before tryin’ t’ fight us where they could draw Red Eye’s forces into the skirmish.”

Thank Celestia! We needed the break, even if it was going to be very short-lived. But more than that, we needed to get somewhere safe. The heat was draining our strength almost as much as the fighting. The smoke was burning my eyes and throat, making it hard to breathe. Our struggle against the Wonderbolts had become a three-way battle, and the Everfree Forest was winning.

I really wanted to walk up to them, waving a flag of truce and calling out: Hello? Look, I know we both decided to do this thing in the Everfree Forest -- hoping we could use the environment against each other and all that -- but we were clearly stupid. Think maybe we could call a time-out until we all get away from the pony-murdering woods?

Obviously, that wasn’t going to happen. They didn’t need help getting out of the Everfree Forest; all they had to do was fly up. Hell, if they wanted to, they could probably just wait us out. Maybe that’s why we didn’t see them anymore -- they had figured that out themselves.

Fuck.



The ground shimmered beneath us. Velvet Remedy had spread her shield spell over the patch of ground beneath all of us, creating a barrier to protect us from the killing joke. So far, it hadn’t tried to attack us again. Life Bloom suggested that the detonation of the mines might have scared it off (although he didn’t put it in those terms -- something about them finding targets by sensing vibrations and whatnot). My own wild theory was that the plant was slithering away from the approaching fire line. The wind had shifted again, blowing the fires away from us; but the flames looked another ten yards closer, and we

could occasionally hear the shouts of Red Eye's forest-burners. Even working against the wind, they'd make Flutter... tree by nightfall.

"Those... those horrible vines," Velvet Remedy whimpered, holding onto me. I was fighting a strong urge to push her back, strip off my armor, and check my flank. But Velvet needed to be held, and I knew that if my cutie mark had been damaged by magical energy, no amount of looking was going to help. Velvet was more important. My friends were more important. And did I really want to know?

"They trapped her up there, h-high on the h-h-hill where she could see what happened to her Equestria. As it was p-poisoned, and destroyed..." Her tear-filled eyes stared into mine. "Pip, they *made her watch!*"

I hugged the kind unicorn who had once been my idol and who had become one of my dearest friends. I couldn't bring myself to mention my own heartbreaking suspicions: that for centuries, the killing joke had used her as bait, luring victims to the clearing and torturing them in front of her. It was intentional cruelty, I was sure of it. How could *plants* be so *vile*?

"They're torturing her! Torturing Fluttershy!" Velvet buried her head against my neck. I held her, not knowing what else to do.

Not far away, a heavily bandaged and medicated Calamity was morbidly instructing Reggie to cut the paws off the hellhound she had killed. "We might be able t' use those claws." The pegasus sent a glance our way. He should be the one holding Velvet, not me. But even touching him would cause him searing pain. The thought pulled my attention to the burning in my own flank. A biting pain that I was doing my best to ignore.

Farther still, Life Bloom was tending to Xenith as best he could. The zebra had yet to regain consciousness. I heard a sad hoot from Pyrelight. I believed the balefire phoenix had come to enjoy being a healer, following in Velvet Remedy's hoofsteps. But unlike Ditzzy Doo or SteelHooves, neither Xenith nor Calamity would find their health

restored by Pyrelight's radiating on them. Instead, she stood guard over the bound and blindfolded cockatrice. Velvet's prisoner.

"W-we have to save her, Littlepip!" Velvet sobbed, pulling back, shaking me. "We *have* to!"

I fished for something to tell her. I wanted save Fluttershy too. But how? How do you save a tree? If anything, the approaching fires might be a mercy.

"We'll... do whatever we can," I promised her, leaving quiet the caveat of not being able to do anything.

Life Bloom stood up, staring down at what was hardly recognizable as a zebra. "She's in bad shape, but she's stable. And that's more than I would have expected." He looked back at me. "That last resort of yours saved her life." With a frown, he added, "But she's in a coma. At best, it's going to be up to her whether she wakes up."

"An' at worst?" Calamity asked.

"At worst..." Life Bloom paused, looking at us, judging how much to say. "I have a spell. Think of it as the opposite of Velvet's bone regrowing spell." Several of us nodded. Velvet tensed against me. "I may have to use it to relieve the pressure in her skull... by dissolving part of it." Almost unnecessarily, he added, "And that is risky."

Velvet and I silently turned our heads to gaze upon Xenith. Her bandages were completely soaked in blood, the crimson life drying into a blackish shade that made her look like a pony-shaped bruise on the earth. My eyes shifted to Velvet. She knew much better than I did what realities hid behind Life Bloom's diagnosis. All I knew was that it was very bad, and we might not have Xenith with us much longer. More than ever, I wanted to see her return "home" to Glyphmark. To be with her daughter. To help and aid her tribe. Teaching them medicines and survival skills and...

A memory flittered through my mind. I halted my train of thought, focusing on it, trying to grasp the fragment of the past that had just shaken loose.

Finishing her grisly work, Reggie slammed one of her brother's knives through the shield and into the ground, the claw-blade sinking up to the hilt. "It should be Kage here, not me." Before any of us could misconstrue her statement, she looked up, her face etched with sadness. "Kage was better at all this fucked-up wilderness crap."

Regina's voice was damp with nostalgia. "Kage actually wanted t' study this shit. If I'da let him have his way, we'da been on a tour t' all the most fucked-up parts of Equestria. Splendid Valley, Canterlot, Whitetail Wood... and, of course, the Everfucked Forest."

The memory seemed to dissolve even as my mind grasped for it. I stomped the ground in frustration; I was sure it had been important.

"Littlepip?" Velvet queried.

Sighing inwardly at the loss, I turned to Reggie. "I... I'm sorry. About Kage."

The griffin didn't look at me. "You already said that," she said crossly.

"Whitetail Wood?" Velvet Remedy asked, picking up on the one name we hadn't heard before, asking more for Regina's sake than her own curiosity.

A smirk crawled across Reggie's beak. "Yeah. Kage used t' call it the most poisoned place in Equestria."

"Ah thinph Canforloph erf thaf," Calamity mumbled. We turned to see our pegasus companion, half-mummified, wind blowing at the trailing strands of gauze, standing in a patch of fronds, the ponified hellhound's dropped energy rifle clutched between his teeth.

"Whuf?" he asked innocently, taking in our stares. "If worph sumechinn."

I rolled my eyes. Next to me, Velvet Remedy stifled a laugh.

"Canterlot's unique," Reggie told Calamity. "Well, was. Whitetail Wood's poison is just excessive." The adolescent griffin gave a slight, smiling shrug that admitted she didn't really know. "That's what Kage said, anyway." The griffin pulled Kage's knife out of the ground,

wiping it off and slipping it back into her belt with its twin. Her eyes turned once again to the corpse of the hellhound she had just dismembered.

“Hey, check this out,” Reggie called, holding the dead hellhound’s helmet in her talons. I slipped away from Velvet. As I approached, I could faintly hear some sort of throbbing hum coming from the helmet.

Crap. When I’d first brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, my PipBuck had notified me of a unfamiliar broadcast. Slipping in my earbloom, I switched to the new frequency. My ear was met with a strange, pulsing hum (throbbing in time to the sound from the helmet). Over the hum were other notes, an odd chorus of artificial sound that cycled in disharmonious patterns. The underlying oscillation reminded me starkly of the Enclave array in Old Olneigh.

Lensflare. *Also top of his class, focused in arcano-tech*, Calamity had said. The Wonderbolts were using magically laced sound to control the hellhounds. This was the other beat of the Wonderbolt’s plan. They knew we were expecting them to attack from above, not below.

I told the others what this meant.

“Then we’ve got t’ go back t’ that farm,” Reggie said, “Take out the transmitter.”

Calamity spit out the magical rifle. “Or, y’know, jus’ take their helmets off.”

“Yes, because then they will be *free-willed*, hyper-aggressive creatures who have just suffered mind-control at the hooves of ponies,” Life Bloom pointed out serenely. “Far less dangerous.”

“Well, muh plan sucked. Again.” Calamity shook his head, staring at the grass beneath the shimmering shield.

I couldn’t wait another minute.

“Littlepip,” Velvet gasped. “What are you doing?”

Stripping out of my armor to look at my cutie mark. That's what I was doing. And I had never gotten undressed so frantically. I bucked away my armored barding, craning my neck to see my flank.

No.

My coat had burned, my flesh had warped and bubbled, twisting like a corkscrew. The cruel, destructive magical energy had pierced my barding just below my cutie mark, devouring nearly half of the cute little PipBuck on my flank.

"No." I didn't scream. I felt I should have. But it was like a rusty hook had been plunged into my gut and torn back out, eviscerating my emotions. Leaving a gaping black pain that was beyond loss. The feeling wasn't rational. I knew I still had my cutie mark on the other flank. But I couldn't engage that part of my brain.

I heard Velvet Remedy gasp. She sounded strangely distant. Gritting his teeth against his own agony, Calamity stepped towards me. "Li'l pip..." he began, wanting to say whatever the fuck he thought would help. But I swung a hoof at him, making him back away.

"Don't you dare tell me how cutie marks don't matter!" I hissed. Calamity didn't deserve that, but I couldn't push through my own grief enough to care.

The Wasteland had attacked me, body and soul. Carved me up. The taint had twisted me up inside, changed me. I re-grew a *leg!* Then there was my PipLeg and whatever else the pink cloud had done to me. But more than that, the Wasteland had taken my innocence, my naïveté... had sliced away one piece of my soul after another. But this was something it had no right to take. The Wasteland couldn't steal from me what made me special, no matter how insignificant that specialness often seemed -- and an attack on my cutie mark felt like exactly that.

Rounding on Velvet, I demanded, "Can you fix this? Tell me you can fix this!"

Velvet swallowed, the sad, shifting look in her eyes betraying the truth. Still, she offered, “Maybe... if we cut away all the damaged flesh...” I willfully ignored those eyes, that look which told me no.

“Do it!” I insisted, virtually thrusting my flank in her face. “Quickly!”

“L-Littlepip... no...” Velvet tried to be reasonable. “Look where we are.”

“I don’t care!” I snapped, my vision blurring. I realized I was crying. When did that start? “Cut it away!”

Velvet Remedy stood up, her expression shifting to displeased determination. “No!” she barked back sternly. “Not. Here.” Turning away, she informed me, “If you want me to cut you up, you’re going to have to wait until we are someplace safe.” She added, “And at least halfway sanitary.”

I wanted to hit her.

I knew it was wrong of me to feel that. But it was as if all the pain and hollowness had shifted, filtered through the lens of her refusal, becoming rage.

“Whoa,” Reggie said, seeing the change in my demeanor.

I rounded on Velvet, lifting my forehooves as I opened my muzzle to scream at her, give her one more chance to...

A flash of magic interrupted me. The pain in my flank disappeared. As did the feeling in my legs... and everywhere else. It was like my body had been dissolved away, leaving me a floating spirit. I didn’t even feel myself hit the ground, registering my collapse only as a drop in perspective.

“Somepony needs a time out,” Life Bloom said, his horn glowing. The anesthetic spell. He’d taught it to Velvet Remedy, hadn’t he?

Everyone stared at me. I felt even more angry. Now I wanted to buck even more of them. In the face. (*With radishes*, my little pony suggested bizarrely.)

Calamity looked away, preoccupying himself with strapping the magical energy rifle to his battle saddle.

Velvet Remedy leaned down and nuzzled me gently. "We're sorry, Littlepip. We understand," she gave me an odd but kind look. "I know how long you fought to get your cutie mark. To not be upset would be... damaged."

She laid back down next to me. Not touching, but giving me the support of her proximity whether I wanted it or not. My rage and hurt didn't fade. But after a few deep breaths, the focus of my anger began to trickle away from Velvet Remedy and more towards myself. The world became blurrier until it was nothing by watery shapes.

I cried onto Velvet Remedy's floor-shield, the tears crackling softly as they fell.



"Now then," Life Bloom suggested calmly, having poured healing spells into Xenith and Calamity. My pegasus friend was moving without pain again. Xenith hadn't stirred. "Let's see what we can do about saving this one."

My anger had dissolved back into that wounded, hollow feeling. The transition was enough to allow the more rational part of my head to take over. Yes, my cutie mark was gone. Well, gone-ish. But I had never understood it or cared for it. It was, after all, not much better than a cutie mark of a cutie mark. And I still had its twin.

I felt ashamed. Reggie was dealing with the loss of a real twin, real family, better than I was dealing with the loss of a stupid picture on my flank.

I also felt woosy, lightheaded. I was dehydrated. My vision was still blurry, even though I had stopped crying -- I couldn't move my forelegs to wipe my eyes. The heat of the burning forest was drying my tears, turning them hot and extra salty. I coughed on the smoke, my throat feeling raw. I wondered how close the flames were now. I couldn't get

up to see, but the crackling was louder than ever; it sounded closer. Everfree Forest looked brighter than before, bathed in an unhealthy orange glow.

(And, of course, there was a tiny, lingering embarrassment over having laid helpless as Velvet Remedy re-dressed me. She and Calamity weren't about to let me lay around in the Everfree Forest unprotected. It was not enough for them that I had been armor-adjacent.)

The white pony with the red and scarlet mane turned and pointed his glowing horn back towards the forest. A reddish glow formed somewhere deeper into the woods, beyond where my ground-level perspective allowed me to see. The glow intensified as it drew closer.

Wrapped in the sparkling red sheath of Life Bloom's magic, the stone statue of a pegasus in Wonderbolt armor floated over the ferns and set down on the shielded ground before us.

Jet, they had called her.

"Daymn," Calamity whispered with a resurgence of hope. Maybe his plan wasn't a total wash after all.

Velvet Remedy levitated the bound cockatrice over. "Now listen close," she whispered, her voice somehow both kind and menacing. "You restore this pony and you promise not to go around turning innocent creatures to stone, and we'll let you go." Unspoken promises of what would happen should the cockatrice refuse dripped from the offer.

Life Bloom lifted a questioning eyebrow, mouthing to the others: *let it go?* I wanted to chuckle, or at least to nod. Life Bloom didn't know our Velvet.

The cockatrice complied. (At least, regarding the first part.) The grey, hard lifelessness of stone washed away, leaving the ebony-coated, violet-maned, blue-armored pegasus blinking in bewilderment. Before the mare could drink in the befuddling change in her environment, Life Bloom stepped forward, lowering his horn towards the Wonderbolt's helmet, lifting up her visor and touching his horn to her forehead.

There was a sparkling red flash. The Wonderbolt's eyes widened as Calamity's memories flooded into her.

Somewhere nearby, I heard shouts. Red Eye's fire brigade was closing on our position.

"Daymn," Calamity muttered again, this time with disgust.

Life Bloom was locked in concentration, casting into the ebony Wonderbolt's head. Velvet Remedy released the cockatrice, which immediately fled with an indignant squawk, its leathery wings propelling it away from the oncoming wall of fire.

Regina took to the air, only to drop back to the ground almost instantly after clearing the treetops. "uh, Pipsqueak?"

"Littlepip," I corrected, my name strangely slurred from a muzzle where I couldn't feel my tongue.

"That tag thing the Wonderbolts are followin' you with? Gotta reckon they got the tags fer each other, right?" I didn't think I liked where Reggie's too-casual speculation was headed. "Whatcha bet when their girl down there got un-stonified, they all got some sort of signal?"

Oh fuck.

Both Red Eye's forces and the Wonderbolts were going to come down on this spot in minutes! We needed to move. *I* needed to move! Lifting a hoof would be a good start.

The glow around Life Bloom's horn faded, the memory spell complete. Life Bloom staggered back, wiping sweat from his forehead. "And Twilight Sparkle could do that at least five times in one day?" he asked weakly.

Jet stood, blinking, shaking herself off. The ebony Wonderbolt stared at us, her eyes wide, her face openly displaying her internal conflict, expressions of confusion, dismay and revulsion chasing each other across her features (the few we could really see).

The Wonderbolt mare spread her wings and, without a word, fled.

“Well shucks,” Calamity said, staring at the empty space Jet had filled moments ago. “Ah reckon Ah was bein’ a silly pony t’ hope she’d jump t’ join our side.”

“She didn’t attack us,” I pointed out. “That’s something.”

“Great. Somebody grab your mastermind an’ your zebra, and let’s get outta here,” Reggie growled, checking the load on her guns. She launched herself into the air, clearing the treetops and nearly colliding with one of the four pegasus-tipped thundercloud contrails that ripped the sky overhead. Too late.

The rust-maned Wonderbolt cartwheeled in the air as she flew past Regina, firing a spray of pinkish light that bombarded Regina, the light seeming to explode on contact with the griffin. Regina crashed back into a treetop.

I found myself engulfed in a magical field the color of Velvet Remedy’s nightingale cutie mark. *If I lose both my cutie marks*, the pony in my head mused worthlessly, *will my magic change color?* Velvet Remedy floated me off the ground, her shielding spell dissipating, and began to run. Life Bloom broke into a gallop behind her, floating Xenith ahead of him. He quickly overtook us, a faster runner than Velvet, and floated Xenith’s seemingly lifeless body carefully onto Velvet’s back as he passed. I saw his red and scarlet tail running in front of us for just a moment, streaming out from beneath his cloak. Then he vanished.

I twitched. Life Bloom’s spell was fading; I was beginning to feel my body again. I swung my PipLeg, my movements less like a pony and more like a ragdoll (*the sort that would come with its own notepad and quill*, a little voice told me). Fumbling, I marked on my PipLeg’s automap where Reggie had fallen. We’d come back for her, I swore, before the day was out. But right now, we were just trying to get some distance between us and the fire.

A cloaked figure appeared amongst the trees ahead of us. At first, all I saw was the zebra stealth cloak, and I wondered why Life Bloom had stopped and turned. But the shape under the cloak was all wrong. My heart skipped a beat.

The figure rose up, the hood of the cloak falling back to reveal the helmeted head of a white-furred hellhound. He raised his magical-energy cannon towards us, aiming down the sight with one of his alien-looking red eyes (a sure sign of albinism -- be smart!), and touched the trigger.

The albino hellhound's shot went wild -- a crackling ball of unstable energy that arched upwards maybe a dozen yards before exploding into an omni-directional spray of magical flak -- as the still-invisible Life Bloom barreled into him, horn first. Even a full gallop, Life Bloom didn't have the strength to penetrate the toughened hide beneath the hellhound's fur, but his momentum sent the monster flying backwards, tumbling and sprawling.

Life Bloom hadn't ended the charge particularly gracefully either. He was on his back, hood down and cloak bunched up around his neck, kicking his legs in the air in an embarrassing and almost perverse position.

The Wonderbolts flew back overhead, splitting off in different directions. The Wonderbolt mare with the rust-colored mane shot straight up.

Life Bloom rolled over, struggling to get to his hooves, getting tripped up by the cloak. The albino hellhound was faster, flipping back onto his feet and diving for where his magical flak cannon fell.

I couldn't move properly, but I was far from helpless. Little Macintosh floated out in front of me as I took aim at the hellhound through the trusty revolver's scope. Without S.A.T.S., hitting an erratically moving target was damn hard, but I wasn't fresh out of the Stable anymore. I had lots of practice.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

I missed the hellhound, two of my shots going completely wild. The third struck his magical weapon just as he was drawing it up. The hellhound was either acting faster than he was thinking, or he hadn't noticed the hit. He aimed the cannon at Velvet Remedy, pulling the trigger.

The gun began to crackle, engulfed in a sheath of unstable energy. The hellhound hurled it as far from himself as he could, the magical flak cannon landing in a grove of grotesquely moss-covered trees and purple ferns. It cartwheeled, bouncing through the fronds...

KRACCK-PRUW!!!

Flashing blades of solid magic sliced past me. One struck through Velvet's mane, sending tufts of white flying, but blind luck and the forest shielded us. The explosion shredded several trees but mercifully claimed no pony victims.

"Break!" shouted Calamity. "Scatter!"

Velvet canted, shifting her gallop in a new direction, drawing me away from the others. I looked back, glimpsing Life Bloom, who had finally made it back onto his hooves, sprinting in the opposite direction.

Something blue shot down out of the sky. The forest exploded.

The shockwave slammed into me, making my insides feel like jelly as it picked Velvet and Xenith up off the ground and hurled us all brutally forward. A ring of crackling, electrified black smoke followed the shockwave, as did the roar emanating from the mushroom-like cloud that rose up behind us.

My whole body felt bruised even before I slammed into the ground. I thanked the Goddesses that Velvet had put my reinforced Canterlot Police Barding back on.

The Wonderbolt shot out of the mushroom cloud, opening fire on her downed opponents, The air between us filled with beams of frantic pinkish light. Biting back a moan, I rolled behind the splintered remains of one of the flak-shredded trees, taking cover.

As the Wonderbolt shot past us, I realized to my dismay that the explosion hadn't even been a weapon. It was an *aerial maneuver*. But... how? I knew that pegasi and possibly even earth ponies had their own inherent magic. (*Well, duh! Have you met Pinkie Pie?*) Pegasi could walk on and manipulate clouds, after all. But this was beyond the pale. I was

forced to quickly reassess what “the best at shock and awe” might actually mean.

I pushed myself up, coughing wretchedly. My coughs were wet and hot and tasted like copper. I ran my PipLeg over my muzzle and found myself looking at a screen smeared in blood.

“Not good.”

Shakily, I got onto my hooves and limped towards the crumpled mess of Xenith. Her scabs had all broken and she was bleeding horrifically again. I drew on the Black Book’s spell one last time in a desperate bid to quell the blood loss.

I stared into the blood-streaked screen of my PipLeg, using the inventory sorting spell to find the last healing potion I had in my saddlebags. As I fed it to Xenith, I tried to spot Velvet Remedy. Rarity’s battle dress should have protected her, she should still be alive.

Life Bloom, I realized, had been much closer to the explosion. I was certain that Velvet was searching for him. Dreadfully, my mind imagined Velvet, stumbling and hurt, walking right past the cloak-shrouded body of Life Bloom as the unicorn bled out.

Hating my mind, I shook off the horrific image. I wasn’t going to let pain or despair stop me any more than I was going to let the Everfree Forest or the Wonderbolts win. I had a destiny. I had a mission. I had friends to help and unicorns to save and a sky to clear. No more self-pity. No more misery. Let the Wasteland and the Enclave throw whatever the fuck they wanted to at me. I’d made it this far. I’d survived Fillydelphia and Canterlot, and that was before I even knew my purpose. How was it going to stop me now? I was going to...

(Be awesome!)

...be awesome. Yes. That worked.

The rational part of my mind told me that if one of the Wonderbolts could do that and fly away, they could probably all do that. And they could just keep doing that until they had torn us all to bloody ribbons, flattening the Everfree Forest in the process if necessary.

I told the rational part of my brain to shut the hell up.

The next thing that came shooting down out of the sky was going to get a bullet through its visor before it could pull off any fancy-schmancy aerial tricks, courtesy of Little Macintosh.

Soon as I spotted where Applejack's old revolver had fallen.

I looked up, trying to spot dive-bombing pegasi through the large gap in the foliage created by the... whatever the hell that explosion was. Instead, I saw Calamity once again pegasus-fighting with a Wonderbolt. This time, a gunmetal grey buck with an electric sea-green mane and what looked like an anti-machine rifle built into his battle saddle. Their sniper.

If there was one good thing about being this close to the fire, it was that the thick smoke rendered that bastard's advantage useless. He was still a better flier than Calamity, and at least damn near as good a shot.

A familiar blast of sparkling red energy struck out of the forest, enveloping the gunmetal grey Wonderbolt, turning him instantly from a graceful aerial fighter to a pony-shaped sack of fail. Calamity stopped, hovering as he watched the other buck drop into the forest, paralyzed by the anesthetic spell.

That spell came from Life Bloom! That meant he was okay, and we had now taken down two of the Wonderbolts. I felt the urge to cry out in elation.

Instead, I coughed up more blood. Stumbling forward, I began to search for my friends. My hoof bumped into something solid and metal. Little Macintosh! Thank you, Luna. It felt like things were really beginning to turn around.

I found Velvet Remedy. She was fighting to save the life of the albino hellhound with the zebra cloak. Of course she was.

The hellhound had been caught in the blast, the Wonderbolts apparently not caring if they destroyed their tools. His leg had been blown off, his body ending in bloody tatters of shredded meat and broken bone inches above where his left knee should have been. The

hellhound was whimpering gruelingly, his body shaking in shock, the grass beneath him wet with blood.

When I came upon them, Velvet Remedy was using a stick and a length of old surgical tubing to craft a tourniquet.

"She... does this a lot?" Life Bloom whispered, appearing at my side, surprised by Velvet's aid to the enemy.

"All the time," I replied, shaking my head. Part of me wanted to be mad at her. We had wounded of our own. But what good would it do? Velvet couldn't see a creature suffering and not try to help. It was a virtue, her virtue... even if it was occasionally damn frustrating.

"Life Bloom, Xenith... please..." I pointed in the direction of my zebra friend and the Twilight Society unicorn trotted quickly away. Life Boom was filthy, his cloak and coat smeared with dirt and blood, but he appeared surprisingly unscathed from the explosion.

Calamity flew up above me, looking around. "Hey, Li'l pip! Ya see where Gutshot fell to?" I shook my head. Gutshot? So, their sniper was the pegasus who took second place to Calamity in the Best Young Sharpshooter competition four years running. I should have guessed.

"Well shoot. Wanna get him t' Life Bloom b'fore that spell wears off. Boy woulda had me if he wasn't so insistant on shootin' me."

Come again? I gave him a confused look.

"Gutshot coulda taken me down a dozen times over with his fancy flyin'. But unlike Skydive, he was so fixated on gettin' the best o' me with a bullet, he all but defeated 'imself."

I frowned as Calamity flew off, continuing his search. That didn't sound like the sort of rivalry that was going to be fixed with a memory spell. I had dragged myself back to Xenith and (the miraculously healthy) Life Bloom. When I reached them, I kneeled before my comatose friend. Life Bloom had stopped the bleeding and was casting a replenishment spell.

"How... how bad?"

"We really need to get this girl out of the battle zone," Life Bloom frowned. "I'm using nearly every spell I have just to keep her from slipping away. All this extra trauma isn't helping." The unicorn frowned, shaking his head. "If she doesn't come to on her own soon, Velvet's going to have to make the call." It took me a moment to realize he was referring to the magical operation. Dissolving part of Xenith's skull to ease the pressure on her swelling brain. Velvet Remedy was the only one of us who knew enough about medicine to make an informed decision.

Do we risk Xenith's life by having Life Bloom cast the spell? Or do we risk it by telling him not to?

"How'd you survive that explosion?" I asked, changing the subject to something I could better handle.

"I took cover," the unicorn explained. "Dove into the hole that hellhound came out of."

One of the Wonderbolts, a cloud-white mare with a flaming orange mane, flew overhead. I recognized her as Skydive, the one who had bucked her own contrail and had felled Calamity with her lethal Buckaneer Blaze. Always front and center of their formations, I suspected she was their leader. She stopped, hovering, then shot up into the air disappearing into the smoke directly above Xenith's huddled form.

No.

"Run!" I shouted, wrapping the bleeding, butchered zebra in my magic, my brain ignoring that my body was in no condition to gallop.

A rust-colored blur shot out of the sky. Calamity had me in his hooves, racing between the trees with strands of gauze flapping in the wind behind him. A moment later, the world behind us exploded in a fiery mushroom cloud. The smoky ring of electrified stormclouds struck us, lightning sizzling across my body, making me convulse. My magic imploded, dropping Xenith once again into the forest at bone-crunching speed. (Goddesses, at this rate, we were going to kill her!) Calamity and I crashed into a large patch of purple ferns with long-

stalked, bulb-headed plants growing out of them. We tore roughly through the plants, fronds lashing at us like whips, until we slid to a stop, Calamity laying half on top of me.

I coughed, blood spraying on the ferns and grass. My body felt torn up inside. My E.F.S. was sending me severe internal injury warnings.

The plant stalks' bulbs, each the size of a stallion's head, languidly swiveled down towards us. A magical barrier washed over us a split-second before those bulbs broke open, hosing us with clouds of dusty plant matter. Spores. I turned to see Velvet Remedy charging towards us, her horn glowing, her shield having saved us from Goddesses-knew what horror.

The fiery-maned Wonderbolt burst out of her explosion, her contrail on fire as she shot towards Velvet Remedy. The bulb-headed plants rotated towards the oncoming unicorn. Their bulbs broke open again and spewed.

Velvet tossed up another shield, sliding to a graceful stop. Wonderment splashed over me as I realized just how fast she had gotten with casting that spell. And this was the first time I had seen her manifest two shields at once.

"Muh mare's got skills," Calamity grinned, echoing my thoughts as he lay half on top of me, recovering from the brief electrocution. I pushed him off, looking about, hoping that Xenith had either landed far from the spraying plants or that Velvet's spell had protected her too.

The Wonderbolt shot over Velvet, her contrail causing trees to burst into flames in her wake, and soared over us, setting the bulb-headed plants on fire. The burning plants seemed to scream, writhing and collapsing, the fire spreading to the ferns all around us.

Something plummeted down from the sky.

It wasn't a dive-bombing Wonderbolt. It was more like some sort of missile -- a mechanical device sheathed in red-painted metal that embedded itself in the ground with a mighty WHUMP.

Calamity grabbed me again, flying us out of the bed of ferns being slowly consumed by fire. He coughed as he inhaled the acrid black smoke bellowing up from them, and the little pony in my head recalled earlier fears of dangers in the Everfree smoke. As we landed again, I began to heave, coughing up blood in large, wet splotches.

“Dammit, Li’lpip!” Calamity scolded, fishing out a healing potion. I downed the potion, feeling the warmth of its magic spread through me. There was a slight hint of peaches and alcohol, telling me that Calamity had purchased this bottle from Candi in New Appleloosa. As the potion started to work, I quickly felt less gruesome inside.

The three remaining Wonderbolts flew up, staring down at the strange intruder into our battle.

A plate on the missile slid open, a strange-looking turret with a diamond embedded in the barrel slid out. It turned, aiming up at a sky thick with smoke.

Velvet Remedy screamed.

I threw her a questioning scowl, assuming that something about the mysterious missile had set her off, and did a double-take of horror. The tree next to her had been set ablaze by the Wonderbolt’s fire-contrail, licking flames spreading through its branches, burning leaves falling about her. But that wasn’t what had horrified her. The tree was one of those wrapped in grotesque, bulging patches of blackish moss. And one of those patches, roughly the size and vaguely the shape of a pony, was ripping itself off of the tree.

The moss-creature fell to all fours, looking even more pony-like. But the way it moved, twisted and boneless, was like something from a nightmare.

At first, I hoped it was just fleeing the fire. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw more dark, misshapen forms pulling themselves from the trees.

Calamity drew the magical energy rifle and fired several bursts into the moss-creature as it lumbered towards Velvet Remedy. The creature incinerated colorfully.

A clicking whine sounded from the missile, and the turret's diamond began to glow, projecting the image of a huge, cybernetic red eye against the smoke. The eye jerked back and forth, seeming to watch us. We all heard Red Eye's voice.

"Congratulations, Wonderbolts, on an excellent strategy," Red Eye said amiably.

"Oh yeah," one of the Wonderbolt bucks deadpanned, "This ain't supervillain-y at all."

"Red Eye to the rescue?" Calamity whispered to me as a burning leaf drifted past us.

Red Eye continued, his voice never straying from a pleasant, conversational tone. As if we were sharing tales over tea and apple slices. "Unfortunately, too good. I'm bored. And frankly, I have my own plans for the little unicorn you are tracking..."

Fuck me.

"...So I decided to even up the playing field a bit." The missile let out a pulse and my E.F.S. alerted me that the hellhound-control broadcast had just been silenced.

The Wonderbolts stared from the red eye in the sky to the missile and back. The fiery-maned, cloud-white mare shouted, "Jet's not here. Situation's changed. Tactical retreat." The Wonderbolts began to fly upwards.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you," Red Eye said calmly, the Wonderbolts stopping as if something had them by the tails. "First rule, no flying."

"First rule?" a Wonderbolt buck asked.

“Fuck that,” the fiery-maned mare retorted before flapping her wings and shooting up through the smoke, right through the projected red eye, in a burst of speed.

The other Wonderbolts waited a heartbeat. The moss-monsters began to move towards us with twisted, jerking steps.

The Wonderbolt’s leading mare plunged back down through the smoke, driven downward by a dark green alicorn who slammed her into the ground hard enough to knock her unconscious and nearly kill her.

Calamity spun, firing on a moss-monster that was getting alarmingly close. It turned to ash in a flash of magical energy.

More green alicorns few down through the smoke, landing in the forest around us. A shimmering red alicorn shield swept overhead, forming between them, trapping us and the Wonderbolts inside. I suddenly felt I was back in The Pit.

“Ah’m not sensin’ a whole lot o’ rescue in this rescue,” Calamity muttered as he checked the load on the magical-energy rifle. The moss-monsters were unlikely to be as vulnerable to bullets.

Something fluttered against my thoughts like a bat. I turned about to see the one alicorn inside the shield, standing over the fallen body of the Wonderbolt’s leader, her eyes burrowing into me.

I felt her in my mind. The intrusion was intimate and unwanted.

You are the one Red Eye wants. Her voice was royal and powerful in my head.

Well, I thought back, he can’t have me.

We shall see. In an instant, her voice was joined by a dozen others, all whispering in my head at once, flooding my thoughts with their voices.

They were all green. The daughters of Gestalt and Mosaic. As the tide of voices mounted into a tsunami, I wondered if the green’s natural telepathy made them more stable, more capable of coping with the loss of their Trixie-Goddess... or less.

I fought to hear myself think. What were they doing? And why were they helping Red Eye? What did the alicorns get out of this? What had he promised them?

Males, the voices responded, reading my thoughts. ***Continuation. Survival. Mates!***

Oh. Clever stallion.

The sea of voices increased. Not just dozens. Scores. Red Eye had coaxed almost half of the green alicorns to serve him in exchange for the male alicorns he would create as their new God. And most of them were here in Everfree Forest. At the Cathedral.

I heard Calamity fire the magical rifle again, but I wasn't seeing him. I was getting flashes of what they were seeing. Muddled glimpses inside the stone walls of Red Eye's fortress, all overlapping, too chaotic to make sense of.

Velvet Remedy had moved up to us. She'd said something about Xenith, but I didn't catch it. The minds of the alicorns pressing against my brain were making it hard to keep connected with the real world in front of me.

Above us, the Wonderbolts were circling the top of the shield, flying faster and faster, their thundercloud contrails spinning spirals behind them as they drew closer with each pass. Above them, Red Eye's red eye shifted back and forth across the clouds of smoke, watching the show.

The flood of other-thought was becoming overwhelming.

Then, suddenly, it focused.

FLOAT OUT YOUR GUN, the voices demanded in unison.

I found myself levitating Little Macintosh. It was such a simple request, after all. And I really wanted to. The voices in my head told me so.

AIM AT THE UNICORN.

Okay... What? Wait. Velvet? No!

But the pressure on my mind was like a physical force. The weight of several dozen alicorns pushed me to swing the barrel of Little Macintosh towards Velvet.

AIM AT THE UNICORN.

I fought back, the revolver shaking in the air as I tried to assert my own will. But the alicorns were determined to consume my will, submerge it in their own until I was cut off from it completely. In my head, my little pony was fighting a losing battle as dozens of little alicorns swarmed her, piling up around her like a mountain.

Little Macintosh swiveled in the air, its barrel pointed at Velvet Remedy's skull.

"Littlepip?" Velvet Remedy asked timidly, finally seeing the gun floating in a sheath of my magic, shrinking back from Little Macintosh. "Why are you...?"

KILL THE UNICORN.

Overhead, the Wonderbolts suddenly angled towards each other. They expertly missed colliding in a threesome, their contrails crossing at a focal point perfectly centered above the missile, releasing a star-shaped explosion of electrical energy.

Red Eye's projector went dead, his eye disappearing from the sky. At the same moment, my Eyes-Forward Sparkle collapsed, my PipLeg's spell matrix crashing.

Be awesome!

KILL THE UNICORN.

My little pony was buried under a rising hill of little alicorns, crushing her, stealing her breath. But they weren't the only thoughts pressing on my mind.

Be strong! Be unwavering! Be smart!

This wasn't the first time I had felt the influence of outside entities. The Black Book. The statuettes. But whether those outside thoughts

bore good intentions or ill, I had never let them control me. Influence, yes. But I never lost myself to them.

KILL THE UNICORN!

The mountain of little alicorns filling my head blew apart, their influences scattering as my little mental pony gave them all a mighty buck.

Nope! I pulled Little Macintosh away from Velvet Remedy, firing instead at the alicorn inside the shield. *Not gonna happen!*

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

The alicorn was dead by the second shot, but I didn't stop until I had completely unloaded the weapon. Turns out, if you pour enough bullets into a creature's brain, it really is almost like decapitation.

Beside me, Velvet Remedy looked shocked. She was trembling... no, wait, that was me. The alicorns minds were still in my head, but they were quieter now. One by one, they slipped away from me. The very last left a stray thought behind.

Tell Red Eye she passed.

The intensity of my trembling jumped an order of magnitude, my mind filled with violation, pain and rage. Lowering my head, spitting at the ground, I let out a primal scream.



Movement above caught my eye.

Velvet had found Xenith near the edge of the shield, and the three of us had made our way to her before I had buckled from heat exhaustion. The others weren't doing much better. Velvet had given me the last of her water after pouring most of it gently into Xenith's mouth. I had taken it without argument, but I was regretting it now.

I looked up to see Reggie pounding against the alicorn shield. She'd recovered, but was trapped outside.

“Reggie, yer okay!” Calamity shouted up to her, his voice cracked and rasping. Most of the trees inside the shield were burning now. The Wonderbolts had rebreathers in their armor, but we were dying of smoke inhalation.

“Of course,” she called back. “I carry plenty of healing potions. I’m not an idiot!” Yeah. What kind of morons would wander the Wasteland without each having their own load of them?

Before the griffin could say anything else that made me question my intelligence, I directed her to start killing the statuesque alicorns sitting just outside the shield.

“An’ be careful,” Calamity warned between fits of coughing. “When the shield goes down... this fire...” He collapsed in a hacking fit that sounded like he was trying to get rid of his lungs through his muzzle. Reggie nodded sagely and flew off.

Life Bloom had crept over to the unconscious leader of the Wonderbolts, shoving the still-bleeding corpse of the alicorn off of her.

WHUMP! The blue-armored form of a Wonderbolt dropped out of the curling smoke in front of us. I recognized her rust-colored mane and red-coated snout -- the Wonderbolts’ heavy gunner. I swung Little Macintosh towards her, trying to focus through the smoke stinging my eyes, trying to remember if I had reloaded or not.

“Dammit, this is just too easy,” she said, casually batting Little Macintosh out of my telekinetic grasp with her wing.

Dark, shifting shapes moved out of the smoke, shambling towards her. “Look out,” Calamity rasped as the moss-monsters closed in on the Wonderbolt.

The Wonderbolts’ heavy gunner turned, spraying pink energy across the black moss creatures, dissolving two of them in flashes of pink ash. The third was huge, a giant shadow towering over her. A splash of icy horror trickled down my spine as I realized the moss-monster was vaguely mantichore-shaped. These... these plant-things had once been

living beasts, many of them ponies. This black moss infected them somehow. Consumed them. Became them.

The Wonderbolt dodged as the moss-monster lashed out at her with what had once been a manticore's scorpion-like tail. It was aiming for her head, trying to get inside the narrow split in her helmet which her mane flowed through.

The rust-maned mare opened fire, spraying the moss-manticore with pink light. Parts of the creature dissolved in flashes of ash, but this one wouldn't die so easily. The moss-manticore slashed out with startling alacrity, raking claw-like appendages against her armor, trying to rip off her visor and get at her eyes.

The Wonderbolt staggered, blocking the blows with her wings, keeping the creature off of her face. She fired again, a few beams of pink lancing out before her weapons ran dry.

The moss-manticore exploded into green flame.

The Wonderbolt stumbled back, turned towards us, and was hit by Velvet Remedy's anesthetic spell before she could speak, much less reload. She collapsed in front of the burning monster. A gaping pit opened in the black moss where the manticore's mouth should be, and it screamed silently, green fire burning up through the hole to consume its mockery of a head.

Pyrelight landed on Velvet Remedy's head, looking particularly proud of herself.

"Sorry about that," Velvet apologized to the downed pegasus.

Beyond us, Life Bloom was getting back to his hooves. He wobbled slightly, the toll taken by the memory spell mixing with the heat and the smoke. The Twilight Society unicorn stumbled away from the Wonderbolt and towards a patch of ferns, looking like he was about to pass out.

A bulb-headed stalk rose up out of the ferns as he reached them, spraying its cloud of spores directly into the unicorn's face.

I cried out in alarm, the scream tearing at my throat, but the sound was lost in the sudden conflagration as the alicorn shield dropped and the fires started by Skydive's flaming contrail exploded outward to greet the fresher air.



Night was falling in the Everfree Forest. We had managed to put at least a mile or two between ourselves and the fires. There was a hellish orange glow in the broiling sky above. The world below became all shadows against deeper darkness. Only the light of our horns, Velvet Remedy's and mine, were truly lighting our way.

Life Bloom doubled over again, retching. Bile and filth poured out of his mouth and nose. He had cast a purging spell on himself, trying to get rid of all the spores before they could settle in and begin to slowly kill him. The effects were extremely unpleasant and debilitating, but still far better than the alternative.

We pushed through the forest. I floated Xenith next to me. Velvet Remedy was levitating the wounded albino hellhound. The monster had passed out, and Velvet had simply insisted, "If we leave him, he'll burn alive."

Calamity had insisted he be bound, and Velvet had at least relented on that. I was unsure how much good bindings would do on a huge monster with long, armor-slicing claws.

The hellhound groaned. Xenith was utterly silent.

We had managed to pull off Calamity's plan with three of the Wonderbolts: Jet, Skydive and Strafewise, their heavy gunner. None of them had joined up with us, although Strafewise at least admitted it was "a lot to take in and a lot to think about" before she and Skydive left us. If there was a truce, it was unspoken. The Wonderbolts' two bucks, Lensflare and Gutshot, were unaccounted for. From what little I knew of each of them, I doubted Calamity's memories would be enough to alter either of their minds. Lensflare was his eldest brother's friend and

lover; the buck had yet to engage us directly. Gutshot, on the other hoof...

"Whoa," Calamity whistled, pulling me out of my reverie. Ahead of us, the Everfree forest was filled with beautiful plants which glowed a bioluminescent green. Pyrelight flew ahead, dancing amongst the plants, singing merrily. They grew along vines that wrapped around the trees and snaked across the forest floor.

"Yes," Velvet chuckled to the balefire phoenix as Pyrelight swooped back to her, one of the flowers tucked into her feathers by the stem. "It does go nicely with your plumage."

"What d'ya figure they are?" Calamity asked as he flew cautiously into the area. "Think they're safe?" Personally, I wasn't ready to count anything in the Everfree Forest as safe.

"Safe-er, maybe," Reggie commented. "I'll tell you what I ain't seein'. Little vines of blue evil."

"That's cuz..." the hellhound rasped, startling us all enough that Velvet's magic imploded, dropping him. He landed on the soft grass without a grunt. "...phantasmal flowers ur deadly tu killeen joke."

"Deadly how?" Life Bloom asked, the only one of us not focused entirely on the fact that a member of a race of vicious pony-slayers had just woken up in our midst. I didn't want to have a conversation with this monster. The little pony in my head was screaming at me to launch it to the moon. Or, at least, as high as I sent those of its kind who murdered SteelHooves.

"Feed off the same psychic energy, Uh think," the hellhound said, then barked as Calamity immediately retreated from the flowers. "They's harmless. Tu dogs en ponies, Uh mean. But tu killeen joke, they's like weeds in the worst way."

We looked at each other. Reggie finally shrugged. "Well, if you're willin' t' take the word of a one-legged slice-n-dice..." Without further words, she flew into the gently glowing stretch of the Everfree Forest.

Velvet Remedy wrapped her magic around the hellhound again, lifting him up.

“Uh, Velvet?” Calamity asked, wondering just what she was doing. “Ah c’n see not leavin’ him in the middle o’ a fire. But why don’t we leave him here?”

Velvet gave Calamity a honey-sweet smile which she slowly turned on the hellhound as she spoke. “Because we should leave him someplace safe, and if in those flowers is as safe as he says, he won’t mind coming with us.”

“Pony,” the hellhound started, addressing Velvet as she floated him back off the ground. He was still bound, but I couldn’t help but notice he hadn’t really tested his restraints yet. Hell, he hadn’t even tried. “Why save me?”

Velvet Remedy replied without even having to think. “Because you were hurt.”

“Ponies don’t heal,” the hellhound countered. “Ponies kill, destroy, take.”

“Strange,” Velvet retorted. “That’s what ponies say about hellhounds.” Wonderful. Why don’t we just poke the hellhound with a stick.

“Hey!” Reggie called back to us, having gotten a bit ahead. “There’s a... something up here.”

Moving forward beneath the glowing orange sky, we discovered a hollowed-out tree, almost as gnarled and twisted as Fluttershy, draped in thick vines and glowing with hundreds of phantasmal flowers. At the foot of the tree, littered amongst its contorted roots, were ancient and fearsome wooden masks carved in faces that looked demonic. Strange bottles and flasks hung from the branches along with a wind chime made of bones. The phantasmal flowers spread out from the tree like ripples from a stone dropped in a lake.

Wait... (be smart!) ...I’d seen this before. Places like this. In a dream.

“Shelter?” Life Bloom suggested hopefully.

“Or deathtrap. Our luck, could go either way.”



“Drink,” Velvet Remedy commanded with her usual bedside manner as she lifted the bottle of to the albino hellhound’s muzzle. “If you’re waiting for sparkling water, you’ll die of dehydration first.” The hollowed tree was a refuge, a home crafted by zebra magic. The bottled brew had come from the refrigerator. Most of what was in the fridge had succumbed to mold, although not of the black and ambulatory kind. Only a few bottles remained unbroken and theoretically safe. “Look, I’ll take a sip first, if it helps.”

Calamity gazed at the glowing green flowers whose vines embraced the ancient zebra home almost as much inside as out, snaking about all the decaying furniture and hanging from the ceiling. Beautiful and serenely eerie.

There was an old terminal, long dead, amongst the rotting boards that had once been a desk. Or possibly a bureau. The spark battery still had some magic left, and I was hoping I could jury-rig a way to reboot my PipLeg from the remains of the arcano-tech device.

“So, what all d’ya know ‘bout these here phantasmal flowers?” Calamity asked. Velvet Remedy hissed at him, eyes narrowed. Talking hellhounds weren’t drinking hellhounds. “What?”

“Zebra plants. Used tu make powders tu conjure up frightful illusions,” the hellhound told us. “Never kud get that tu work urselves, but mash them up just rite und they make uh fine gloween paste.” He grinned, showing lots of very sharp teeth. “Slather it on un old sawhorse covered en brahmin skins and jerk et around on strings like uh puppet, und watch the ponies scream und run from the headless horse.”

“Why would you do that?” Velvet Remedy asked.

“Why would anyone be scared o’ that?” Reggie wondered.

The hellhound grinned again. “Cuz ponies ur stoopid.”

We all glowered at him, except for Reggie who was too busy snickering. Calamity muttered something about the stupidity of saving him, earning another dark look from Velvet.

Finally, the hellhound offered, "Not all dogs want tu kill ponies. Most du. But some of us just want tu be left alone." Scowling, he told us, "Ur alphas wanted war with the old ponies und with the new ponies und with the Goddesses. So we left Maripony. Made ur own home. Made ghosts und the headless horse tu scare ponies away."

Well, better than having them shoot at us.

"That is, till you ponies flew up en one of yur big, black cloud-boats und dropped that damned antenna en ur yard. Made us all sit still while you put those damned helmets on us. Make us go where you want. Kill who you want..."

My hoof hit my face. Perfect. The one group of hellhounds in the entire damned Wasteland that might be friendly, and the Enclave went in and fucked with their heads.

"...All but Barking Saw. That old dog might have the best eyes en the Wasteland, but he's old und senile und, best of all, stone deaf. Took out a mess of you ponies with his sniper rifle already. Bet he's still back at the farm, shooteen anything pony-shaped that pokes its head out."

Well, that would be why the Wonderbolts used the Hope Solar Array to hide in rather than the farm itself. "Why doesn't he just shoot up the broadcasting array?" I asked as I tried futilely to make the terminal do something useful.

The albino hellhound scowled at me. "What part of deaf und senile you don't git?"

"Ouch," Reggie whispered.

I tossed aside my work with the terminal in frustration, turning instead to a locked chest in the corner of the zebra home. It was metal and looked out-of-place with the rest of the age-tattered décor. And unlike the terminal, I knew how to make the lock do what I wanted it to. Out of nostalgia, I floated out a bobby pin and my screwdriver.

Velvet once again pestered the hellhound to drink. I began to suspect his refusal was more a game of piss-off-the-pony to him than borne of any actual concern about the contents.

“Velvet,” Life Bloom said, gently putting a hoof on her shoulder. “We need to talk about Xenith. She hasn’t woken up yet. The swelling is getting worse. If I’m going to use my trepanation spell, I should do it now.”

The lock yielded to me without a fight. I lifted open the chest, looking inside. A stone plate with a carved inscription, an old audio recording, and an oddly-hued hunk of pock-marked rock. Everything else in the chest was decayed into slime and dust. The inscription on the stone was in an archaic pony script, like zebra glyphs, but using symbols including horns, lightning bolts, horseshoes and unicorn busts. I had no idea what it said.

Reggie looked over my shoulder. Then called back, “Hey, any of you know how to read Pretentious?” I snorted, quite sure that wasn’t the proper name of the language.

“eh... nope,” Calamity said succinctly. Life Bloom and Velvet Remedy strode up to look.

“When the Five are present, a spark will cause the Sixth to be revealed.” Life Bloom read. “It’s talking about the Elements of Harmony,” he said. “A slight variation on a passage from *The Elements of Harmony, A Reference Guide*. Probably the original. From the looks of the stone, this plate was part of the Castle of the Sisters.”

“Then what’s it doing here?”

I took a closer look at the chest, searching it until I found the gear-shaped Stable-Tec logo stamped onto the bottom corner.

“Stable-Tec built a Stable under the ruins of that castle,” I mused. “They must have torn quite a bit of it up to do so.” I floated out the audio recording, wishing my PipLeg worked. Or, at least, the terminal.

"If none of you have a particular need for that stone, the Twilight Society would appreciate the right to claim it," Life Bloom said before he and Velvet Remedy returned to discussing Xenith.

"Pfft," Reggie pffted, "What would I want with a dumb rock?" *To bad there isn't an Element of Snarkiness*, the little pony in my head snarked back.

"Ah prefer decorations Ah c'n read muhself," Calamity said, flying away to one of the windows.

The memory that had slipped from my mental grasp earlier returned to dance in front of me. "Velvet!" I spun to face her. "I think..." I paused. Better slow down. This is by no means a sure thing. "I believe there might, and I stress *might*, be a way to save Fluttershy."

The beautiful unicorn mare's eyes opened wide, glistening with eager hope. "How?" she asked, followed promptly by, "Can we do it now?"

"There's a book I read, *Supernaturals*. It's full of old remedies, one of which is to reverse the transformations caused by something called poison joke," I said carefully. "I still have the book back at Junction R-7."

Velvet Remedy smile thankfully, but I was already having serious doubts. "And you think that will turn Fluttershy back into a pony?"

"No," I admitted. I was sure that killing joke was a mutated, vicious cousin of the plant described in *Supernaturals*. But they were vastly different, even in their magical touch. The book said the transformations caused by poison joke occurred overnight, but killing joke inflicted its cruelty instantly. In the very least, it was a far more potent magic. "Not as it is. But I think the recipe is the starting point for creating a cure."

Velvet Remedy nodded, looking grimly determined but still hopeful.

And if it could? Was this really a good idea? What if the cure turned Fluttershy back into a two-century-old pony? And even if she was restored physically to her prime, was there any chance her sanity would

be intact? I reluctantly voiced my concerns to Velvet Remedy, only to be surprised by her resolve.

“If that is the case, then I will do what Fluttershy needs me to,” Velvet Remedy stated flatly. “But one way or another, her torture ends.”

The room fell quiet.

A realization passed over Velvet’s face. She turned to Life Bloom. “Now it’s not just my friend’s life you hold in your horn, but the life of the greatest of ponies too.” She bit her lower lip. “Xenith is the only one who knows enough about herbs and alchemy and magical plants to know how to create a new recipe from Littlepip’s old one. Do what you have to do. And may the Goddesses’ hooves guide you.”

Having said those words, Velvet Remedy slowly walked over towards where Calamity was standing, watching her. Her last steps faltered and he moved to support her, holding her close.

Calamity nuzzled the weary unicorn lovingly, then turned to stare out the window at this eerily beautiful patch of the Everfree Forest.

His expression slowly hardened.

“uh, folks. Ya better take a look at this...”

Footnote: Maximum Level

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



THE KINGDOM OF THE BLIND

"Are you not happy that your quest is complete and you can return to your studies in Canterlot?"

"...rocks.

"I can't believe this whole war has been about rocks. Gems. Coal. Rarity said something about a meteorite, but she got all evasive when she realized I had overheard. Whatever. (Like it was hard to figure out. Sometimes I'm slow, but I'm not stupid.)

"Dumb rocks.

"I used to think rocks were cool. I mean, my big sister has gems for a cutie mark. And Pinkie Pie once lived on a rock farm. We even used to play a game, Scootaloo and Apple Bloom and me. We found the rock that Rarity had gotten her cutie mark from, and I made Twilight Sparkle enchant it so that we can make it open and close (she kinda owed us for that whole Smarty Pants thing). We called it the Rock of Destiny, and we'd pretend that when it opened up, it would give us our

cutie marks. Twilight made it so each of us could set a pass phrase to open it. Mine was 'Dumb Rock' so I could pretend I was just like my sister. (I changed it to 'Apple Pie' for a while, but then changed it back. Just as well. My sis and I haven't been apple pie in a long time. Not since the Ministries.)

"I hope you don't mind me using your place. I mean, of course you can't mind, but I hope you don't anyway. Sometimes, I just have to get away from all the noise. It's so nice and peaceful here. And I really love your flowers.

"Anyway, I guess I'm thinking about rocks because we found chunks of that meteorite when we dug into Luna's old foundry under the castle last week. It was all broken up because they'd taken all the ore out of it, and they'd sealed up the pieces. I felt kinda sorry for it. Ponies and zebras blame it for all sorts of stupid stuff. It's not the rock's fault. It's just a rock. And I kinda know what it's like, being blamed for stuff. (Seems, sometimes, everything I do just makes things worse.) So I had them make one of the bigger chunks into a cornerstone. As an apology or something, I dunno. Make it feel useful. Yes, I know that's stupid; it's just a rock.

"So... I guess not dumb rocks. Just dumb ponies and zebras.

"I came up here yesterday. Building the last Stable in Everfree was my idea, so I wanted to be here. Especially after we started having problems. (Rarity said that Everfree Forest is the one place she was sure the zebra's wouldn't attack; so I thought, 'Why are we putting all the Stables in places we think they will attack? Doesn't it make sense to put at least one somewhere they won't?' Yes, the forest is dangerous, but it can't be that dangerous -- you lived here, and my sister and her friends used to go into it all the time. Well... just another of my ideas that ended up a mess.)

Apple Bloom had warned me about the poison joke, but was it always this... aggressive? It's been really bad the last three days. Moonbeam said it's like the excavation is attracting it. He thinks that either it's vibrosensitive (which isn't even a word) or it wants to be near people, but that doesn't make any sense. It's a plant, right? But then, Apple Bloom says you told her the plants want a laugh. How can a plant want something?

"I'm sorry. I know I'm rambling. I guess my thoughts aren't too coherent. I'm just trying to work things out.

"I think...

"I think we've lost our faith.

"Does that make any sense? It's like everything we're supposed to believe in has gotten dark and crumbled. Like the air is heavy. No... that doesn't make any sense. Like... I dunno. Like everything is too real. You know, like when you're just a filly and you look up to someone and they're your idol? But then you learn they're not perfect like you imagined? That they're flawed, just like everypony else? Maybe that's just growing up though.

"It's like we've forgotten how to have heroes. Only worse. We've forgotten how to believe in each other. In ponies. Even Scootaloo... she's trying to fix ponies with all these experiments.

"I once told Scootaloo I thought she was trying to make ponies like they were when we were kids. You know what she said? She said, 'Nostalgia is mostly just make-believe.' Isn't that horrible?

"I... um...

"I've started having second thoughts. Maybe we should just stick to saving ponies. Maybe it's not right for us to try to fix things. But then, won't it all be for nothing, like Scootaloo says?

"I don't know anymore. Sometimes these experiments feel... I dunno... wrong. I know they're not dangerous. We've made extra, extra sure. But I still don't feel right doing experiments on ponies who are just trying to survive. Isn't that wrong? It's not like it's their fault... not most of them, anyway. (The ones in Stable One, maybe.) I just want to save them and give them a chance. Kinda like the rocks, I guess.

"I even almost told Rarity about the experiments. But I didn't. Because... well... I'd be betraying Scootaloo and Apple Bloom if I told. And I'm not sure Rarity would do the right thing if I told her. I really don't like the Ministry of Image. And if that's what she is now...

"...Like I said before, we haven't been apple pie in a long time. Sometimes, the little statue of Rarity that my sister gave me feels more like my sister than she does.

"Today, I did ask Scootaloo if Stable 101 could be made a 'control' Stable instead, but she and Apple Bloom both insisted the experiment here was too important.

"And part of me still thinks Scootaloo's right. Like maybe we really do have to fix ponies. To figure out what went wrong so everything doesn't get so... so... bad again. But how many times do we have to try before we get it right? And what happens when we fail? This time, the cost can be so much more than tree sap and pine needles.

"...

"Scootaloo has been looking at me funny. I think maybe she knows I'm having second thoughts.

"Anyway... sorry for all the rambling. Thanks for letting me use your place. And thanks for listening. Apple Bloom is right. You really are a good person to talk to, Zecora.

"We're all very, very sad about what happened to you. I hope you're at peace."



You better take a look at this...

We all stared upwards, our eyes lifted above the dark silhouettes of the forest trees. The sky was a cloudy haze that glowed a hellish orange, lit from the fires that stretched for miles below. Our gazes were fixed on the massive black shadow slowly moving through the Everfree fire-sky, brilliant flashes of lightning erupting along its sides. It was moving towards us, but we were not its destination.

The *Overcast*.

This was a day too soon. Goddesses damn him, Colonel Autumn Leaf was jumping the whistle on his own attack plan!

"Muh brother's on that ship." Calamity's tone was dour.

I pranced in agitation. This was not good. Why the hell would he...? A sudden wave of weariness passed over me. It had been far too long, and far too rough a day. I needed sleep. I wasn't going to get it.

Above us, more lightning flashed as the four raptors moored to the *Overcast* began to pull away, their smaller thunderclouds pulling free of the Thunderhead warship's massive ones. Two of them began to move ahead while the other two flanked the mobile siege platform.

"Okay," I said, spinning around and addressing the others. "Change of plan..." I looked over the ponies (and griffin) who had followed me this far. Part of me dreaded what I was about to say. But part of me knew it would somehow be this way. "...We'll have to split up."

Before anypony could protest, I explained, "The Enclave is moving on the Cathedral now. They'll be there in, what, a few hours?" I looked to Calamity who nodded at my assessment. "And we can't all go. Xenith shouldn't be moved anymore, especially not after Life Bloom uses his spell." With a grudging reluctance, I added, "And neither should the hellhound."

Velvet Remedy agreed quietly, staring back at her patients. Life Bloom was moving about Xenith's bed, preparing to cast his trepanation spell.

"Life Bloom and I need to stay," she intoned, sparing me the task of saying it. She smiled sadly to Calamity, "And you, love, need to go."

"Pyrelight," I instructed. "Keep them safe." The balefire phoenix hooted, perching up straight and giving me a one-winged salute.

"Ah don't know if Ah c'n do this..." Calamity admitted. "After all he's done, after all the ponies dead... Ah know Autumn needs t' be put down. But Ah don't think Ah can..." He looked at me, his eyes wide and hurting. "Muh own brother."

I remembered Pride's change after learning the Enclave had marked Calamity for death. That, in fact, Autumn Leaf (his own brother!) had ordered my best friend's execution.

"Then it's a good thing you're takin' me with you," Reggie said flatly.

Velvet Remedy gave a pained look.

"It's a hard thing, goin' against kin," Reggie said. "T' take down your own brother... I don't think I could have done it if Kage had gone bad. Nobody blames you fer not takin' that shot."

Calamity watched her check the load on her guns, guns he had custom made for the adolescent griffin. "If it helps at all, you'll be puttin' a stop t' his murderin' ways even still." It struck me that Reggie viewed those guns as a stand-in for Calamity -- a way for him to be part of what he needed to be but couldn't -- much in the same way she carried Kage's blades.

"So, Li'lpip, what's the plan?" Calamity asked. "How the hell are we s'posed t' make it through miles o' fire an' whatever else Everfree's keepin' in it's back pocket, an' get t' Red Eye's base b'fore they do?"

"We don't," I answered him simply. I raised a hoof to the sky, pointing towards the *Overcast*. "We're going to hitch a ride. On that."



Calamity, Reggie and I made our preparations while Life Bloom's horn glowed and he tried to work a miracle. We didn't have a lot of time. We wanted to give the *Overcast* enough time to pass us by, but not enough to move out of sight.

"This is a stealth mission," I proclaimed, wincing at the groans. "Hey, we've got this one in the bag. We've got two stealth cloaks now," I pointed out, counting the albino hellhound's cloak along with Xenith's. "And I have the advanced StealthBuck."

"Which only works for a few hours," Velvet Remedy warned.

"True, but we shouldn't need it for even that," I suggested. "Once we get up there, we'll snag a set of Enclave magically-powered armor for Calamity, and I'll take the cloak."

"Aw, crap," Calamity muttered. He dipped his head, tossing off his hat. "Can't be bringin' this then." He stared at his trusty black desperado hat. Half of it was badly burned from the Buccaneer Blaze. To be

honest, it no longer really looked right on his head. In fact, it made me wince, remembering how painfully hurt he had been.

“Ah loved that hat.”

“I’ll take care of it until you get back,” Velvet Remedy promised, her words carrying a subtle insistence that he would come back.

Brilliant scarlet light flashed over Xenith then settled in a halo about her head, making her look like a sleeping angel. I remembered how she looked with bat-like wings the day she saved her daughter. The mental images combined strangely.

Life Bloom was sweating, straining in focused concentration.

Calamity dumped the contents of his saddlebags (which I swear took up more space in the hut than the saddlebags could possibly have held, and had apparently come to include several bottles and jars of desiccated herbs and dust that Calamity had scavenged from the hut itself) insisting he wanted to “travel light.”

“You won’t fight your brother, but you’ll be taking as much of his ship as you can carry, won’t you?”

“Ayep.”

Reggie, meanwhile, had decided she was as ready as she could be, and was leaning in the doorway, smoking another cigarette. Velvet Remedy huffed at her.

“Yeah, right,” Reggie said with a roll of her eyes. “I shouldn’t smoke. Might burn down the forest or somethin’.”

“You could at least show some respect for your health,” Velvet commented.

Reggie just lifted an eyebrow then waved a wing the direction of the ponies she had chosen to assist, particularly me. “Yeah. Cuz I’m well known fer makin’ healthy choices.”

Velvet opened her muzzle, a retort on her tongue, then closed it again as a look of heartbreaking defeat blanketed her body. "It's too late, isn't it?"

"Bout the smokin' or me followin' you lot?" Reggie blew a ring of smoke. "Way I see it, if I quit, it would be like sayin' I made a mistake in insistin' on lendin' a wing. An' that would be like saying *Kage* made a mistake. An', well... that just ain't gonna happen."

But Velvet wasn't talking about Reggie's life choices. She turned to me with a horrified look. "Littlepip... please... be honest..." Her voice was fragile. "The fire... how long before it reaches Fluttershy?" She swallowed hard. "It's already there, isn't it? She's already dead. Or... or..." My lovely unicorn friend could not bring herself to say that Fluttershy was dying. But it was clear from the pain in her expression that she was imagining Fluttershy, burning alive slowly in utter agony. It was too cruel an end for too cruel a life. I couldn't bring myself to say that, by my best estimate, the fire had been there since nightfall. Maybe it was corrupted kindness to be dishonest about this, but I just couldn't tell her the truth. It would destroy her.

I opened my muzzle to lie. But I was interrupted before I managed the first word.

"Doesn't matter," Reggie told her, drawing stares and glares from everyone except Life Bloom, who was too deep in concentration to notice his surroundings.

"..." Velvet stared, muzzle open, her heart tearing apart in front of us. "...what..."

Reggie looked taken aback. "Oh, wait..." She looked at us all. "You don't know?"

"Know what?" Calamity said carefully.

"The fire ain't burnin' the trees," Reggie announced. My jaw was not the only one to drop. She looked at us and shook her head. "Hells, it would be easier if I showed you. I don't think you'd believe me otherwise."

"What do you mean, the fires aren't burning the trees?"

"Just that," Reggie replied. "Got a good look after you all ran off and left me half-dead in a tree." As she said that, her voice was not accusatory. If anything, she sounded amused. "Red Eye's fire brigade pushed past my position. Saw 'em hose down a moss-covered tree with one o' their flamethrowers. I swear on my mother's name that the flames went right through the tree like it wasn't even there."

"But..." Velvet's voice betrayed her desperation, "But we saw the trees burning! When we were fighting the Wonderbolts, remember?" She looked at me, and I could sense that she wanted me to tell her it was just her imagination. That Reggie was right and there was nothing to worry about. I thanked Luna that this time I didn't need to lie.

"Those trees were burning because of that trick Skydive pulled," I reminded her. "That wasn't from Red Eye's fires."

Calamity shook his head, looking at Regina. "An' ya didn't mention this b'fore..."

"Hells, I thought you knew. Besides, I was totally focused on the rest of the freaky!" The griffin tossed her cigarette to the floor and ground it under a hindpaw. "The tree didn't catch, but the moss on it sure ignited. Then it began t' heave an' thrash an' tear itself off the tree even as it burnt up. I swear it looked like it was screamin'. I'll have nightmares for weeks!"

"Well daymn," Calamity whistled.

"The fire... isn't burning... Fluttershy's safe?" Warring emotions wracked Velvet Remedy.

"Yes," I murmured, my eyes going wide as the gears in my mind started turning again. I had seen the reports of Red Eye's research into Bypass Spells. *His scientists had been working to apply a bypass to some sort of weapon effect. The full details had been redacted after the research had been successful.* Xenith had told me she had worked in one of the buildings where they were creating flamethrower fuel, but I'd never put the two together. "At least... for now."

“For now?” Velvet’s voice was small, but hopeful.

“Red Eye ain’t the sort t’ waste resources, is he, Li’lpip?” Calamity asked, clearly following my train of thought. “He’s cleansin’ the Everfree Forest, but he ain’t gonna burn down the trees. He wants the lumber.”

I nodded.

I could see a calculating light in Velvet’s eyes. Her quest now had a timeline that she could see. Xenith had to recover, and they had to brew a remedy that would save Fluttershy, before Red Eye’s forces finished burning the forest and proceeded far enough in their harvesting to reach the top of Killing Joke Hill.

“You want dis?” the hellhound interrupted abruptly, holding up his zebra stealth cloak; his bindings lay useless around him. “Ur not gitteen it less you give me somethen back.” There was a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“What do you want in return for your generous offer?” Velvet asked diplomatically as she pointedly looked at the stump of a leg which she had treated and dressed.

“Them claw blades,” the hellhound barked, pointing at Kage’s hellhound claw knives strapped in Reggie’s belt.

“Oh HELLS no!” The young griffin flew almost within claw reach of the hellhound, guns drawn, before she was yanked short, her tail in Calamity’s teeth. “These. Are. My. Brother’s!”

“Uh figger they belonged tu one uh *ur* brothers before him,” the hellhound growled back, unimpressed and vicious.

“How jush holl on!” Calamity came as close to shouting as he could without letting Reggie’s tail out of his mouth. “Ah figger we c’n shoof ya an’ haf bofe!” He shifted, pointing his battle saddle at the hellhound.

Being an amputee had not made him any less dangerous; the albino hellhound was swifter than any of us expected. He had an arm around Velvet Remedy, his claws -- sharp enough and strong enough to slice

metal -- right against her face! Their barest touch was drawing blood. Velvet eeped sharply.

"How fast?" he challenged coldly.

I levitated Little Macintosh in front of me. "Let her go, real gentle, or you are so amazingly dead it won't matter."

Astonishingly, the crippled hellhound stared down the five guns pointed at him and didn't blink.

Velvet's horn flashed. The hellhound dropped limply back onto his bed, one of his claws sliding across Velvet's face as his hand fell away. Blood gushed from the wound, staggering her.

"Don't shoot him," she ordered as she stumbled back, holding a hoof to her face. The claw had barely missed slicing open one of her eyes. "Littlepip! Your spell. Please!"

We had used up all the healing bandages and potions that we had. There was nothing left to aid Velvet with but the dark spell I had been granted by The Black Book. Once again, I let myself draw on that knowledge to create a cast from Velvet's own blood, wrapping half her head in a ruddy mask.

Calamity rushed to Velvet's side, shoring her up. He growled at the hellhound and clearly really, really wanted to shoot the monster. But Velvet wouldn't let him. Instead, she turned to her attacker and spoke with a touch of sympathy.

"I completely agree with how abhorrent it is that some ponies have made weapons out of your kind's *body parts*." She looked at us with the one eye not hidden under solidified blood. "And anypony here who doesn't should try to imagine seeing a creature wielding a weapon made of pony hooves!"

Addressing the (extremely pissed-looking) albino again, "So in trade for the use of your cloak, we are giving you this..." Her horn glowed again, and Xenith's hellhound-claw helmet floated over and rested upon the albino hellhound's chest (ignoring the strangled sound of protest from

Calamity). "... but you will not be taking Kage Grimfeather's blades from Regina," she added sternly. "I am sorry."

She frowned. "And for your aggression, you will be spending the rest of our time together under the effects of this spell. It is never intelligent to attack your doctor."

Velvet Remedy stepped away. Then her knees gave a little tremble. A moment later, she had dropped to them, breathing heavily, letting her panic wash over her now that the crisis had passed.

Calamity laid down next to her and held her, nuzzling her gently. She buried her face in his mane, shedding tears born from the rollercoaster of hope, despair and mortal danger that the last few minutes had thrown my friend through.

The scarlet glow faded, and Life Bloom staggered, slumping to the floor next to Xenith. Pulling her muzzle out of Calamity's orange mane, Velvet Remedy immediately bombarded Life Bloom with questions about how it went; the only answer he could give was a weak, "We shall see. It's up to her now."

"Then she'll pull through," Velvet proclaimed, her breathing still a little shaky. She seemed to draw strength from caring for her friends. "Xenith's a fighter. A survivor. More than you could know."

I discovered I was smiling. Just a little.

Somewhere, somepony gave what sounded like a polite cough.

I caught Reggie's movement out of the corner of my eye. She drew her guns at the speed of Rainbow Dash and had the twins pointed out the doorway in front of her.

"We got company," she warned, growling.

Dammit! I was so hoping the Enclave would pass Zecora's Hut without taking interest. I really didn't want to fight right now.

Velvet moaned. Behind me, Life Bloom was trying to get up; but he was too exhausted to stand, barely able to keep his eyes open.

“Enclave?” he asked. Pyrelight swept across the room to perch on Reggie’s head, glaring out the door with her.

“No,” Reggie said, wincing at Pyrelight’s talons. “Red Eye. One o’ his damned sprite-bots.”

True, it made sense he’d have some wandering this close to his home base, but I heard no music. Watcher!

“Wait,” I called out, waving. “Hold your fire. This might be a friendly.”



Thunder rumbled overhead like the steady beat of war drums. The *Overcast* was passing directly above us, the massive siege platform blocking out the fiery light reflecting off of the clouds of smoke; the flowers ringing Zecora’s Hut seemed to shed even more beautiful bioluminescence in the deeper darkness.

Colonel Autumn Leaf was either oblivious to our presence, or he was too focused now to care.

“It’s been a long time since my home felt crowded,” Watcher was saying. With the mechanical monotone of the sprite-bot, I couldn’t tell if he was pleased or complaining. “At least half of the people you asked me to gather have already arrived.”

“Huh?” Calamity blinked. “Li’lpip? Ya asked him t’ what now?”

“We don’t have enough time,” I told my pegasus friend bluntly. “The Enclave is moving too fast; I can’t be everywhere at once...” Truth was, I was about to ask even more of Spike. And he wasn’t going to like it.

“Don’tcha mean *we*?” Calamity asked pointedly. My little pony scowled at me and virtually grabbed my head, making me nod apologetically.

“Yes... but, that’s kinda the point,” I offered lamely. “We need every ally we can get if we’re going to pull this off...”

“Ah note ya still haven’t filled us in on exactly what this plan o’ yers is,” Calamity grouched. “Ah’m trustin’ there’s a good reason fer that.”

"There is," I assured him. Yeah. Great reason: you would try to stop me if you knew. "In the meantime, I've asked Watcher to contact all the people we know who can help and start bringing them together."

"And I'm afraid I have some bad news," Watcher said through the sprite-bot. "One of your guests isn't going to be able to make it." I felt an icy cold wash through my mane. The obvious implication was that someone had died.

"Who?" I asked, the little pony in my head suggesting we really didn't want to know. "What happened?"

"Homage," Watcher said, and my world plunged out from under me, leaving me in a numbingly cold void. Luna... no...

The sensation was as intense as it was brief, dispelled by Watcher's next words, "And nothing yet. But the Enclave has figured out that DJ Pon3 is moving from one S.P.P. tower to another, hacking in to make those broadcasts, and they've started parking Raptors above each of the towers, just waiting for her to make her next move."

Thank you, Luna! Celestia please keep her safe!

A huge part of me wanted to dash off to her aid. But doing so could lead the enemy right to her. And I knew she would not approve of me abandoning the good fight just to make it to her side.

"Fortunately, the Enclave don't have enough Raptors to spare for every tower, and she's not making it easy for them," Watcher explained. "But their dragnet is eventually going to catch her."

"Not if we c'n help it." Calamity stepped up beside me, putting a hoof on my head. "If Ah know Li'lpip, this plan o' hers is gonna pull the heat offa Homage in a big way."

I gave him a worried but thankful smile. He was right about that. We had to win now. We always had to, but now it was for more than just the wasteland. Now I was fighting to keep Homage safe. I realized how horribly selfish it was of me to place the safety of one pony as equal to the needs of tens or even hundreds of thousands of ponies. But I didn't

care. Homage was... Homage was Homage, and I was allowed to be just a little selfish when it came to her, wasn't I?

"Homage herself insisted she can't make it. She doesn't want to risk drawing the Enclave to the rest of... the Resistance is what she's calling all you guys." *Resistance Radio*. That's what the Tenpony residents had taken to calling DJ Pon3's broadcasts. Clearly, she'd adopted the moniker. "I'll try to have a sprite-bot nearby so she can talk to us," Watcher offered. "And she told me to tell you that she's sending some more allies your way."

Allies are good. I liked allies. We could use all the friends we could get.

Then reality struck. The blow hit me, cold and sharp and hard, nearly knocking me over. Part of me had been clinging to the belief that I would see Homage again when I gathered everyone together at Spike's cave... at that final gathering before I set my plan into action. A final respite before I galloped headlong into my destiny.

But Homage, the one pony I wanted and needed to see most, was not going to be there. At most, I might hear her voice. Speak to her. But she would not be there to touch, to hold, to kiss... goodbye.

My legs were wet noodles, utterly unable to hold the titanic weight of my breaking heart. *I was never going to see Homage again.*

With a burst of static, the sprite-bot started playing the heavy, ominous music of the Enclave. Watcher was gone. His time was up. I barely noticed. I was too busy crying my heart out.



The drumming of the *Overcast's* thunderclouds was receding. There was no more time. We needed to go.

I realized I could still hear the low horns and booming drums, the mournful tones of violins: the music from the sprite-bot. It hadn't wandered away. It was watching us.

I knew there was no way that Red Eye had been using these things for so long -- had been running operations in Fillydelphia from a Ministry

of Morale hub -- without knowing that these machines could be used to spy.

Grim resolve flooded through me, drowning out the agony in my heart. Not killing it, but just letting me not feel it for a while. I pushed myself to my hooves and strode determinedly over to where the sprite-bot was floating amongst the trees, still within sight of Zecora's Hut.

Red Eye knew we were here. Knew where to find us. I wanted to make it clear that wasn't necessary.

"We're coming," I told the sprite-bot, sure that I was all but addressing Red Eye directly. "That's what you wanted, right?"

The sprite-bot kept playing music.

I stared at it for a long minute, possibly two, before turning away in disgust. "Calamity! Reggie! Let's go hitch ourselves a ride."

I started to walk away from the sprite-bot, then stopped. I trotted back around to it, my horn glowing softly as I announced, "Sorry. I have to kill you." This time, however, I wasn't addressing Red Eye, but the sprite-bot itself. My PipLeg was still dead, and I was going to use the little spy machine to reboot it.

My telekinesis opened the repair hatch on the sprite-bot and yanked its spark battery.

The sprite-bot dropped like a stone. Dead. Or the robot equivalent of dead.

Sitting, I proceeded to disconnect audio and video feeds then bring it back to life, a robot vegetable. (Or something like that. Whatever. Stupid robots, making all my metaphors awkward.)

I looked down at where my PipBuck was grotesquely melded into my foreleg. Miserably, I realized that maybe it was for the best that Homage never saw me again. Let her last memories of me be before the balefire bomb. Before Canterlot. And before Arbu.

Life Bloom approached me as I was rebooting my PipLeg.

I assumed he was going to offer comfort, or ask a question about Watcher or the gathering. I pre-empted the conversation, somepony else on my mind. “How did you meet Homage?” My voice sounded small to me. I didn’t have the will to hide the sadness that was leaking into it.

Life Bloom paused, then sat down next to me. “The Twilight Society assigned her to me,” he told me. “They thought I would be able to connect with her.”

Leaning forward on his forehooves, Life Boom gave me the story. “When she first gained residency in Tenpony Tower, she was in mourning. She’d lost the mare she loved, and she didn’t know if she could ever find love again.” He smiled gently. “I’m happy to see she was wrong.”

That only made it hurt worse. My heart was bleeding onto the ground and I could feel the tears building up behind my eyes. They felt like fire. Even worse, the little pony in my head didn’t really want to hear about Homage’s past loves. Of course she had to have had at least one. You can’t get to be as... *good* as she was without practice, right? But I liked being able to pretend otherwise. Even though I knew better. Even though I was pretty sure I knew who it was.

Jokeblue.

I wasn’t going to be jealous. Not of Homage’s dead beloved. I refused to be that horrible.

“We were the same age, and I’d suffered loss of my own that the others in the Society thought was similar,” Life Bloom continued, his tone suggesting that the Society was in error on that supposition. He explained, “I was kicked out of The Republic after they discovered I had a preference for stallions.”

I blinked in surprise. “W-what?”

The Republic, I remembered, was the little town that the raiders from Fluttershy’s cottage had massacred. A *bizarrrre, cult-like group o’ weirdoes, but not bad ponies* according to the Wasteland Crusaders.

"They kicked you out because of *that*?" I was astounded. Since my youth, I had been resigned to my feelings for mares lowering my prospects for finding love. But I'd never experienced actual prejudice because of it. I couldn't even fathom that. "Why? Why would they even care?"

"Fer the same reason, Ah'll reckon, that the Enclave rewards it," Calamity said, approaching us, his words prompting another *wait, what?* from the little pony in my head. "Population control. Small place like The Republic, Ah bet they needed as many babies as they could get."

Life Bloom nodded, frowning. "And if I wasn't going to contribute to the growth of The Republic, I wasn't wanted."

"And the Enclave?" I asked, driven by morbid curiosity. My PipLeg hummed to life, the screen flashing status reports. I brought up my E.F.S. and checked the most critical readouts.

"There's only so much cropland above the cloud curtain, all o' it 'round those towers. Too many pegasi means famine. The Enclave keeps real tight reins on childbirth."

Officially, y'all are probably dead already, Calamity had told Tracker and the other pegasi in New Appleloosa. *By the weekend, the Enclave will 'ave delivered condolences and new birth-approval certificates t' yer families.*

"Bein' allowed an extra foal is one o' the perks a pegasus gets fer enlistin' with the Enclave," Calamity admitted, "So while there's nothin' official, the Enclave has a little extra appreciation fer those officers who won't be takin' advantage o' that benefit."

I sat and thought about that for a moment. Then shook it off like a wet coat. "We really need to go." I stood up, looking down to Life Bloom. "But when we get back, I'll want to hear everything you can tell me about Homage."

He gave me an odd look.

"I'm not prying," I explained. "I just... I miss her."



Within minutes, we were soaring through the smoke. Beneath us, we could see the flames burning through the forest. True to Reggie's claim, the trees were not burning, although occasionally it appeared they were as the moss or vines clinging to them were cremated.

We were all wearing scarves to protect us from the worst of the smoke, but it only mitigated the foulness. My lungs burned, my eyes were stinging and felt hot in my skull. Most of that was from the smoke, but not all of it. I was exhausted, even more so after hearing Watcher's soul-crushing news. It took massive, almost monumental, effort just to keep my eyes open.

fwut!

I yelped as something struck my left hindhoof, a lancing pain followed by a burning sensation. I lifted it, spotting a dart-like thorn impaling the underside of my hoof. The burning increased. Poison.

fwut fwut fwut fwut

"Goldangit!" Calamity hollered, banking sharply as the air filled with more plant spikes. A patch of forest vegetation was shooting at us! Goddesses, I hated this forest.

The plants stopped shooting as the fires reached them. Calamity braved thicker smoke in an effort to keep us out of the range of any more of Everfree's hostile plant life.

The fire in my hoof started to climb up my leg, achingly painful. But I'd suffered so much worse. Hell, I'd been set on fire by a dragon. Compared to that, hell, compared to the plethora of hurts from the battle with the Wonderbolts, the plant spike poison was trivial.

We were catching up to the *Overcast*, but it was taking time. I held off activating the MG StealthBuck II for fear that it would run out before we had secured a hiding place on the Thunderhead.

I closed my eyes for a few minutes. I was using my levitation to make myself weightless in Calamity's arms. I felt safe there. I could close my eyes for just a minute...

I was Rainbow Dash.

The clouds were a beautiful white, fluffy and soft under my hooves. And they stretched out forever beneath the warm glow of Celestia's sun. I could see colorful pegasi flitting and flying about. There was a town nearby, but I wasn't looking at it. I didn't want to.

Instead, I looked at the ocean of white that rolled out beneath a canopy of brightest blue.

I was Rainbow Dash, and I was not a happy pony.

Everywhere under those clouds was Equestria. Or what was left of it. Everywhere beneath was a nightmarish hell where those ponies unfortunate enough to not be in Stables and not be killed in the onslaught were struggling and dying.

And I was watching ponies fly about, happily ignoring what was out of sight beneath what some ponies were beginning to call "the Cloud Curtain".

It wasn't right.

Nevermind that all my friends, all of them, were somewhere down there, and I didn't know if they were dead or alive. I couldn't just live up here and pretend Equestria didn't exist anymore. I could understand the temptation, true. But I wasn't that kind of pony. And it hurt more than my heart could bear that apparently the rest of the pegasi were willing to be.

I wanted to be disgusted with all of them. Instead, I just felt sad.

I was Rainbow Dash, and I was ashamed to be a pegasus.

If this was what being a pegasus meant now... well, maybe it was time for me to go.

I felt my wings flap, slowly lifting my hooves off the clouds. I loved flying, but today I could barely find the inspiration to lift myself. My head drooped low, my body hanging from my wings like dead weight. My hooves brushed against the clouds as I began to move.

I turned around, my back to the colorful flying ponies. I took one last glance backwards before flying away...

...I awoke in a coughing fit violent enough that Calamity crushed me to him to keep me from jerking out of his forelegs.

Below us, we were passing over part of the fire brigade moving through an already-burned part of the forest. I watched as a unicorn marched forward before a wing of Red Eye's griffins, her horn glowing. The glow spread out over the ground in front of her, lighting up a large swath of blackened forest floor. A moment later, the ground churned, tearing itself apart.

The griffins swept forward with their flamethrowers, setting ablaze the tangles of blue vines that the unicorn's tilling spell had uncovered.

"Whoa, there, Li'l pip!" Calamity comforted. "Ya okay there?"

"Y-yes. Sorry," I apologized, bringing my levitating field back up around me. "Dozed off."

"Yeah, Ah reckon when we get aboard, we're gonna find a place t' lay low an' yer gonna take a nap." Ahead of us, the *Overcast* loomed closer. We would be on it within a few minutes. "Ya might only get a couple hours, but that's a couple hours better than none."

I turned on my advanced StealthBuck. We were getting close enough that all of us needed to be invisible. Reggie and Calamity followed suit, donning the hoods of their zebra stealth cloaks.

A strange silhouette shot out of the sky -- a dark figure the size and shape of a pony but with leathery bat-like wings that reminded me strongly of Xenith and her flying amulet -- and impacted one of the Raptors like a bullet.

"What the hells was that?" Reggie's voice blurted. "Either of you see that too?"

The Raptor began to veer off, moving away from the Thunderhead. I floated my earboom into my ear and quickly sought out the Enclave's military channel.

“...been breached. I repeat, we have unknown hostiles aboard,” the voice from the Raptor’s communications officer sounded professional, unconcerned, even bored. **“Disengaging from position to deal with the intruders.”**

The *Overcast* was still hours away from the Cathedral, and attacks were already starting. I had no doubt that Red Eye was behind this attack, but something wasn’t right. Sending a single creature against them wasn’t going to stop them. It wouldn’t even slow them down. And that meant it wasn’t intended to.

“Acknowledged, *Raptor Lenticular*. Rendevous at the target as soon as you have exterminated the infestation.”

I suspected, rather, that Red Eye was just looking to soften the Enclave up a bit before pulling whatever big surprise he had hidden beneath his cloak.

“*Lenticular to Overcast!*” This time, the officer’s voice sounded panicked. **“It’s the demon! I repeat, the *demon* is on board!”**

The. What. Now?

Reggie started to say something but I waved a hoof for her to be quiet – which in retrospect was really silly since I was invisible -- my attention fully on the conversation in my earbloom.

“*Overcast to Lenticular*. Please confirm. Are you reporting that the monster which downed the *Mammatus* is...”

The officer aboard the *Overcast* never got to finish his question, much less get an answer. A loud whine tore at my eardrum, and the Enclave’s inter-warship military channel became death.

I bucked in Calamity’s grip, my vision going red as agony tore through my brain and took hold of my horn. I quickly shut off my PipLeg’s radio, gasping and wiping blood from my eyes. Whatever was aboard the *Lenticular* had just infected the military channel with the Canterlot signal!

By Luna’s mane!

We had run into corrupted broadcasters in Zebratown. Even with Canterlot itself gone, any broadcaster that survived would still create a zone of malignant noise. Hell, still had one of those in my saddlebags. It had never occurred to me that somepony might think to use one of those devices to actually broadcast across a normal channel!

Fortunately for the Enclave, all they had to do to survive was turn their radios off. But this meant that they were about to fly into battle against Red Eye's forces without communications.

The battle was engaged.



The burning in my hoof had consumed my entire left hindleg before fading dully. My leg felt stiff and swollen, but the worst seemed to be over. The plant spike poison was far from lethal. At least, not to anything larger than a rabbit.

Aside from the earlier plant attack, the stealth mission seemed to be going perfectly. Nopony shot at us as we drew close behind the *Overcast*, all the Thunderhead's dangerous magical weapons were pointing forward. We just needed to fly up to a hatch, pick the lock, and slip inside. And with Calamity's knowledge of the Thunderheads, we found a hatch in no time.

I cursed the Enclave, the pegasi and the entire concept of wings the moment I saw it. Fucking cloud-locks.

"Ain't gonna be able t' pick this one," Calamity said, his voice muffled. I wasn't sure if he was talking about himself or me. Probably both.

"Rainbow!" I called out as loudly as I dared to this close to the *Overcast*.

"dash," came the muffled response. Unlike StealthBucks, the zebra cloaks dampened sound: it was impossible to tell where Reggie was, but at least she was still close.

"Okay, back-up plan," Calamity announced just loud enough for Reggie (we hoped) to hear. We couldn't actually be sure where the griffin was, and had already resorted to call-response navigating. I had

begun to regret not using rope to tie ourselves together. “We get up above this thing, near one o’ the landin’ bays, an’ wait fer somepony t’ open a door.”

With that, Calamity beat his wings, drawing us higher.

Below us, the hatch hissed open. “coming?” the muffled voice of the griffin asked.

I tried to exchange a look with Calamity. And, of course, totally failed. “honestly, way you two act, you’d think littlepip is the only person in the entire wasteland who c’n pick a lock.”



We were inside the corridors of the *Overcast*, the thrumming of its thunderclouds rumbling against hull. The vibration mixed with the hum of the lights; the hum seemed deeper here than in the *Raptor Pyrocumulus* or inside the Stables -- more ominous -- but that could have just been my imagination. The voices of pegasus ponies were omnipresent in all but the most isolated passageways.

The corridors were painted black, making the lights seem to provide stunted illumination. Colored stripes ran down the middle of the walls like an abbreviated rainbow, the paint reflecting the light that the rest of the walls absorbed, making them seem to glow. The colored lines weren’t solid, but had slanted breaks, and they would change, dropping away or being added as we moved through the ship. I gleaned that they were some sort of color-coded guidance stripes that would tell an Enclave pegasus if the hallway they were in would take them to the section of the massive ship that they wanted. There were monitors placed at intervals along the wall, each glowing with the Enclave’s symbol, an emblem of clouds and wings with a pair of eyes gazing out from the shelter of an arch, green and purple on black.

We moved quietly, holding each other by the tails, Calamity taking the lead. My hindleg made walking unpleasant and a bit difficult. Fortunately, sneaking through the bowels of the *Overcast* didn’t require me to run.

I felt awkward and uncomfortably warm with Regina Grimfeathers biting my tail. I tried to focus forward, and immediately regretted it. It tasted like Calamity hadn't washed his tail in weeks. (I knew that couldn't actually be true. Velvet Remedy would never stand for it. But that didn't change anything.) I fought a slowly losing battle against my gag reflex.

I survived about five minutes and two floors, waiting until we reached a secluded stairwell, before I had to spit my friend's tail out and dry heave in a corner.

I felt Regina spit out my own tail, snarking, "Yeah, like yours was a picnic."

If I was beginning to understand the *Overcast's* guidance scheme, the striping that flanked the metal stairs suggested we were midway between the barracks and the *Overcast's* medical bay, with a longer path towards the officers' quarters. I would have expected such a stairwell to be in heavy use, but it was utterly empty.

"Hang on here, Li'l pip," Calamity ordered. "Ah'll go round me up some Enclave armor. The barracks are on the floor below, opposite the rec center."

We had skirted what Calamity referred to as the rec center on our way to the stairwell, getting a good look at it through a set of large observation windows. It was a large, three-story open room filled with mares and stallions exercising, lifting weights and even flying through obstacle hoops, all out of armor and uniform. A third of the room was a cloudball court, and there had been nearly two dozen sweaty Enclave mares and stallions faced off in a friendly game. I'll admit, watching some of those mares temporarily distracted me from the concentrated disgusting in my mouth.

Made sense that the ponies down there had suits of armor nearby. But...

"Alone? Into a barracks?" Reggie asked, echoing my concern before I had fully formed it. But then she added, "How 'bout we just wait fer

the next Enclave bastard t' come down these stairs an' take 'im out? I'll use Kage's knives, real quick and quiet."

"No," I insisted, taken aback. Fighting the Enclave in battle was one thing. But that? That was murder.

"Muh brother needs t' be put down, yes," Calamity said sternly. "But most o' these ponies ain't evil. They're jus' followin' orders. We ain't killin' anypony we don't have t'."

"None of these ponies are innocent," Reggie hissed.

"Some o' these ponies might be," Calamity countered. "Ah don't recall the *Overcast* gettin' directly involved in the fightin' anywhere yet."

"That's not how we do things," I added, only for Reggie to scoff.

"Oh please," Reggie repudiated, "I'm a child of Gawd, remember? I know all 'bout what you did at Shattered Hoof. You're an assassin when it suits your cause."

I flinched. I really, really didn't want to think of myself that way, but Regina was right. And I deserved the sucker-punch to my self-image to knock me off my pedestal.

Still mentally smarting, I changed tactic, "Okay, you're right. But so is Calamity. We've already seen crew rebellions. There's a chance that many of these ponies would side with us, giving half a chance and a touch of perspective."

"But they sure as hell won't if ya start slittin' their throats in the stairwell."

Reggie seemed to accept this. She fell silent.

I moved amongst a few Enclave crates stored beneath the stairwell and laid down, beginning to drift asleep. Calamity, I assumed, moved off to fetch the armor. I couldn't really tell, but it was a safe assumption. But either way, he and Regina weren't arguing or bringing up unpleasant points of morality anymore. Peace and quiet. Time for a nap.

Too quiet.

“Rainbow,” I whispered.

“Dash.”



I woke up when Calamity returned with the Enclave armor and, if I were to guess, most of the medical bay.

“Went smoothly,” he said, slipping off the zebra stealth cloak and passing it to me. I reached out for it and realized I could see my arm. The MG StealthBuck II had drained while I slept. Fortunately, nopony (or, at least, nopony observant) had used the stairwell since then.

Wait. “How long was I out?”

“Long ‘nuff fer him t’ make a few trips,” Reggie teased from someplace nearby. “Figured we ought t’ let you sleep.” Reggie shifted her attention to Calamity. “Don’tcha think your brother’s gonna notice his whole damn ship is missin’?”

I would have sworn one of the Goddesses had a love of ironic timing. Before Calamity could answer, we heard a door open several floors above us. Music flooded into the stairwell, hidden speakers coming alive at their entrance, pouring haunting orchestral music with an exquisite cello performance as its centerpiece.

“Aw hell,” Calamity moaned softly. “It’s Autumn.” At my querying look, he explained, “Who else would have the whole ship rigged t’ pipe classical music wherever he goes?” I noticed that he positioned himself, wings spread, so that he would feel if Reggie tried to pass him. I wasn’t sure if he intended to stop the griffin or just wanted forewarning.

Voices echoed down the stairwell.

“Again, sir, my deepest apologies,” the mare said, almost whining. “I still can’t understand how that monster got past us.”

“Teleportation, no doubt,” Autumn Leaf replied, his tone hard. “Two of those beasts that tried to breach Neighvarro a few years back were

teleporters.” He added, “That little spell proved no help to either of them.”

“Sir, you know this is a trap,” a mare’s voice was saying.

“Of course it is a trap,” a stallion’s voice replied smooth as glass. Unlike Calamity’s other brothers, there was no trace of his family’s accent. “Red Eye is calling me out. There is simply no other explanation for that...” Autumn Leaf’s voice twisted in a snarl, “...mental violation.”

My head was spinning. Unless I was gravely misinterpreting what I was hearing, I hadn’t been the only one that Red Eye’s alicorns had “tested” with that vile mental *rape*.

Autumn Leaf sternly announced, “I do not intend to disappoint him.”

I now understood what pushed Autumn Leaf to jump the whistle.

“Sir?” the mare pleaded, their voices drawing closer, “With all due respect, I believe it will be a grave error for you to enter the battle yourself like this.”

“I do not doubt it,” responded the pegasus who had brought so much harm and devastation and death to the Equestrian Wasteland. “But there are some transgressions that absolutely require a personal reckoning.”

I heard another door open above us.

“If I die,” Colonel Autumn Leaf instructed, “Or I am taken hostage, you have your orders.” His voice receded as the two ponies walked away. I barely caught him add, “Besides, Red Eye is *not* going to see *this* coming...”

The door slid shut. When it closed, the virtual classical orchestra evaporated, plunging the stairwell into an oppressive silence.

“Rainbow?” I asked cautiously.

There was no Dash.



I listened to my earbloom as I drank another of the healing potions Calamity had pilfered, blinking away blood-tinged tears. My headache and horn-ache receded, then disappeared completely. At least we were going into this magically restored to complete health. Even the swelling in my leg was almost completely gone.

Canterlot static from the *Raptor Lenticular* was still flooding the Enclave inter-warship channel. The fact that the *Lenticular* had managed to neither shut down its com array nor get far enough away for the *Overcast* to be outside its range suggested that the Enclave aboard had not been successful in dealing with the “demon”. I was willing to bet at least one of the other Raptors were trying to hunt the *Lenticular* down; but without communications, there was no easy way for them to coordinate efforts. I pictured Enclave soldiers flying between ships, relaying messages.

I had switched away from the channel as soon as I had heard it, but the concentrated blast of Canterlot static had still taken its toll. Now I was switching through other transmissions: the Enclave’s hellhound-control broadcast, the intra-ship classical music station (all cello, all the time), Red Eye’s broadcast (straight from the Cathedral, sans towers and thus free from Enclave takeover) and finally the normal wasteland broadcast (all Enclave, *almost* all the time).

Still no sign or sound of Reggie. It had been fifteen minutes.

“Ah got a few ice-cold Sparkle-Colas in the rucksack over there,” Calamity pointed. “That’s almost good as another couple hours o’ sleep, Ah reckon.” He turned to the Enclave crates under the stairs, opening the first unlocked one. “Oooh,” he whistled. “Grenades!”

I began to dig through the sack in question as the dour tones of fancy horns and kettle drums played in my ear. “You really need a PipBuck,” I whispered to Calamity with a chuckle. In his kleptomaniac enthusiasm, he had dumped the contents of who knew how many medical boxes and Enclave crates into his saddle bags and even more into military rucksacks. “If for the inventory sorter alone.”

The song on the radio changed. The new one was heavy on the string section.

"Ah shoot," Calamity said, facehoofing his armor-clad hoof against his helmet with a thunk. "The armor's got one o' those." Clearly, it had been a while since he'd properly used Enclave armor. The few times I'd seen him use his own suit, with the exception of a brief stint in Old Olneigh, he'd always had the helmet off.

I smirked, about to say something witty, when I found the ice-cold Sparkle-Cola. And, beside it, a couple tins of Mint-als. I stared, feeling a moment of cold shock.

"Calamity," I asked, trying to sound casual, "Did you even look at the stuff you were taking?"

"Nope," he said. I could almost feel his grin through the helmet. He had no idea what I'd just seen. "Reckon if Autumn wants it, best I have it."

Right. I looked back into the rucksack, my mind insisting on replaying the taste of Party-Time Mint-als, the feelings of competence and intelligence, the certainty...

I took the ice-cold Sparkle-Cola in my teeth and telekinetically zipped the rucksack shut, the little pony in my head echoing Calamity.

Nope.

I got to mentally celebrate my little victory for about a minute before I heard a door open below us. A pair of lightly-armed Enclave officers strode by, trotting up the stairs. Calamity whisked his scorpion-like armored tail around in a salute. One of the officers saluted back.

I watched them disappear up the metal stairs, following the line that led towards the officer's quarters without even noticing it. Once they were well away, I shifted my attention back to Calamity. "Got a question for you," I said as I opened the frosty Sparkle-Cola, enjoying the little fizzy hiss it made and the aroma of carrots and cola-ness.

"All right," he said, alleviating another crate of its cargo (which in this case included somepony's *Wingboner Magazine* collection, three hot plates, seventeen pre-war bits and a copy of the pre-war book *Give Peas a Chance: the Vegetarian's Guide to Cooking*). "Shoot."

Remembering Reggie's snide remark about carrying healing potions, I started to telekinetically fill my saddlebags with a healthy supply from the rucksack.

"What kinds of defenses does the Enclave have around the S.P.P. Central Hub?" I questioned before tipping back the cola and taking a swig. (Yay, carrots!) I knew that the hub itself had defenses -- the most significant being the shield surrounding the entire structure -- but those were not under the Enclave's control. The Single Pegasus Project was the core of the Enclave's grip on the heavens. Even if nopony could get inside the central hub, I had to assume the Enclave had guards or at least some kind of warning system.

"Ya mean Neighvarro?" Calamity asked.

I almost choked on the taste of fizzy carrots. The healing potion I'd been levitating hit the floor. "Neighvarro?" I asked back slowly, setting the cola safely on one of the Enclave crates.

"Sonuva...!" Calamity nickered, giving a stomp.

"That's yer plan?" he asked, spreading his wings. "Ya wanna take on the Enclave's biggest military base?"

Oh fuck.

"The base with a Thunderhead permanently parked overhead?"

Fuckity-fuck.

"The base where muh *father* serves as drill sergeant?"

Luna shove my cunt full of moonrocks and call me home. The Enclave had built a whole damn base around it!

"Stealth mission?" he asked, his voice betraying the ludicrousness of my idea, "Or were ya just plannin' on a full frontal assault?"

I opened my muzzle to reply, but all that came out was a squeak.

“Ayep. This is gonna be barrels o’ fun.”

He would have said more, but the sound of another door opening prompted him to clam up. We both waited, listening, striving to hear whether or not the pony or ponies who just entered the stairwell were heading our way. Our ears were greeted only with silence.

Moments later, we heard Reggie’s muffled hiss. “Dash.”

Calamity’s wings drooped. “Muh brother?” he asked, hesitating to speak further.

“Still alive, I’m afraid,” Reggie admitted. “Sorry. I got distracted.”

Distracted?

“I found they’ve got prisoners in here,” Reggie explained. “Anypony up for breakin’ ‘em free?”

Calamity chuckled. “Welcome t’ the team.”



One pegasus in Enclave armor on a ship full of Enclave pegasi, flanked by two invisible and virtually inaudible companions. If we couldn’t pull this off, we didn’t deserve to win.

The Enclave music in my earbloom had changed again. This one sounded like a dirge.

“Howdy, partner,” Calamity called out jovially as he trotted up to the mare at the guard station outside the ship’s brig. I so wanted to facehoof. “Bored yet?”

“Hover and identify,” the guard pegasus ordered rotely.

“Windsheer,” Calamity lied swiftly, “Superior Communications Officer. Transferred from the *Glorious Dawn* last week.”

That was a dangerous gamble. If the mare knew about the Colonel’s family, using his brother’s name and rank would give his story a sense

of legitimacy. After all, it was understandable that Colonel Autumn Leaf might want his brothers on his ship for this operation. And Calamity's accent lent credence to the claim.

Would she buy a Superior Communications Officer wearing Enclave armor rather than an officer's uniform? I had to trust Calamity's instincts and Enclave experience on that. However, if she knew what Autumn Leaf's brothers looked like, then not only would any glimpse beneath that armor tell her that Calamity was lying, but she would know his palette matched one of Autumn's *other* brothers -- the one who was branded a traitor. The one that the Enclave was to kill on sight. Calamity's ruse could put the mare in the perfect frame of mind to guess his actual identity.

"Superior Communications Officer?" the mare asked, immediately rendering my worries pointless. "So maybe you can tell me what the hay is going on with *Raptor Lenticular*." She gave Calamity an exasperated look. "I mean, we've got the ship's tag, right? And even if the infiltrators managed to take it out, we've got the tags for every pony in a suit of armor on board. Why don't we just find the damn Raptor and blow it out of the sky?"

"Cuz we have Raptors to spare, right?" Calamity chided as he trotted up to the mare. "The ship ain't turned about t' attack us yet, an' I reckon that means there's still hope our forces will keep control. As fer trackin' it down? My bits are on the infiltrators not actually havin' the channel fer our communications."

The control for the door had a cloud interface and required a code. Reggie and I teamed up to hack it, her talons and my savvy, while Calamity kept the guard mare busy.

He shook his carapace-helmeted head. "Nope, much more likely they're blasting that necro-noise broadband, flooding out every signal comin' from the *Lenticular*. Jammin' the tags." Calamity whinnied. "Hell, that might be the whole point, an' screwin' up our comms is jus' icing on the cupcake."

The password was "Fluffykins". I wasn't sure what to think of that.

“So, is the demon really, well, a demon?” the mare asked. “I heard rumor that it’s a monster released from hell by the balefire bombs.”

“Ah don’t believe in demons,” Calamity replied. “No more than Ah believe in goddesses. Way Ah see it, we don’t need outside forces t’ blame fer makin’ the world a shittier place. We do that well enough by our own hooves...”

I positioned myself behind the mare and slipped off my hood, giving Calamity a signal. Reggie entered the code while Calamity kept the guard’s attention. There was the faintest whirr as the lock cycled; our pegasus friend moved up to the mare, speaking more loudly to cover the sound.

“...Ah’m sure the so-called demon ain’t nothing more than a pony,” he said in a tone that suggested what he was saying was more than just his opinion: it was the Enclave line, and the mare was expected to believe it. “Or some monster twisted up by the byproducts of the war.”

Reggie and I slid inside the brig.

Before us was a corridor of cells, two floors high, each cell behind a glowing blue force-field identical to the magical energy cages the Enclave had thrown Ditzzy Doo, Calamity and me into less than a week ago. The sound of weeping drifted through the air.

Most of the cells were empty. Most. There were ponies here, not just bucks and mares but foals too. Some prisoners paced in their cells, others huddled on hard metal cots. They were from the wasteland; they looked filthy compared to the stark cleanliness of the Enclave vessel. I recoiled as I found the source of the crying, a mare cradling a foal, the colt’s body limp in her hooves, having died in captivity.

There were two guards inside, standing at a rear airlock, and they both reacted to the door. “I thought I heard something,” one of them said as they moved from their positions, looking about.

I shifted, moving out of the way as one passed me, his tail swishing inches from me. Part of me wanted to draw out Little Macintosh and shoot him in the head, point blank. He deserved no less. But the noise

could draw the whole ship down on us. I wished I had Velvet Remedy with her anesthetic spell with us, or Life Bloom, or Xenith with her paralyzing hoofstrikes. In their absence, I did the next best thing.

My horn glowed, giving away my position, as I wrapped my telekinesis about their necks and squeezed until they stopped struggling.

Reggie pulled back her hood and gave one of the limp guards a kick. "Help me disable these energy fields."

I pulled mine off too, choosing to have faith that we could trust the prisoners to not give us away, and moved to the control terminal for the cells.

As Reggie and I began to work, I couldn't help but comment, "If it makes any difference, I'm proud of you. You chose to help these ponies over your revenge."

Regina Grimfeathers squawked a laugh. "Ain't your approval I'm aimin' fer, but thank you anyhow." At my curious look, she sighed. "Kage's. Wherever my brother is now, I want his approval. An' this is what I think he'd want me t' do. What I think he'd do in my place."

My mind flashed to the young male griffin buying a bent tin can from Silver Bell just to make her happy. "I think you're right," I offered. "I mean, I know I didn't know him long. But from what I did see of him, yes, he would."

Reggie nodded. "Revenge ain't worth anythin' if I dishonor his memory in the process."

She looked at me, a small tear in one eye. "He was always wantin' t' do stuff like this, you know. Me too, of course," she hastily added, "But I wanted t' be the hero. He jus' wanted t' make somethin' better o' the griffins' role in Equestria." She smiled bleakly. "Sometimes, I think he took Stern an' her lot as a personal affront, an' wanted t' try t' balance things out."

"You!" one of the prisoners called out. I rotated towards the voice and saw Tracker. The jade pegasus slammed his forehooves against the

energy field, ignoring the feedback. "This isn't how things are supposed to be! Get out while you still can. Before they get you too!"

"Not without taking all of you with us," I said with a determined smile. More ponies were getting up, moving to the edges of the magical barriers, staring at Reggie and me with mixed expressions of hope and disbelief. "Welcome to your rescue."

The sound of klaxons filled the brig. I spun to Reggie, eyes wide, certain that somepony had triggered an alarm, and we were about to be overwhelmed by Enclave soldiers.

Then we felt the first dull thuds vibrating through the floor. The brig was close to the *Overcast's* exterior (I had a terrible inkling that the airlock was for easy, high-altitude disposal of prisoners), and we could feel the impacts of what had to be the Cathedral's anti-aircraft cannons.

Reggie returned my gaze.

"We're heeere."



I had never seen such disciplined and orderly chaos as the Enclave mobile siege platform in the heat of battle. Every pegasus knew where to go, what to do, and they were doing it rapidly under the barked orders of their commanders. With the military channel down, officers had taken wing, brushing the ceiling with the tips of their feathers as they shouted down to the troops, and across the ship to each other.

Nopony questioned the apparently lone Enclave soldier moving with purpose through the corridors and out into one of the *Overcast's* hangar bays, laden down with rucksacks.

"Where to, Li'l pip?" Calamity asked.

"You'll like this," I replied from beneath the zebra cloak. "You're going to steal one of the Enclave's sky-tanks."

"Good." I could almost hear the grin breaking across his face. "The Enclave owes us fer the *Sky Bandit*."

"There's an exterior airlock we need t' pull up t' once we're free of the ship," Reggie added. "Got some extra passengers t' take aboard."

The entire ship flooded with the tense sound of brass, drums and violins, the heavier classical music replaced by the stirring battle anthem *Flight of the Shadowbolts*.

"This is it, ponies," the voice of Colonel Autumn Leaf boomed over the music. **"This is the moment all your training and all your experience has prepared you for. This is the battle you were *born* for. It's time to separate the pegasi from the griffins. It's time to kick Red Eye's ass, and teach him that crossing the Enclave, murdering our brothers and sisters, was his *ultimate* folly.**

"We fight in the name of every pegasus ignominiously massacred in the Splendid Valley sneak attack..." The monitors along the walls came to life, the Enclave emblem replaced by a slowly scrolling names in red -- every pegasus killed by the Splendid Valley balefire bomb. I forced myself not to look, not to read each name. I knew I should. I was responsible... but if I did, I also knew, I wouldn't be able to go on. **"...We fight in the name of our loved ones, our home and our Enclave!"**

As we made our way across the hangar deck towards one of the black-and-green armored tanks, the *Flight of the Shadowbolts* began to crescendo. The hangar door growled open to the smoky yellow sky. Explosions of black smoke pockmarked the haze as anti-aircraft shells filled the sky.

A squad of pegasi in black carapace armor shot past the opening, embattled with a wing of dark green, shield-protected alicorns. I could hear the sounds of magical energy discharges and automatic gunfire from the world below mixing into a nerve-wracking din. The first sky-tanks and bombing chariots took off, flying out of the throat of the ship and into the heart of the war.

Calamity opened the largest sky-tank we could find, one with multiple plasma cannons (the kind like the one Calamity had shot Topaz with, too big for even a battle saddle) and space for a dozen armored soldiers.

He pushed himself to the front, strapping himself into the flight harness while Reggie and I took up places in the back. I noted the name stenciled onto the side of the sky-tank just before climbing aboard: *Tortoise*.

A pair of Enclave soldiers came trotting up to the back of the *Tortoise*, their helmets in their muzzles. They had seen Calamity strapping in and were expecting a ride. Reggie tossed back her hood, becoming visible for just a moment, grinning as I closed the door on them. "Sorry, bucks. This one's taken."

Their stunned expressions were priceless.

"Go now," I told Calamity, tossing back my own hood the moment the door was shut. I looked over the door, the pony in my head panicking as I realized I had no idea how to lock it. "Now. Now is good. Go now!" I didn't want to give the two bucks time to recover, open the door, and gun us down.

Calamity spread his wings inside the armored enclosure of the *Tortoise's* cockpit, pumping twice, and I felt the tank lift from the hangar floor.

A moment later, we were shooting out the hangar door, the horizontal slit windows of the *Tortoise* glowing with the sickly golden light of Everfree's dawn.

Beneath us was a massive complex of metal, stone and brown concrete: the Cathedral. High in its center rose an airy gothic structure of steepled roofs, flying buttresses and rosy stained glass. Ringing out around it was a heavily fortified castle -- thick walls, towers, battlements. Tower strongholds held anti-aircraft guns identical to the ones that had once protected Friendship City. There was even a moat, and I could see the shadow of something the size of three dozen ponies swimming about in it.

Beyond the castle's outer walls and moat, the Everfree Forest was nothing but blackened ash and severed stumps for at least a mile in every direction. A deep gorge knifed through the land on three sides, spanned by only a single, fortress-like bridge.

The scorched land was filled with ponies. Not just dozens, not just hundreds. Thousands of ponies wearing Red Eye's colors were engaging the Enclave in a ferocious battle. Red Eye's troops fought from trenches and pillboxes, more soldiers lined the walls of the castle, pouring bullets into the sky. Red Eye's alicorns and griffins met the pegasi in the skies.

It still seemed like a horribly lopsided battle. Bombing wagons rained high-explosives down on the fortress from high enough above to be out of range. The Raptors alone could level the Cathedral with concentrated fire. Goddesses knew what the *Overcast* itself could do.

Two of the Raptors from the *Overcast* had joined four more, encircling the Cathedral, bombarding it with heavy plasma fire. (I assumed the third Raptor was busy hunting *Raptor Lenticular*.) Three of the Raptors were showing signs of damage from the shelling, one of them was smoking badly and had begun to cant, drifting out of position.

Calamity circled us around, deftly keeping us out of the line of heavy fire. We drew up to the brig airlock. Tracker already had it open, waiting for us. I opened the door of the *Tortoise* as Calamity backed us up to the *Overcast*. The Thunderhead siege platform was barely moving now; jumping from it to our sky-tank would be more nerve-wracking than actually dangerous. I moved into position to help them; Regina climbed into the seat for one of the plasma cannons.

The first pony, a light grey mare with a shockingly purple mane, moved up to the edge of the airlock. She gulped, her knees shaking, her brow beading with the effort not to look down.

"It's okay," I coaxed. "You can do it."

Our attention, and the attention of every pony in the battle, was suddenly wrenched downward by a horrific, Equestria-shaking bellow. Something huge, dark and horrifying rose up from the Cathedral, a black and monstrous shape against the smoke-filtered sun. Great, angry red eyes poured hatred down on us as it brutalized the air with massive, leathery wings.

Then it moved towards one of the Raptors, bellowing balefire. As it moved, I could make out pony-sized claws and spines and the two-tone

green of its scales, marred by deep scars that looked more surgical than battle-borne. I glimpsed an odd, mechanical glow coming from inside one of the wounds which hadn't fully healed.

There was a dragon in the Everfree Forest. And not just any dragon, the Luna-fucking granddaddy of all dragons. An ancient dragon so old it must have already been a huge, gigantic, terrifying, enormous, totally all-grown-up dragon back when Spike was only a *baby*!

And it was fighting on Red Eye's side.

The dragon roared again, grasping the Raptor in its claws as three of the others turned their weapons towards it. Dragon-killers, Calamity had called them. Well, this was their chance to prove themselves worthy of the title. The dragon blasted the captive Raptor with choking black smoke, then howled as the other Raptors lanced it with bright pastel beams of magical energy. It flicked its tail, producing massive spikes that glowed with eldritch energy, and lashed out at one of the attacking Raptors, cutting deep grooves in its forward armor.

My jaw hit the floor of the *Tortoise*. Those spikes were magically enhanced. I stared at the dragon's unnatural, glowing-red eyes and knew immediately who they reminded me of.

"Red Eye. Cybernetically. Enhanced. A *DRAGON!*"

I blinked, the little pony in my head petrified. Then spun. "Okay, that's it. We're getting down there *right now!*" I called out, wrapping the escaping prisoner ponies in my magic and floating them unceremoniously into the *Tortoise*. "Calamity, get us the fuck out of this sky!"

I closed the door, apologizing to the prisoners as I pulled myself into another of the plasma cannon chairs. The chair and controls were made for a larger pony, and I had about as much skill with magical energy weapons as I did with swordfighting, but as long as I didn't manage to shoot the damn tank we were in, I figured even I could help.

Reggie was already firing, taking shots at other sky-tanks and Enclave bombing chariots. The high-pitched yelp of her plasma cannon was making my ears hurt.

“Oh YEAH!” Reggie shouted over the cacophony as one of her shots turned an Enclave bombing wagon into a cascading explosion of rainbow pyrotechnics. She was already swinging towards her next target before the fireworks had subsided. “I love me this turtle!”

“*Tortoise*,” I corrected as I linked my PipLeg into the turret, downloading the sky-tank’s tag and maximizing the value of my targeting spell.

“Whatever,” she said with a dismissive wave of her wing. “Hey, Calamity. C’n we keep it?” Her next three shots took out two carapace-armored Enclave pegasi, freeing up a very surprised-looking alicorn.

Some of Red Eye’s troops along the Cathedral wall opened fire on the *Tortoise* as Calamity brought us close. I gasped in dismay as two of the escapees crumpled, dead, crimson flowers bursting across their bodies. Several of the other escapees screamed. The more level-headed ponies stepped in, trying to prevent a panic. Tracker belted out a command ordering everyone to lay flat on the floor and make themselves as small a target as possible. I floated open one of the rucksacks filled with medical supplies as I looked around the interior of the tank.

The bullets hadn’t penetrated the tank’s armor so much as ignored it completely. There weren’t even bullet holes. Red Eye’s troops were using bullets enchanted with an armor bypass!

I turned my plasma cannon on the troops along the wall, trying to clear a path for us to land without losing any more ponies. Suddenly, between that and the dragon, this battle was looking a whole lot less lopsided.

The dragon roared overhead.



The noise of the battle outside barely disturbed the almost pietistic atmosphere of the Cathedral's central building. The buildings surrounding it had proven to be barracks and military training grounds, now emptied as this half of Red Eye's army engaged the Enclave invaders. The other half, the larger half as I learned from a few hacked terminals, were amassing in Fillydelphia. In just a few days, the Fillydelphia Ruins was going to become the site of the biggest battle in Equestria since (and possibly before) the pony-zebra war.

And thousands of innocents were going to die in the crossfire, or be exterminated by the Enclave, if I didn't manage to stop it.

We had left the escapees in one of those barracks, instructing them to barricade themselves inside until we returned. I couldn't help but think we had taken them from the proverbial frying pan into the equally proverbial fire, but there simply wasn't *anyplace* in Everfree that was truly safe. Except maybe Zecora's Hut, and I was sorely tempted to have Calamity fly them there while I pressed ahead. But my gut told me we didn't have time for anything else. Once I freed the unicorns Red Eye intended to sacrifice in his damned ascension, we would need to leave very swiftly. I was already planning on levitating the lot of them in tow while Calamity flew the *Tortoise* as fast as he could go. With any luck, it would be the speediest flying tortoise in history.

The trio of us snuck through the Cathedral. Calamity had left the Enclave armor in the *Tortoise* and was back under a zebra stealth cloak. This time, it was Reggie who walked around visible. There were enough Talon griffins in Red Eye's forces that nopony gave her a second look.

"Okay, this is kinda creeping me out," she admitted as she strode by a squad of Red Eye's soldiers who were running to garrison part of the building, one of them stopping to smile and wave to her as they passed.

We passed under an archway. Carved into the stone was the message: Equality is Harmony.

Robed ponies strode casually past us, humming a low tune and paying Regina no attention at all.

We saw two more up ahead, admiring one of the many pinkish stained-glass windows. A third walked up to join them, my ears catching the phrase, "Walk in the Blessings of Unity." The other robed ponies parroted the hail.

"That's Discord," the new arrival told the other two. "The Spirit of Disharmony." Her voice carried the authoritative tones of a professional know-it-all. "Red Eye was so impressed on his visit to Canterlot that he imported all the windows used in the Cathedral from the old Royal Palace."

I stared at the window, ignoring the monster depicted and instead focusing on the pinkish tones of the glass itself. A surge of dread hit me as I realized that all the windows in the Cathedral were suffused with Pink Cloud. My little pony conjured up imaginings of the windows slowly leaking minute amounts of necromantic poison into the building.

"Never heard of him," one of the robed ponies asked. "What happened to him?"

"Noooo pony knooooows," the pony teased. Then straightened up. "No, really. Princess Celestia and Luna defeated him and turned him into a statue. He was still in Canterlot when the Apocalypse happened. Some say the attack on Canterlot woke him up, only for the Pink Cloud to prove as lethal to spirits as it was to the Princesses. Some say he has been a statue all this time, in which case he was probably destroyed when the Enemy obliterated the Canterlot Ruins..."

"And some say," the third blurted out, "that Discord was released by the war, but he was so weakened that he's now just an itty-bitty spirit running around the Equestrian Wasteland putting ammo and bottlecaps into random containers!" She grinned. Then paused, tapping her muzzle. "Or... was that the Ghost of Pinkie Pie?"

The other two ponies stared at her blankly for a moment, then burst into giggles. "Icicle, you're so random!"

Up ahead was another huge archway with wide-open sainted glass doors, another bon mot from Red Eye engraved into the stonework,

inlaid with bronze: Remember, you are not here because you are better than those who are not, but because you are better than who you were.

Beyond was the main theatre of the Cathedral, a voluminous room of pillars, high arches and towering windows of dazzling stained glass. The room was filled with robed ponies sitting in pews, their attentions on a mare standing at a pulpit.

“Do not be alarmed, my fellow Disciples of the New Unity,” she was saying. “Let not your heart feel dismay as we hear the roars and rumbles of the violence that surrounds us like a storm. Instead, rejoice. We have come to this place through fire and darkness. But today is the day we have all been waiting for. Today, is the day of Red Eye’s ascension, and the birth of the New Unity!”

I felt like I’d been hit by lightning. Today? Red Eye’s going to try to become a god *today*? Now? In the middle of all of this?

“Remember, Disciples, as you hear the screams and the thunder of weapons outside these halls, that Red Eye has told us from the very beginning that this day would be born just as we all were, covered in blood. That...” she pointed towards one of the towering windows as the passing dark shape of the dragon turned the majestic stained glass to shadowed greys. “...is not to be feared, but to be loved. That is a sign of our salvation! The dragon came to Red Eye weak, blind, dying of old age. And Red Eye gave him new life. And like the dragon, soon, we will all be reborn!”

Reggie pulled out a cigarette and lit it. “We are so fucked.”

I turned, knowing that there was a stairwell near here. We needed to go down. “This way,” I said as I spotted a familiar-looking tapestry.

I led them into a side hall that connected the chapel to the Cathedral’s school and nursery wing. Through open doors on either side of us, we could see the workrooms where the Disciples of the New Unity were creating schoolbooks and educational materials for the new schools that Red Eye intended to establish all across Equestria. The rooms reminded me severely of the Ministry of Image.

The doors to the school wing opened, several robed ponies herding a gaggle of colts and fillies, most of whom sounded more excited than frightened. Several of the children, I saw with sick alarm, were wearing alicorn costumes.

“But we wanna see the battle!” one little colt protested. “We wanna see the good guys win!”

“We already know Red Eye will win,” the adult intoned. “It has been ordained. Now move along. Red Eye wants you all safe in the shelter.” Another of the adult ponies was opening a side door leading to descending stone steps. That was the door we wanted. That should take us down to... cybersurgery? No, no, that was sublevel... two, I thought. What was sublevel one?

The colt whined. “We knooooow it’s ordated. But we wanna seeeee it!”

“Down that way,” I told Reggie. “As soon as the children are through.”

The adolescent griffin turned a gaze towards the emptiness of my invisible direction. “How is it that you know where we’re supposed to go?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “Have you been here before? Seen a map?”

“Sort of,” I admitted. “I’m working off fragmented memories I caught during my alicorns’ telepathic skull-fuck.” Oh, the nostalgia I had for the innocent days of Stable Two when I didn’t even know what skull-fuck meant, much less had a reason to apply the term to an experience of my own.

“Ugh... Well, I’m glad something good... came... of it.” *Not* a pun I needed. But at least Reggie had the good grace to wince.

The music in my earbloom erupted in a painful blast of static. I nearly tore it from my ear. I was immediately thankful that I did not, as the next sound I heard was possibly the most wonderful sound in the Equestrian Wasteland.

“Goooooooood morning, children!”

DJ Pon3! Homage was okay!

Or, at least, she was okay when this was recorded. Knowing her, the broadcast was rigged to occur hours after she had left. As Watcher had said, she wasn't making it easy for the Enclave.

"I interrupt the Enclave's depressing-ass music for a very special broadcast. Today, I have with me two members of the Wasteland Resistance, none other than the Enclave-fighting duo of Lion & Mouse. And I'll be speaking with them about the good fight, the blows they have struck to the Enclave, and what everypony can do to lend a hoof. But first, the weather!"

I drank in her voice. Disguised as it was, it was still her. I could hear my Homage, feel her presence, behind every single word.

My heart stirred, taking strength yet splitting with sorrow. Never again...

I'd never see, feel, smell my Homage again.

Oh Goddesses, I pled under my breath, my body beginning to shake. Please don't let that be true! I do anything, give anything. Please, just give me this one thing!

DJ Pon3's voice, a miracle in the fire and the darkness, continued to break through.

*"Completely cloudy, with a chance of big, black Thunderheads over the Everfree Forest and the valley between Manehattan and Fillydelphia. I predict one of those two cities is in for some really nasty weather very, very soon. So if you're in the... *BZZZZZZTCHK!"*

The signal went dead. No DJ Pon3. No music. Nothing. The Enclave had shut the broadcast down completely.

My heart stopped. I stood frozen. Paralyzed...

...until the Cathedral shook under a mighty, rending rumble. The crippled Raptor had finally lost any semblance of control and was crashing into one of the battlements outside, gouging out an avalanche of sundered stone. The Raptor's storm clouds dissipating in a hurricane blast that shattered the nearby windows into razor shards and fine pink dust. I instinctively lashed out with my telekinesis, pushing back at the

debris, keeping it away from us and from the children, terrified at the consequences of breathing powdered Pink Cloud glass.

The children screamed and no longer needed coaxing to go down the stairs. We swiftly followed.



The first sublevel beneath the chapel was dedicated to bypass spells and weaponry. The archway we had just passed beneath read: Productivity is the right of every pony.

Here, Red Eye's disciples had enchanted almost a thousand firearms for his army. Like the barracks, these rooms were empty now save for the occasional guard or passerby, none of whom gave Reggie more than a second look.

"Just because a pony is born with wings or a horn does not make them inferior." Red Eye's voice played in my earbloom, part of an audio log stamped with the logo of Stable 101. I had spotted it amongst a stack of books on a shelf just inside the archway.

The audio log was apparently part of a recorded discussion between Red Eye and the Overmare of Stable 101, a remnant of his past that someone from the Stable had deemed to save. The debate was taking place over dinner at what sounded like a crowded table. The munching of food and the clinking of plates and glasses created a constant background din, and occasionally the voices of others at the table murmured into my ear, making it hard to pick out what Red Eye or the Overmare was saying.

"The first Griffinchaser was designed and built by an earth pony in a matter of minutes," the Overmare countered silkily. "The entire town of Appleloosa was created by earth ponies in less than a year. Do you honestly think unicorns or pegasi could have taken us from muskets to machine guns in just a few decades?"

As we walked, I looked around, trying to shake loose memories of where to go next. Unfortunately, few if any alicorns had been on this level during their assault on my mind.

"Unicorns and pegasi have their own special talents which they bring to the table," this younger-sounding Red Eye countered. "For example, without unicorns, we wouldn't have healing potions. Without the pegasi, Equestria would have been ravaged by wild weather. Each race of ponykind adds to the whole, no one greater or more important than the others. It is a vital gestalt, requiring all three. It is wrong for earth ponies to set themselves up above the others."

Above us, the Cathedral was rocked by a succession of heavy explosions. The stone ceiling tiles cracked, dust raining down. Reggie looked up, guessing, "One of the bombing wagons. Much more of that, and they might punch through."

"Magic," the Overmare chuckled. "Let me tell you a little about pony magic. As it so happens, there was a particularly magical earth pony in my ancestry. His name was Joe, and he worked in Canterlot as a craftsman making coffee cups. Though he was no unicorn and knew no spells, the coffee cups he crafted would always be clean, they would never stain, and it took tremendous force to make them chip or crack. Why? Because making these cups was a labor of love, and that natural earth pony magic infused each of his creations."

We reached a locked door. No cloud controls this time. Just a good, old-fashioned tumbler lock. Seeing it made me absurdly happy, and I telekinetically picked it before I realized I intended to.

I opened the door, hoping for a stairwell down. And instead found a storeroom. Full of assault carbines, shotguns, ammo and more. Calamity looked like he had died and gone to heaven.

I sighed. "Take just what we can grab quickly..." Calamity became a flying rust and orange blur. "...and that won't slow us..." Calamity stopped in front of me, every single damned weapon slung about his body and an assault carbine in his mouth. I heard an impressed "wow" from Reggie.

"Wanph one?" he asked innocently. I went ahead and took the (slightly drooled-on) assault carbine and several magazines of ammo. It would be good to have a backup for Little Macintosh.

"First, the magic of pegasi and unicorns are flashy shortcuts to hard work; and without hard work, where is the drive for

innovation? When has a pegasus or a unicorn ever needed to be creative? Second, the magic of pegasi and unicorns are selfish. The shortcuts they provide, the labor they save, is only for themselves. Whereas the innovations of earth ponies can be shared by all ponies and be built upon by future earth ponies.

"Finally, the magic of pegasi and unicorn ponies is demanding. I'd even say crippling. Where earth ponies can throw themselves directly into their work, the pegasi of the past needed flight camps, and the unicorns needed magical schooling just to be able to use the magic they had been born with. Time that could be spent learning other skills were spent instead mastering their magic.

"Not so with the earth ponies. Our magic is inherent, and innately applied to the work we do. While the unicorn's magic is spellcasting, and the pegasus' magic is impossible flight and prancing on clouds, our magic is to be superior at what we do. Earth ponies are inherently superior because that is our gift!"

"Hey," Reggie called out, standing at another door. "I think I've found the way down."

"Shortcuts," Red Eye offered smoothly, "Are sometime useful. Critical, even. Sure, the earth pony way builds things that last, but it is a slow process, and sometimes you need a quick fix. Take, for example, poison. An earth pony may be able to test your blood, identify the poison and brew up an antidote. But all of that can take hours which you do not have. Isn't it better to have a unicorn on hoof who can cast a spell purging any poison away?"

"Red Eye," the Overmare sighed drolly. "I am not impressed with this new-found 'insight' you claim from your scouting missions. I speak in sweeping truths and you argue isolated examples. Exceptions that are not sufficient to disprove the rule. Now I..."

The Overmare fell silent. There was a pregnant pause before the voice of the young Red Eye asked casually,

"Overmare? You were saying?"

Then, even more casually, he added,

"Is something wrong?"

"I... why haven't..."

"Yes?" he prompted. *"I'm afraid I don't follow."*

The sounds around the dinner table died away. I imagined everypony was staring at Red Eye and the Overmare. I suspected the latter had suddenly gone alarmingly pale. Very softly, the Overmare murmured,

"...I just noticed that you haven't so much as tasted your drink..."



The Cathedral. Sublevel three. Cybersurgery. A plaque on the wall read: Until all of us can be free, none of us should be free.

The hall we had emerged into announced "Research and Surgery" in one direction, "Administration" in the other. Both paths seeming otherwise equal, I had chosen the former, suspecting that there was a fair chance of running across Red Eye himself in Administration. And that wasn't my goal. I was here for his prisoners. His sacrifices. Not him. I was more than happy to leave him to the Enclave.

I was regretting that decision now.

The smell of blood, spoiled meat and disinfectants hit my nostrils like a buck to the face, making me turn and gag. Reggie recoiled and I could hear the muffled sound of Calamity's many, many guns clattering together as he staggered.

The walls of the surgical labs were a gleaming, disinfected white that made every flaw and discoloration and old stain stand out. The floor tiles were cold and felt unpleasantly damp.

There were highly advanced machines built into the walls and ceiling, half of which I couldn't even guess the purpose of. There were vats of strange liquid, and floating within them were a variety of cybernetics. My eyes took in a mechanical snake that resembled a pony's spine, a robotic leg that clearly wasn't for a pony, metal arms that could have been torn from a cleaning robot, and more esoteric devices -- strings of wire ending in arcano-tech baubles.

There were three exits. One was the way we came in, the hallway leading to the Administration section of the sublevel. The one opposite it led to the stairs down. The final door, directly across from me, was open to what the sign claimed was a “storage” room. Huge glass tubes displayed creatures and monsters, subjects of cybernetic experimentation. All were dead, many still splayed open from surgery. Everything from radroaches to manticores. There was even a hellhound. Or, at least, half of one. The left half.

At the back end of the room was a cast iron hatch marked “Disposal”. Most of the stench was coming from that “storage” room. Only a little from the... meat... on several of the tables surrounding me.

“And how may I help you,” the thing in front of us asked. It (he?) had been a pony once. But now he was more machine than flesh, the whole lower half of his body replaced by a robotic chassis that reminded me of the brain-bots in Ironshod Firearms. Mechanical arms, like those from the hovering spider-bots, each ending in a different tool or manipulator, flexed and moved about him, carrying out unspoken tasks of medicine and science.

It only saw Regina, but my heart began beating like a frightened rabbit’s every time it looked my way.

Reggie flinched away as one of those arms moved towards her, probing. “N-nothing. I’m fine.”

“Fine? Yes, I suppose,” the creature said. “But you could be better.” I felt myself cringe.

“Better?” Regina questioned skeptically. “Like you?”

“Indeed. You should have seen me before the grenade.” The creature chuckled. “I know the looks take a bit to get used to, but ol’ Doc Slaughter has never been better.” Several of the arms paused in their tasks to wave. “And you can’t imagine just how useful these are! Well, maybe *you* could, being a griffin.” His chassis turned, extending one arm in particular, one that ended in mechanical talons. Reggie took an involuntary step back, looking repulsed.

Doctor Slaughter. I knew that name. *Oh, and tag her to see Doc Slaughter. She's got one of them leg terminals that are a bitch to get off.* He was in Fillydelphia. I narrowly avoided losing my PipBuck to him.

"You... created the cyberdragon, didn't you?" Reggie surprised me by asking.

"Oh yes. Possibly my best work," Doc Slaughter said proudly, his chassis spinning back as the arms scurried about their tasks. "A most unique opportunity. Poor thing's body was failing right out from under it. He was blind when Red Eye brought me to him, and he could barely fly, failing ticker. Red Eye offered the dragon new eyes, and more, for half his gems." He purred wistfully. "And just look at him now. Stronger, faster, more powerful and lethal than he was in his prime."

"If he wanted this new life so badly, why is he out there risking it?"

"My dear, you say that as if he might be harboring a death wish or something," Doc Slaughter said, the tracks on his chassis spinning, delivering him from one side of the lab to another. "But that's not the case at all. He simply has no other choice."

No other choice? Red Eye *enslaved* the dragon?

We heard explosions and the sounds of rapid-fire magical energy weapons. They sounded like they were coming from the floor above us.

"Red Eye wasn't going to have a creature that powerful and dangerous in the Everfree Forest without having it on a leash, you know," the cyber-doc explained, ignoring the battle that was quickly catching up to us. "So when we replaced the dragon's heart with a newer, better one, Red Eye had me install a matrix-disruption grenade in there with it. Red Eye sends a signal, the dragon turns off." The griffin-arm clanked its talons together. "Just like that."

"That's... horrible," Reggie gasped. "And really, really stupid. Now he has a super-powerful dragon who hates him."

"Hates him?" Doc Slaughter laughed. "Not at all. The dragon loves his new body. And Red Eye isn't foalish enough to abuse the situation. The dragon's cage is *very* gilded." Another explosion caused the lights to

flicker and a few tiles to drop from the ceiling. This time, even the cyber-doc reacted. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to seal up this lab. I'm expecting a new patient, and we can't be disturbed."

Suddenly, dangerously familiar classical music began to pour through the intercoms. It was followed a moment later by Red Eye's voice. The voice of the older, Wasteland-hardened stallion I knew too well.

"Now that our esteemed guests have arrived, I thought I'd help make you feel at home. This is one of your favorites, right Autumn Leaf?" His tone was pleasant, as if the whole battle and all the pain and blood that came with it was nothing more than a rapping at the door. "I admire your taste, Autumn. May I call you Autumn? And I do agree that Octavia never played a more splendid and perfect recorded performance. Yes, I know her works well. Grew up with them."

In a softer, wry voice, he couldn't prevent himself from adding, "She was an earth pony, after all."

As we scurried to leave, the cyber-doc added, "He even let him keep all his gems!"



The Cathedral. Sublevel four. We were almost there. Almost where I was sure we needed to be. The markings on the doors labeled this level as "Meta-Pony Testing". The inscription over the main door read: We ascend together or we fail together.

The walls were a mottled brown stone that seemed to be secreting a thick layer of slime.

Reggie grimaced in disgust. "This place just gets worse and worse."

"Whatcha think that means, meta-pony testin'?" Calamity asked, his voice suggesting he knew the answer and really hoped he was wrong.

"I think it means exactly what you think it means," I answered gloomily.

There was only one way to go this time. And that was through a sealed vault door up ahead. An access terminal was mounted on the wall nearby. Once again, no clouds. Just regular, hackable goodness.

"The way you talked, I didn't think your stealth missions tended to go this smoothly," Regina commented, pulling out her guns and checking the loads. "I ain't complainin'. Jus', I'm 'fraid if I don't getta shoot somethin' soon, I'm gonna forget how."

Unity. The password was "unity". I felt cheated. He wasn't even trying.

Entering the password gave me access to the terminal's contents. The first option was to unlock the vault door and open it. But beneath that, I was surprised to see a number of scientific journal entries. Curiosity pushed me to glance at the first. The contents drove me to read the others.

Entry #5

What a fucking waste of my valuable time. Now I have to scrap the whole mothercuntfucking I.M.P. experiments. Red fucking Eye wants to take the research in a "new direction". One failure too many. Like you can make a fucking omelet without a few generations of dead chickens.

I told his imminent god-ness that the guidance factor may be more than just genetic, but what the fuck do I know? I'm just a motherfucking scientist. He's a glorified fucking scout. How can I argue against that?

Now he's got me looking at some him-damned piece-o-shit rock. Like I don't have better things to do. Do I look like a fucking geologist?

Entry #4

The cumulation of two years of experiments, and I can write what we learned on a fucking napkin. You know what that tastes like? It tastes like a cunt that's been shit upon.

There are five stages of Impelled Metamorphosis development in a viable subject. The first three levels are well documented in my research journals, the most significant being incremental changes to the subject's relationship to and tolerance of radiation.

Radiation-induced regeneration, even to the point of regrowing limbs, begins at the first stage and radically improves in the second.

When the subject reaches the third stage of Impelled Metamorphosis development, the subject's body actually becomes stronger and faster in the presence of radiation, similar to the "glowing ghoul" and a precursor to the "super alicorn" phenomenon. The subject's healing becomes so advanced that the natural aging process is all but halted.

The fourth stage involves underlying physiological changes in preparation for the fifth and final stage: complete metamorphosis. For example, the pony's body and mind begin to grow the necessary neurological structures that will allow the pony to utilize the new horn and/or wings that the final stage will bestow, as well as other substructure changes in support of the less obvious but more radical alterations that accompany becoming a fucking alicorn.

It is at this stage that everything goes to fuck-all on a speeding enema. The Impelled Metamorphosis Potion was never intended to be administered in stages. The most pleasant of the side effects to stage four can be described as "phantom limb syndrome". The false sensations experienced by the subjects appear to be constant and amazingly painful. Subjects in fourth-stage are inevitably driven to seek out more exposure, or simply driven utterly bloodwing-shit insane. All too often, both.

The real problems comes with the extremely narrow bridge between the third stage and the fourth, and with what I have deemed the "Guidance Factor".

First, it has proven virtually impossible to expose a pony to enough I.M.P to bring them to the third stage without crossing the threshold into the fourth. The few examples of successfully stable third-stage subjects have all been in the wild under unrepeatable circumstances. Which is too fucking bad, since stable stage threes have capabilities that give Doc Slaughter's vaunted "enhancements" a run for their bits.

Second, I have determined that successful metamorphosis requires more than just sufficient exposure. It requires a sort of "guidance" through the process. In the case of the existing alicorns, this guidance is given by the Goddess. Whether this is a product of some intentional nurturing, or an environmental response is unclear. Well, it's unclear to

fucking me. Red Eye has this "template" theory and has pretty much stopped listening to any-fucking-thing else.

As a side note, I hate that freak-o-nature bastard upstairs. You know, maybe when a grenade blows your legs off and tears up the whole underside of your torso, that's a sign for you to just fucking die.

Entry #3

Fuck. I lost another assistant. Not to a lab accident this time. No, that little cancerous prick decided to bail on me and pursue his own demented "research" some-fucking-where else. Him and his fucking manticore fixation.

What a tail full of shit. He was a useful assistant. Particularly since he didn't have to sleep. Now I will have to autopsy subjects #128 and #129 myself. And I'll have to refill the fucking lanterns on my own. Yet another waste of my time. I'll be missing the fucking bastard by tomorrow.

Won't miss his stink though.

Speaking of stink, they're finally putting in the new disposal chute. Slaughter's getting his part put in tomorrow. It's going to take them a fucking week to get around to putting in mine. I swear that fucker Red Eye gives preferential treatment to cybernetics.

And then he comes down here clamoring for results. Says he's getting sick of sending me ponies only to have them tossed out with the waste. Like Red Eye should fucking talk. At least my research is doing something fucking useful.

Asswipe.

Entry #2

Finally perfected the Induced Metamorphosis Potion recipe. Would have done it sooner if that psycho Twilight Sparkle hadn't been so fucking O.C.D. with her notes. Now that we've got that manticore shit out of the way, the bucks downstairs can start whipping up whole vats of the juice. Still not sure why the fuck his self-importance Red Eye wants that much of it. He plan to go swimming?

Be funny as hell if he did, actually. I'd love to see the fuckers whole body become a bloated, misshapen blob of metastasized, living cancer. That would be fucking hilarious!

So far, the initial numbers have held. We have a solid 18% benevolent effect manifestation in test subjects. Not ideal, but I'd say it's a fuck-ton better than we really could have expected. And more than enough excuse to increase the scale of our tests.

My assistant has expressed particular interest in one of our failed cross-species tests. Of course, I fully expected all cross-species tests to fail. I.M.P. was crafted specifically for ponies, after all. But the effects on other creatures could continue to yield enlightening results.

The test that my assistant is most interested in, however, is the one that produced the least results. In fact, it produced no results at all. All the other creatures tested had at least some reaction, most of them violent and fatal. But I might as well have been shooting a concentrated fucking placebo into that manticore. Unless looking pissed off was an effect, I.M.P. failed to have any affect on it whatsoever.

On that note, I've ordered a more convenient waste disposal system. We've got passages under this place that dump into the gorge. Why don't we use them to flush some of this stink out of here?

Entry #1

New project today. About fucking time. Last one was a pointless disaster. Why does the world want to fucking keep wasting my valuable fucking time?

Got a good feeling about this one though. That pompous prick Red Eye got ahold of some pre-war fancy-mane's recipe for the crap that Taint is made out of, the shit that the Goddess uses to fucking create alicorns.

So far, four out of five test subjects have responded with the most grotesque, body-warping deaths. But that last one-in-five? Very promising, indeed!

The entries were stamped from the personal files of Doctor Glue, head of Meta-Pony Research.

I stepped back from the terminal feeling cold and hard. "Subject #129," I whispered hoarsely. This pony had murdered over a hundred ponies in his experiments for Red Eye. Probably double that, and other creatures too. Tortured them to death. *With Taint*.

I felt a ruddy darkness seep across my vision, a drive to violence mounting in every beat of my heart, the likes of which I hadn't felt since Arbu. My nerves were on fire.

I kicked on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle -- barely taking note of the new signal it had discovered, or the fact that it helpfully announced I had found "Stable 101" -- and ordered the terminal to open the door. I was really hoping Doctor Glue was behind it. Because I was going to kill him. A lot.

The door opened into a chamber of horrors. A catacomb for the horrifically malformed and mutilated byproducts of Doctor Glue's experiments, lit sporadically by mounted lanterns, many of which were dark and cold.

Ponies with massive tumors enveloping their heads. Ponies whose internal organs had been pushed out through their coats by the cancerous masses evolving inside them. Ponies who had dissolved into bubbling, leathery slugs that looked like a hospital horror's miscarriage, discernable only as ponies by the warped remains of their cutie marks. Worse.

The strains of classical music were being piped down here as well, a twisted counterpoint to the vileness. The music was defiled by being played in here; I didn't think I'd ever be able to enjoy Octavia's artistry again.

Regina Grimfeathers was vomiting in a corner. I wanted to clamp my eyes shut against the horror, but I was afraid I would still see them. So I covered my face with my PipLeg instead, staring at the screen.

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle was picking up a flood of red lights ahead.

"Oh muh soul," Calamity whimpered. He had tossed back his hood and was staring in dismay at a body whose bones had undergone a rapid

and twisting growth, bursting through muscles and flesh that had turned black and slimy. “Ah think this used t’ be a griffin.”

Reggie’s head shot up. She approached the body, spitting the last of the vomit from her mouth, her breast heaving heavily. “What?... How?” And with mounting rage that echoed my own, “*Why?*” She swung around to Calamity. “How could any pony do that? What was the point?”

“Ah couldn’t say,” Calamity began, taken aback. Then his voice grew sharp. “But as muh gal Velvet would say, anypony who would do that ain’t a pony.”

Voices echoed from within the catacombs ahead, and one of them was recognizable.

“Fan out!” Colonel Autumn Leaf ordered. “The coward ran this way. And if you find him, do not kill him. Just wound him. Excessively. But that bastard is *mine!*”

Eyes wide with recognition, Calamity vanished under the hood of his zebra cloak. I scooted against the wall and Reggie moved amongst the bodies, playing dead, as two Enclave soldiers galloped around a corner and charged past us. Reggie stepped out behind them as they passed, leveling her guns. But then lowered them, letting the two soldiers disappear.

“Stealth mission,” she grouched. “I bet bits t’ bottlecaps I’m gonna regret that later.”



“Get the fuck out! Get your hemorrhoidal fucking asses out of my laboratory!”

Doctor Glue bellowed at the four ponies surrounding him, three of whom appeared to be Enclave elite guards. We could see them through the security glass window set into the lab door. Glue was a wizened old stallion with a pale grey coat and a stringy charcoal mane. His cutie mark was a blasphemy.

Beside me, Regina was furiously trying to pick the lock with her talons. I could have opened it easily myself, but I knew the moment I did so, she'd go charging into that room, twin guns blazing. And we wouldn't win that fight without casualties.

Behind me were the catacombs. To my left was a stone archway and stairs leading down to a vault door flanked by mounted terminals. I couldn't picture the room beyond, but the fragmented alicorn memories told me that Red Eye's prisoners were down there. Angrily, the little pony in my head pointed out that we were almost there, and we were getting distracted.

But not without good reason.

"No, no. I think we will keep you company while my mares hunt down your master." The reply came from a pony in magnificent jade carapace armor, exquisitely crafted and embellished with ebony filigree and a scarab motif of leaves in iridescent bronze and copper. I didn't need to see any part of the pony to know who it was. The voice was unmistakable.

Colonel Autumn Leaf sneered casually as he strolled around the Glue's lab of horrors. "Just in case he doubles back."

I was watching two mass-murderers. The scope and heinousness of the evil in that room was breath-stealing. Truth be told, I wanted to charge in there guns blazing too. Or worse. there was enough blood in that room to fashion a guillotine for each of them. My little pony was horrified that such a plan crossed my mind, more so by just how appealing it was.

"*Effwhat?*" Doctor Glue exploded, yanking my focus back to the window. "What the *fuck* did you just say?"

"You heard me."

"*Red Eye is NOT my master!*" he exploded again, shaking with rage. "And he's not coming back!" he added. "So you can take your fucking goon squad, shove them up your sphincter, and prance the fuck out of

my lab! I've got important fucking research to do and you're wasting my time!"

"So you say," Autumn Leaf dismissed. He moved past chemistry labs, skirting a wall of cages filled with dead animals, and stopped at a machine I could not identify.

Regina growled and took a swipe at the door. "Fuck this," she muttered, drawing one of Kage's hellhound-claw blades. "Why am I pickin' the lock when I could cut right damn through it?"

I felt Calamity press up against me, the ponified hellhound's energy rifle held in his muzzle. I floated out Little Macintosh, then paused. "Wait, I have an idea."

Regina stopped, her expression still seething but her voice calm and smooth as polished steel. "Okay, Littlepip. Your way."

"Get away from that!" Doctor Glue barked inside the room. "That's a very delicate analyzer."

Autumn Leaf pulled the front panel open just a little too hard. I heard something snap. Doctor Glue roared and threw himself at the Colonel, only to be forcibly blocked and pushed to the floor by the guards.

"Oops."

I floated out the assault carbine and slid in one of the magazines, then pulled off the zebra stealth cloak, passing it to Regina. "Both of you, get back at least two corridors."

"Aw crap, Li'lpip. What are ya thinkin'?"

"I'm thinkin' that if these bullets are enchanted with a bypass, then they'll go right through that door and right through their armor," I told my friend. "One spray, and they all go down."

"An' if they ain't, yer givin' away our position an' bringin' the wrath of heaven down on yer mane."

Yeah. That was the problem. Regina's expression showed she had the same concern.

"I'll draw them away while you two remain hidden," I told him. "I still have the advanced Steathbuck. I'll trigger it once I've led them far enough away, then circle back to you."

I looked back into the window, comparing their positions to the red lights on my E.F.S. compass. I would get a few five-round bursts with this weapon while using S.A.T.S., and I wanted to make sure I took down the armored ponies first.

My breath caught as Autumn Leaf produced a hunk of twisted, blue-ish metal. "This? This is your critical research?" Was that...?

The Colonel's next words confirmed my darkest fears. "You are researching starmetal for Red Eye." It wasn't phrased as a question. I didn't know which filled me with more dread: what Red Eye's interest in starmetal was, what Doctor Glue's experiments might entail, or the fact that Autumn Leaf knew about starmetal and could recognize it on sight.

"Don't touch that!" Doctor Glue demanded, struggling against the guards. "Get the hell away from my fucking experiments!"

Autumn Leaf tossed the chunk of Luna's old armor between his forehooves. "What are you doing with this? Shaving off slivers and feeding it to ponies to see what will happen?" Autumn Leaf no longer sounded bored or pleasant. "Or perhaps you are making cybernetics out of this metal? Is this what Red Eye has inside him?"

Regina moved up beside me, the cloak draped over her shoulders but the hood down so she could look me in the eyes. "No, Littlepip," she whispered, holding out her talons for the assault carbine. "Let me do this. For Kage."

Inside the room, Doctor Glue was spitting. "Are you fucking retarded? Is that how the En-fuck promotes? Based on the number of your brain cells that have been replaced by diarrhea? Who the fuck is going to put bizarre-ass metal with unknown properties from motherfucking space in their fucking bodies? I still can't believe anypony was willing to make *armor* out of it."

Taking a breath, he seethed, "And cybersurgery is one floor up, you fetid asshole. Seriously, how long has it been since you were euthanized?"

I looked at Regina. She looked so much like her brother; I could see him in her. And that brought visions of him crumpling, dead from the weapon of an Enclave soldier. Killed on a mission that I led. What she was asking was for me to put her in equally grave danger. Yet, did I have the right to say no?

The weight of the assault carbine suddenly felt much heavier, even though it was floating weightless.

"We c'n play rock-paper-scissors for it," Reggie suggested confusingly. I looked at her like she'd just spoken in zebra. "Griffin game," she explained with a sigh. "Rock beats scissors, scissors beats paper, paper beats rock. I'd win. Ponies can only do rock."

I still had no idea what the hell she was talking about.

"Aw hell," Calamity said, tossing back his hood. I saw he'd put together Spitfire's Thunder; it was laying on the ground at his hooves. "This ain't gonna happen this way."

Pushing past us, Calamity marched up to the door and pounded a hoof on the window. "*Hey! Brony! I wanna talk t' ya!*" he shouted. "*Ya got some things t' answer fer!*"

Swinging around to me, he suggested, "Run."

All hell broke loose.

"Calamity? Colonel Autumn Leaf turned towards the window, startled recognition ringing clear in his voice. His recovery was swift, immediately followed by an order to his guards. "Bring me that traitor! Dead or alive!"

The elite guards jumped up to follow orders, spinning towards the door and unleashing a massive volley of magical light. The door heated up brightly, flooding the hall with plasmic light -- it was like standing inside the Goddess Celestia's mane! -- and promptly began to melt. The

stonework around it started hissing and glowing. The air near the door became blisteringly hot and the powerful odor of molten slag and magic overrode the stench of blood, rot and spoiled meat from the catacombs.

Regina snatched the assault rifle out of my levitation field, swinging it towards the melting door and returning fire. The sounds of gunfire and battle saddles filled the room, drowning out the classical cello music. One of the red lights on my E.F.S. compass winked out.

I floated out Little Macintosh, using my compass to aim and waiting for enough of the door to slough away for me to take a shot. The light from the door was almost blinding.

Calamity didn't have to wait. He flew back from the door, kicking Spitfire's Thunder off the ground with a forehoof and catching it in his muzzle. The crack of the shot split the air. Another red light on my compass went out.

The door collapsed, lancing beams of lethal magic filling the corridor. I fired a single shot as I scrambled for cover in the stairwell. Calamity and Regina dove behind the nearest deceased monstrosities crafted by Doctor Glue's "research". Reggie let out a screech as one of the beams struck her right arm, burning away an inch of flesh, leaving a blackened and charred wound. The griffin dropped the assault rifle and collapsed behind a mound of misshapen flesh and barely recognizable limbs, tears streaming from her eyes as she dug healing potions out of her supplies.

But this was magical damage, I realized as I watched her hold a healing potion in her beak, tossing her head back and gulping the magical liquid as her left talons drew out one of her pistols. At best, this would be a bad scar. More likely, she wouldn't ever be able to use her trademark two-pistol style effectively again.

Assuming we all lived through this. "Ever again" might be really short.

I spun back towards the entrance. Two of the three elite guards had dropped. Calamity shifted Spitfire's Thunder, pointing it directly at his older brother.

Doctor Glue, no longer being held, jumped up and galloped past Calamity's brother, snatching the starmetal shard in his teeth as he fled.

The Colonel stood his ground, staring through the door at Calamity. A hatch on the back of his jade magically-powered armor popped open and a small turret emerged, taking aim at Doctor Glue. The weapon built into the turret was bizarre yet familiar, made of gleaming blue metal and a glowing power core.

Colonel Autumn Leaf's star blaster fired at Doctor Glue. Unlike Homage's weapon, the beam of energy was a cruel orange, and Doctor Glue was incinerated in a puff of fire.

The Colonel hadn't even needed to aim. Xenith was right. The weapons *wanted* to kill.

Regina leaned around the pile of bloated bodies she was using for cover, trading shots with the remaining guard. A pulse of blue magic struck her in the back, staggering her but failing to penetrate her Talon armor, as the two Enclave soldiers came charging up from behind us. I spun around, slipping into S.A.T.S.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

One of them went down. The other swiveled to face me, the rainbow barrage from her multi-gem cannon forced me to change cover, one of the shots passing close enough to blister the flesh on the back of my neck. I could smell the scorched hairs of my mane.

I returned fire, forcing her to duck back around the corner she had come from. As I reloaded, the classical music was cut, replaced by the last voice we expected to hear.

"Calamity?" Velvet Remedy asked, sounding distressed. My pegasus friend gasped, dropping Spitfire's Thunder to the floor in shock and worry.

Autumn Leaf turned the alien fire blaster on his own brother.

"Velvet?" Calamity asked, momentarily oblivious to anything else. "What are ya doin' here?"

Only Reggie and the other guard seemed unhindered by the voices on the intercom. The guns Calamity had crafted for her were proving capable of punching through Enclave armor. The Enclave guard was already bleeding from several wounds. He kicked over a chemistry table and took cover behind it, trading shots with the griffin.

"I invited her," said the cool, casual voice of Red Eye. Autumn Leaf spun towards the sound of Red Eye's voice and fired, blasting one of the intercoms. "Don't worry, Calamity. She's in good..." his voice paused as if unsure which word to use, "...things with Doctor Slaughter."

I'm expecting a new patient, and we can't be disturbed.

Red Eye... brought my friend right into harm's way? As what? A distraction? Leverage?

What's that cyber-psycho doing to Velvet? my little pony cried out as I ducked out of cover long enough to keep the Enclave soldier pinned. *And what happened to Xenith?*

What about Pyrelight? She was guarding them. What did Red Eye do?

"Now, now, Colonel. You can't kill me that way."

"Where are you!" Autumn Leaf roared. In response, I heard a door slide open somewhere out of sight in the room beyond.

"Come and see," Red Eye offered.

Calamity scooped up Spitfire's Thunder, whipping around and firing a single shot through the helmet of the Enclave soldier as she shifted to fire again. The carapace-armored pegasus dropped with a dull thud.

"Y'all go ahead," he shouted to me. "Ah'm goin' after Velvet!"

Autumn Leaf paused for just a moment, then chose his mission over murdering his brother. He reared and flew away from us.

"He's getting away!" Reggie shouted, firing shots at the retreating pegasus. Sparks flew where her bullets ricocheted off his jade armor.

“Go with Calamity!” I yelled back to her as I turned and galloped down to the vault door at the bottom of the stairwell.



Metal catwalks over glowing vats of I.M.P.

The room at the nadir of Red Eye’s Cathedral was a nearly perfect replica of the Goddess’ chamber in Maripony. There was even a catwalk stretching out between the vats, ending in a pedestal with a cup. The room shimmered with rippling light emanating from the glowing liquid filling each of the open-topped vats. This was Red Eye’s ascension chamber.

The door at the bottom of the stairwell had opened to a pony-sized platform, like a diving board, providing me with this dizzying view of the room below. After all the tight corridors, the abrupt spaciousness of this room had managed to kick up a lingering wisp of dread. Oh agoraphobia, my old friend.

I was suffering from vertigo mixed with severe déjà vu. If this place hadn’t been recently constructed -- if the metal wasn’t shiny and new, and the floor lacking the detritus-clogged lake I remembered so well -- I might have started worrying there could be a balefire bomb beneath us.

The giant cage dangling over one of the vats like a piñata filled with unicorns... that was different too.

It had taken me two minutes to hack the terminal. And that was a minute and a half more than I would have actually needed if I hadn’t been in denial. Really, can it ever be a good thing when *your name* is the password on somepony else’s terminal?

There had been one last journal entry (**Entry #6**) from Doctor Glue on the terminal. This one was an audio log that I downloaded to my PipLeg. Now, I started it playing as I wrapped myself in a field of levitation and floated myself over to the cage.

"Normally, I fucking hate field reports. This sort of shit should be left to underlings. No good reason I should have to

go wandering about the Equestrian Shithole to get my work done.

"Normally. But this time, I'm really fucking happy I didn't have anypony else to trust this to. What I've found... this is too important to let some half-wit in a lab coat fuck up. Investigations into the origin of Red Eye's mystery rock took fucking forever, but it did eventually lead me to a place called Zebratown, where I recovered a chunk of what I believe to be actual, alien fucking metal. I can't wait to get this thing into my lab."

I was passing over the vats. There were at least two dozen unicorns littered the inside of the cage, not a single one of them moving.

"While I was at it, I got a good look at some of the prevailing theories surrounding that meteorite. Not the zebra craziness, but conclusions by ponies working under Princess Fucking Luna herself. Opinions seem split between 'the meteorite ain't nothing but a rock' and 'falling stars are vessels for fucking spirits to come to our world from outer-fucking-space'. Because, they reckoned, folks like Discord had to come from somewhere. And, they pointed out, the zebra civilization fell into centuries of bloodshed and strife after a meteor shower.

"Which is, of course, fucking stupid. The zebras didn't need evil spirits from beyond the sky for them to plunge their country into chaos and war. I mean, had these ponies even fucking met zebras? I've seen one of them fighting in the Pitt, and she was all I needed to see to know they're fucking barbaric animals. The real mystery is how the hell they built a fucking civilization in the first place.

As I drew closer to the cage, I could see the slow breathing of the caged ponies. They were not dead, but they were all unconscious. Drugged, I assumed. I couldn't imagine they naturally all went to sleep at the same time. I sent a prayer of thanks to Celestia.

If it was anypony other than me, rescue would be impossible. But I didn't need the ponies to be awake and moving in order to lead them out.

"Brought up the old theories to Red Eye in passing and even he laughed. 'If there's a spirit here,' he told me, 'It's the Spirit of Progress!'

"Looking at my research, for once I agree with the fucker. And actually sharing an opinion with Red Eye makes me want to gut myself with a rusty scalpel.

"Anyway, both sides were totally fucking far from the mark. Based on my own analysis, the meteorite did bring something, all right. But it wasn't some fucking asinine evil-star-demon-thing. More like... an infection. A virus that got into our ecosystem and mutated. That's not quite right, but it's a hell of a lot closer than star-spirits or it's-just-a-fucking-rock.

"No wonder they blew up the world. Ponies were stupid as shit back then."

My insides felt like they were twisting up when I realized he had been talking about Xenith. I was not sorry that Doctor Glue was dead. No, not one iota. Not a single hair in my coat worth of sympathy for that disgusting blight on ponykind.

And Red Eye had employed the monster.

As my hooves touched down on the top of the cage, the door that led out onto the central catwalk slid open. I cringed, making myself as small and unnoticeable as possible, when Red Eye galloped in through the open door.

He was alone. And once inside, his gallop dropped back to a trot. Then a walk. Despite having been running, regardless of the war raging above his Cathedral, Red Eye looked unfazed. Confident. His mane and coat neatly groomed. He wore a heavy scarf and his black 101 cape fluttered listlessly behind him.

The door slid shut. As I watched, he stopped and looked around, then activated a StealthBuck in his PipBuck and vanished.

I at once felt both alarmed and foalish. Red Eye was in the room with me and I didn't know where or what he was doing. And why was I flattening myself against the cage when I had a StealthBuck too? A much better one, at that.

I activated the MG StealthBuck II, removing myself from sight.

And not a moment too soon.

The door whisked open again, and Colonel Autumn Leaf swooped into the room. He beat his wings, ascending to get a pegasus' eye's view of the ascension chamber.

"I know you are in here," he said gruffly. "There was no other way to run."

"By intention, I assure you," Red Eye's voice floated out of a dozen speakers. "And now that we're all here..."

There was a flash of light from the open doorway, and a film of magical energy washed across the walls and over the floor and ceiling. An alicorn shield!

Colonel Autumn Leaf spun about to see the dark-green alicorn sitting statuesque just outside the doorway. Another alicorn, a purple one, had just teleported the two of them in, and was wrapping both of them in a shield of her own. Looking up, I saw an identical two just outside the door I had entered through.

"Well, you clearly have me where you want me," Autumn Leaf admitted, flying down to land on the catwalk. "So why not tell me what this is all about? What is the big plan?"

There was a moment of drawn out silence. I began to search for the lock on the cage. I finally spotted it. It was on the bottom, and picking it would cause the bottom of the cage to swing open and dump the helpless unicorns into the vat of swirling green and purple below.

Of course it was.

Red Eye spoke again, and this time he actually sounded surprised, although hardly displeased. "Did you... Did you just *invite* me to *monologue*?"

No, I thought. He invited you to waste enough time talking that your StealthBuck drains, you become visible, and he can kill you.

"So you are going to become the new Goddess," Autumn Leaf surmised, looking at the vats. "Is that it? Replace the one you killed?"

"That's... not wrong," Red Eye admitted.

"And what does this have to do with the Sustained Pegasi Project?" Autumn Leaf prompted, taking to the air to peer beneath the catwalk, searching for the hiding earth pony.

"Oh, everything!" Red Eye proclaimed, clearly warming up to the conversation. "You see, I've finally found the way inside."

"Oh really?" the jade-armored pegasus perked up. "Do tell? Because, from my understanding, it is impossible. And that makes you a liar."

"Impossible? Hardly!" Red Eye's voice proclaimed from the dozen speakers. "There are several things that can get through an alicorn shield, even one that powerful. Telepathy. Telekinesis. Certain types of dragon magic. And, most importantly, anyone that the shield is enchanted with a bypass for can walk or teleport through. Or, as you know, anyone sufficiently related."

"Right," Autumn Leaf agreed. "Too bad Rainbow Dash had no descendants."

"Ah, but Rainbow Dash wasn't the only one the S.P.P. hub's shield was designed to let through," Red Eye countered, and now he had Colonel Autumn Leaf's full attention. "It was also designed to let the Princesses through!"

Wait. What?

"I have a hard time believing you will be in any condition to go anywhere," Autumn Leaf pointed out, "Judging by the late Goddess." I guessed that behind his visor, he was rolling his eyes.

"True. But I will be able to maintain telepathic control over one of my children, who will take control of the Central Hub as a vessel of my will."

Autumn Leaf began searching for Red Eye again. "If you are thinking that one of those sorry excuses for alicorns can get through the shield, then you are pathetically mistaken. Several have already tried." The alien fire blaster swiveled as he scanned the room.

“Oh I know,” Red Eye almost purred. “We sent them. I will admit that Nightseer’s failure did send me back to the proverbial drawing board...”

Nightseer? It took just a moment for the name to conjure a face. The crazy alicorn in the Royal Castle, the one who had fallen under the influence of the Black Book and was *wearing Luna’s skull* as a necklace! *That* was the alicorn who the Goddess and Red Eye tasked with getting through the S.P.P. shield? And she failed?

That... actually explained a lot, in a very twisted way.

“...But it was from her failure that I discovered just why the Goddess’ alicorns couldn’t make it through. And what was needed. It was just like you said, they are sorry excuses for alicorns. They are flawed -- missing something vital to what an alicorn should be. And thus too far removed from what an alicorn should be, and thus Celestia.”

Almost as if he wanted to assuage the feelings of the alicorns maintaining the shield, Red Eye kindly added, “No fault of their own; it’s the failing in their templates.”

“What are you blathering about?” Autumn Leaf asked. He had made a full circle around the room, checking behind each of the vats, and was now landing back on the central catwalk.

“If you understood the creature your High Councilor tried to make friendly with, you’d understand,” Red Eye chided. “The essence of the Goddess was formed out of the souls of four dominant ponies. And these ponies, in turn, provided the metaphysical template for the alicorns to follow.”

Red Eye wasn’t saying anything I didn’t already know, and we weren’t apparently going anywhere until his StealthBuck ran out or something else changed the status quo, so I focused my attention on the unicorns.

They seemed healthy. Unharmred. Even surprisingly well-fed. Far more than the slaves in Fillydelphia. It occurred to me that some of these unicorns might have volunteered. If so, they were either fanatical disciples or severely misled.

I also noticed that each one was wearing a mechanical collar with a tiny red light. The collars were locked shut.

"Unfortunately," Red Eye continued, "The templates lacked a certain critical diversity..."

Yeah. They were all females. The Goddess had a plan for that. It involved a really, really bad book.

"...They were all unicorns."

Oh. Never thought of that, but I supposed it was true as well. Twilight Sparkle, Trixie, Gestalt and Mosaic: all unicorns.

Whoah! Pull back the reins!

"To create alicorns that can bypass that shield, the templates require a certain... unity."

Each race of ponykind adds to the whole, the voice of the younger Red Eye whispered in my head. No one greater or more important than the others. It is a vital gestalt, requiring all three.

Oh no.

"A new deity needs to be created with templates from all three races," Red Eye revealed. "Which meant I needed to find a pegasus and a unicorn who were strong enough in mind and soul to become dominant aspects with me in the new Godhood.

"We're all going to get to know each other very well, you in me."

Oh FUCK no!

Colonel Autumn looked appalled. Then he broke into uncontrolled snickers. "What?" Colonel Autumn Leaf laughed, "You are expecting me to take a swim with you?"

He cantered to the edge of the platform, asking, "Or were you planning to drop me in like what happened to Trixie?" He flapped his wings, hovering above the catwalk, showing off. "Yes," he added, answering the unspoken question. "I did my research."

“As did I,” Red Eye told him. “Poor, little Autumn Leaf. A middle child, trapped between the perfect son, the loser and the mistake. So you took the only path left: the over-achiever.

“You have the drive, the ambition, not to mention the charisma and force of will, to become the leader of a massive military force. One of the highest ranking officers in your entire country. And yet... it’s all born out of a desire for approval.”

Autumn Leaf hovered silently. Then slowly spoke. “You know nothing.”

“Not from your father, not anymore. You’re now the obedient servant of much more powerful ponies than him. But for all your power, you’re still just a dog responding to his master’s call, hoping to be petted.” Red Eye purred cruelly, “That’s what makes you perfect. You’re a powerful enough soul to become a template, but you’ll never be able to challenge me for true dominance.”

The room was utterly silent and still, save for the flapping of Autumn Leaf’s wings.

“Sorry, Red Eye,” he said finally, his voice feigning jovial dismissal. “But you lose. I am not drinking your cup of delusion.” He looked pointedly into the cup on the pedestal. “Find somepony else.”

The cup erupted in a crackling blast as Red Eye set off the matrix-disruption grenade he had hidden inside it. Colonel Autumn Leaf’s armor went dead, and he dropped onto the platform with a resounding clang, utterly paralyzed.

Red Eye disengaged his StealthBuck, appearing on the catwalk less than two yards away. He walked up and nudged the incapacitated Enclave leader with a hoof.

“I’ll admit, you did surprise me,” Red Eye offered generously. “I needed the Enclave to send some pegasi within my reach, but your insane level of overreaction caught me entirely off-guard.” Red Eye lowered his head to Autumn Leaf’s helmet. “I’ve spent more time scrambling to adjust to your Enclave’s *massive overkill* than I care to admit.”

“What in the name of whatever you hold holy did you expect,” Autumn Leaf growled, trapped within his armor like SteelHooves had been when I first talked to him. “What you are planning is nothing short of annihilating an entire country’s crops. Your megalomania threatens the pegasi with massive famine and starvation. You are attempting to become the *greatest mass-murderer in Equestria’s history* just so you can claim credit for a sunny day!”

Oh Goddesses. Is that what I was doing too? My own plan was not so far different. Was that the cost? Compared to the cruelty of that, the paltry help I had given the ponies of the wasteland paled to insignificance.

“To resurrect Equestria,” Red Eye answered bluntly, “Sacrifices must be made.”

The callousness of his words struck me. Yes, I was also planning to take control of the Single Pegasus Project. The Enclave needed to be stopped. And Velvet Remedy was right: you can’t stop something until you take away its reason for being that way. Furthermore, the ponies of the wasteland deserved to see Celestia’s sun again. To know that warmth and hope that only a sunny day could bring.

But I wasn’t the sort of cold, uncompassionate creature I saw in both of the ponies below me. I knew something that neither Red Eye nor Autumn Leaf knew, a game-changing factor that made it possible for my plan to succeed without doing unspeakable harm. I knew about the Gardens of Equestria.

“Although, in the end, the Enclave’s actions... that is to say, *your* actions... have served my intentions nicely,” Red Eye gloated gently. “You’ve made yourselves so much the villains that our new Godhood will be celebrated as a savior when I end you.”

Colonel Autumn Leaf began to swear. “Maybe I will be the one ending you!”

“Interesting fact,” Red Eye said over Autumn Leaf’s threatening string of curses, “Four ponies became the templates within the Goddess, but they didn’t form the Goddess equally. The Goddess was dominated by

one mind, one will. And it wasn't the most powerful of the four. No, that would have been Twilight Sparkle. Instead, it was Trixie. And not just Trixie, but Trixie the Showpony. The most *charismatic* of the four.

"I'll be sharing Godhood with a martyr who wants to save everypony and a gutless tool." He smirked. "I'm feeling pretty confident in my chances."

Red Eye turned his gaze up towards the cage. "You can come out now."

What? my little pony stammered. *I... but... oh, forget it.* Her head slumped in defeat. I disengaged the StealthBuck and stared down at the wasteland's other Stable Dweller.

Red Eye smiled at me.

"Not a chance in hell," I told him bluntly.

"Up to you," he said, surprising me.

"Wait... you're giving me a choice?"

Red Eye walked up to the catwalk railing, placed his hooves on it, and peered into the swirling colors of the vat beneath. "Of course I am."

"Why?" I had to know.

"Because I'm going to have a hard enough time struggling against him," he tilted his head towards the collapsed body of Autumn Leaf. "I don't want to be fighting both of the other templates. And I figure there's a far better chance that you'll spend Godhood actually trying to help the wasteland through your benevolent rule, rather than trying to undermine me out of petty revenge, if you actually choose to be there. And finally..."

Red Eye paused, seeming to consider what he wanted to say. "...because unlike him," he said, whipping a tail towards Autumn Leaf, "It doesn't have to be you."

I blinked. My name had been his password, and now he was saying he didn't really need me? That I really wasn't special after all? I felt as wounded as I felt relieved.

"There are twenty-five unicorns in that cage," he pointed out. "Twenty-five hoof-picked chances for a good unicorn template. One of them is bound to be sufficient. But you..." He snorted bemusedly. "You're a sure thing. Imagine my surprise when fate dropped you right in front of me at the seventh hour. A unicorn who not only had all the qualities that guaranteed a strong template, but who would volunteer to become part of the Godhood, and whose rulership would actually make our New Equestria a better, richer place.

"I've always known that I was taking a gamble. No matter how much I researched, planned and created contingencies, inevitably all my efforts would come down to a roll of the dice. You just allowed me to hedge my bets more than I would have thought possible."

My mind caught on one word in all that. Volunteer? "Why the hell would I ever..."

"Because you don't want to risk what will happen if you don't," he said simply. "You already know what *he's* like. You're not going to run the risk that the Godhood will manifest with him in charge. Or some third pony you don't know who might be just as bad."

"You said he couldn't possibly challenge you," I reminded him plaintively.

"Oh very true," Red Eye told me. "But I'm not the one who will be ruling Equestria. I told you before, I'm too much of a monster for the world we are creating. I have no place in it. That will be your job, remember?" He chuckled. "Besides, I'm going to have my plate full controlling the sun, moon and weather."

My jaw dropped.

"Oh dear," Red Eye laughed. "How else did you think I was planning for you to take over my work? My forces and my followers aren't going to be loyal to a new leader just because I tell them to. But they will be loyal to the new me, and any part of me."

I reeled.

“Really, Littlepip, did you ever take the time to seriously think this through? Or did you just assume I was lying?”

I felt numb, removed, like the world was a distant, far-away place. I was in a cocoon of else-ness, staring out at reality through hazy gauze.

The paralysis broke when Red Eye hefted one hindleg over the railing.

“Stop!” I ordered as I floated out Little Macintosh, taking aim.

“You’re kidding.” Red Eye looked up at me, shock dissolving into contempt. He stared down the barrel pointed between his eyes. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No,” I told him sternly. “I’m taking option three. The one where I don’t have to worry about what the ponies in the Godhood are like because there isn’t a new Godhood at all.”

“Take the shot!” Autumn Leaf growled. We both ignored him.

“Really, Littlepip?” Red Eye asked. “Would you doom the ponies of Equestria to the Wasteland? To another two-hundred years of futile struggle, poverty and hardship... all ending in death, usually at the whim of the Wasteland’s raiders and monsters? They need us, Littlepip. Where will they be without our leadership? What will become of them without our guidance?”

“They don’t need us. They don’t need a God to save them. They can save themselves.”

“I admire your faith, Littlepip. So... childlike. But now it is time to grow up.”

Was it? Was I just being naïve? “No,” I said slowly, not sure where my thoughts and words were going. “Maybe... I think... it’s time for them to grow up.”

I thought of the Twilight Society sitting on a treasure of magic and not using it to help anypony. Of the Steel Rangers preying on other ponies in their selfish drive to hoard the technologies of the past. Of New Appleloosa willing to trade with slavers and not lifting a hoof about the horrors of Old Appleloosa not so far from their door.

“It’s time for the ponies of the wasteland to stop being so selfish and short-sighted. To start caring about their fellow ponies. To raise their hooves in aid and communal support. To work together to build something bigger and better, not because they’re being forced to, but because they want to, for themselves and for their children...”

I remembered the words of Life Bloom: *This is us helping.*

“...It’s time for the ponies to tell the wasteland to buck off!”

I thought of the Applejack’s Rangers, and SteelHooves’ words in Stable Two: *Today, you must choose with whom your Oath lies. Surrender this ignominious goal and join by my side, reaffirming your Oath to the protection of the citizens of Equestria.*

I remembered Homage’s broadcast: *And I’ve got more reports coming in. Heroes all the way from Shattered Hoof to Hoofington have been holding the line against the nightmares from above.*

“And you know what?” I continued. I couldn’t have stopped; it was like an avalanche had started inside of me. “I think they want to. They’re ready to. You’ve shown them that rebuilding is possible. I’ve...” I’ve what? I knew what. I’d been an example. I couldn’t listen to Homage without her drumming it into my head. But saying it, *accepting* it, was another thing entirely. I knew *I* was nothing special, but my reputation had become something powerful.

“...I’ve been their Lightbringer.” I said finally, coating the concept in Homage’s words and hoping it didn’t sound conceited. “We’ve done what we can...”

Well, I wasn’t quite done yet. I still had one big play to make. But I was done here. With him.

“...and now it’s time for Daddy Red Eye and Mommy Littlepip to get the fuck out of their way.”

Goddesses. That’s where my thoughts were going? Ick. Most dysfunctional family ever. I mentally divorced myself from Red Eye.

Red Eye chuckled, a good-humored sound, having a laugh at my bizarre little speech. "Dear Littlepip. You can't truly believe that. Not after all you've seen. If ponies were capable of that, they would have done so already. They wouldn't have needed us in the first place."

He stared downwards into the glowing, swirling liquid. "If left to their own devices, without us, they would collapse back into the same routines that have kept them under the hoof of the Equestrian Wasteland for two hundred years. Ponies..." Red Eye snorted. "Ponies never change."

"We've made mistakes," I countered. "Ponies do that. We all make mistakes. We all have flaws and weaknesses. But we are stronger when we are together." I felt the comforting weight of the Ministry Mares in my saddlebag. "And together, we can be better than this." We have to be better than this, my little pony added. "We're ponies."

"Stirring," Red Eye quipped, straddling the railing. "Inspirational, even. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an ascension to bathe in."

I cocked Little Macintosh warningly. "Back away from the edge or I *will* put you down."

"No. No you won't," Red Eye stated flatly. "Two reasons. First..." He reached a hoof up to his scarf and pulled it away, revealing a collar identical to the ones on the unicorns. "...because I'm wearing this."

Little Macintosh lowered ever so slightly as I stared at him in confusion.

"Bomb collars," Red Eye explained. "Zebras used to put them round the necks of prisoners of war and set them free. They'd wait for the prisoner to make it back to other ponies, then BOOM!"

I felt queasy. My eyes lowered to the unicorns in the cage, each with a deathtrap around her or his neck.

"These particular bomb collars are linked. If one is disarmed, or the pony wearing it dies, then BOOM! *All* of them go off." Red Eye leveled a gaze at me. "You kill me, you kill them."

The new signal my E.F.S. had notified me about, I realized, had been the bomb collars' shared frequency. Every time I thought I knew Red Eye...

And if something hadn't gone according to plan? If Autumn Leaf had gotten off a lucky shot and killed him before this point? Boom. Just by wearing that thing, he was toying with the lives of the unicorns beneath me in a whole new, disgusting level.

"You'd have to disarm them all simultaneously," he told me. "You? You might just be good enough with telekinesis to perform separate delicate operations on two dozen devices at the same time. But how skilled are you with explosives?"

He had me. Dammit, he had me!

Hell, I could barely disarm a grenade bouquet.

"And second, because if you were going with that option, you would have shot me already."

I really, really hated Red Eye.

This was really happening. I... I was actually going to do this? The little pony in my head was telling me I couldn't just let Red Eye win. But that sounded more like childish rivalry and stubborn pride. And I wasn't going to sacrifice these unicorns, much less the future of the wasteland, for something so selfish.

Really, in a way, it wasn't that different from what I had intended, was it?

No, it really was.

I was trying to bring hope to the wasteland. To banish a very real darkness. And I was willing to lose everything I had, even *Homage*, to give that to the ponies of Equestria. I wasn't trying to gain anything. I wasn't putting myself on a pedestal or on a throne. But that's what Red Eye wanted.

"And besides, I do have your friends," he reminded me. "After all, repetition is magic."

“What about my friends?” I asked harshly. “Where’s Xenith? What have you done to Velvet Remedy? What...”

“Don’t worry,” Red Eye assured me, “They’re fine. All of them. I sent one of my best purples to invite them here. She gave them an offer they would be hard pressed to refuse. And they’ll continue to be fine as long as you don’t do something stupid.”

“Right. They’re all helpless, at the mercy of my choices.” My little pony snorted. Red Eye had a terrible habit of underestimating my friends.

I thought of my friends. How would they feel about this? What council would they give? The answer hit me like a bucket of ice water.

SteelHooves would not approve. SteelHooves joined me because I represented a chance to do something better, to be a better pony. He died pursuing that belief. And he would be utterly disgusted that I was even contemplating Red Eye’s offer. I owed him better than that.

Once again, I remembered sitting with him, staring out over the bay at Friendship City. The city of ponies, I noted, that Colonel Autumn Leaf had ordered burned off the map. But then, hadn’t I annihilated a town myself? How could I allow the pony who razed Arbu to become ruler of Equestria? Look at the mistakes I’d made. The damage I’d done. Monterey Jack. Party-Time Mint-als. I couldn’t take the role once held by the Princesses!

Red Eye thought I’d be unable to trust anypony else with that power. I knew I couldn’t trust myself with it.

Red Eye was appealing to my virtues, both corrupted and true; he knew me better than I knew myself. He always had.

But what Red Eye did not understand -- had never understood -- was friendship. Alone we were weak, at the mercy of our failings. But together, as friends, we were strong. We buttressed each other. We shared our strengths, protecting each other from our vulnerabilities. Even when apart. I thought of my friends, and I thought of *their* virtues. Loyalty and kindness, perseverance and humility. Red Eye’s offer flew in the face of all of them.

Red Eye jumped.

I concentrated.

A moment later, the red-coated stallion floated up, wrapped in my magic, until he was level with my position on top of the cage. His legs flailed at the air helplessly, struggling to get down. Then Red Eye let out a heavy sigh, head drooping.

“Forgot you might do that,” he admitted. He sighed again, giving me a plaintive look. “Why?”

“Because the ponies of the wasteland deserve a better ruler than me,” I told him. “And a better God than you.”

My E.F.S. compass suddenly came alive with a swarm of red lights.

“There is something else you are forgetting,” a voice called up from below us. Autumn Leaf had been silent long enough that I’d forgotten he was conscious. “Scissors beats paper.”

The alicorn shield collapsed as Enclave-helmeted hellhounds tore through the alicorns at the entrances, their claws slicing easily through the purple alicorns’ protective shields. More gouged their way in through the walls, the ceiling and even the floor. One of the vats began to drain as at least one hellhound had the misfortune of digging up into the room directly beneath it.

Hellhounds beat alicorns.

“*NO!*” Red Eye shouted, seeing decades of carefully laid plans torn apart.

A heavy, muffled thud vibrated through the ascension chamber. Followed by another as something began to hammer the Cathedral from above. A whole new level of bombardment. The *Overcast*, I realized, had started bombarding the fortress with its heaviest weapons.

One of the hellhounds charged onto the catwalk, pulling out a magical energy rifle, and fired. The purple pulse struck Red Eye, dissolving a plate-sized chunk of his scarred, cutie mark free flank. His pony eye opened wide in shock.

Red Eye began to die.

Fuck!

I couldn't save him. He'd be dead in seconds, and he was going to take all of us with him.

Inspiration hit, born of panic. I pulled the MG StealthBuck II out of my PipLeg and swapped in the Canterlot broadcaster, setting it to broadcast on every frequency I could before turning it on.

My head exploded as death-tainted static poured into the room. My magic imploded, dropping the dying Red Eye into the vat beneath us as a vice clamped down on my horn. My eyes began to bleed. The unicorns beneath me moaned in agony. Inside his suit, Colonel Autumn screamed. Several of the hellhounds howled, collapsing and writhing. More than a few managed to tear off their helmets.

More beams of light slashed through the room. One of them struck into the cage, dissolving one of the tranquilized unicorns, the glowing ash spilling down into the I.M.P. pool below.

The bomb collars didn't go off. Like on the *Lenticular*, the Canterlot static completely flooded the collar's channel, preventing them from sending the trigger signal.

I turned the broadcaster off again, fishing out a healing potion and downing it swiftly. I then focused on the cage's lock as I wrapped the unicorns in a telekinetic sheath. We were too exposed here. I needed to get us out!

More heavy thuds shook the chamber. The Cathedral was being pulverized.

"Take me with you," Colonel Autumn Leaf commanded. "Save me!"

"Go with your hellhounds," I shouted back.

"They haven't been ordered to do that," he admitted, pleading. "My first officer is about to turn this place into a crater." And the hellhounds were acceptable losses. There was no provision in their orders for self-preservation.

The lock clicked. The bottom of the cage swung open, the twenty-four remaining ponies floating in place above the vat of swirling I.M.P. below.

“Look, I’m good with explosives,” the Colonel bargained. “I can walk you through disarming those collars. But only if you take me with you!”

I glowered, staring at the pony who had been behind the destruction of the Canterlot Ruins, the murderer of Star Sparkle. The pony who had ordered his own brother, my best friend, to be hunted and killed. Who had sent the Wonderbolts after us. Ordered the attacks on Friendship City, New Appleloosa, and more.

“On one condition,” I told Calamity’s brother.

“Anything!” he agreed readily.

“Tell me how to rig that star blaster’s battery to explode!” I ordered. Doctor Glue had indicated there were tunnels beneath the Cathedral. The hellhounds were already spilling taint into them. How much worse would the Everfree Forest become once this room was torn apart and all of this, a million tons of pure I.M.P. released into the environment? I couldn’t even imagine what that would do to Equestria. It would be more devastating than a megaspell.

It wasn’t enough to let this room be destroyed. It needed to be vaporized.



My head was pounding, my brain trying to claw its way out of my skull. There was a warm, wet stickiness dribbling out of my ears and nostrils. My abused horn protested, the effort it took to pick the lock on the last collar seemed more than it took to once float a boxcar.

The collar snapped open, and I shut off the broadcaster one last time, slumping against the wall. We were in what was left of Doctor Glue’s laboratory. My gaze lingered over all the unicorns. I had only turned on the broadcaster for a few second for each collar, but the cumulative toll

was devastating. I was out of healing potions. And four of the ponies hadn't survived.

The rational part of my brain (or as much of it that wasn't trying to leak out my ears), told me that I had saved twenty lives. Out of twenty-five. And that four out of five wasn't that bad.

The little pony in my head was weeping, mourning every one of the five I had failed.

The powerful thudding overhead caused part of the ceiling above to give, raining down dirt and several blocks of stone, reminding me that I hadn't saved anypony yet. Until we were out of here, all I had done was delay their deaths.

I wiped my PipLeg across my eyes and it came back smeared with red. My gaze shifted to the limp form of Autumn Leaf, trapped in his unique jade Enclave armor. I had refused to reboot it until he had fulfilled his part of the deal. I didn't want to be incinerated by that alien weapon as repayment for my helping hoof.

I crawling over to him, turning my attention to the alien fire blaster. "Okay. One more bomb to deal with, and then I'll set you free."

Removing the alien fire blaster and rigging its power core was far more complex than I had imagined. It spoke volumes to me, realizing how skilled Homage was to have done what she did. I felt a happy pang in my heart, pride in my mare mixing with the hurtful reality that I would almost certainly never see her face again.

There just wasn't enough time. There was never enough time.

The homemade explosive hummed to life, the charges from the bomb collars ringing the bright orange glow of the star blaster's power core. I set the timer and floated it out and down the stairwell, guiding it into the ascension chamber. I knew the room well enough that I didn't have to see it to place the bomb right into Red Eye's cup.

I gave us ten minutes. The hammering above shook the room, but I didn't think the *Overcast* would be able to blast down this deep quite that quickly.

“Okay then,” Colonel Autumn Leaf said. “Reboot me, and let’s get the hell out of here.”

I turned to Calamity’s brother. The butcher of the wastelands. Setting him free... it wasn’t a question of whether he’d do more damage, but how much. How many more ponies was I letting him murder by letting him go.

A realization swept over me. A determined frown crept across my muzzle. I crouched down to him, telekinetically lifting his visor so I could look into his eyes. Autumn Leaf had fiery hazel eyes. Calamity’s eyes, the realization struck me painfully. But they were tinted crimson, streams of blood running from the corners, matting his coat and pooling in his helmet.

“There’s something you should know about me,” I told him sadly. “I’m not the Bearer of Honesty. But I know her. And I love her.”

I floated out Little Macintosh. Autumn Leaf’s eyes went wide.

BLAM!

Standing back up, I slid Applejack’s gun into its holster and began floating the twenty still-living ponies in the room.

For the longest time, I had thought of myself as Red Eye’s reflection (granting one of Pinkie Pie’s particularly warped funhouse mirrors). But I was comparing myself to the wrong pony. I wasn’t Red Eye.

I was Applesnack.



All my friends were already waiting at the *Tortoise* when I galloped up, twenty still-unconscious unicorns floating in tow.

“Well, all right!” Calamity whooped. “Let’s get this show on the wing!”

The Cathedral was nothing but rubble, only a few of the barracks houses still halfway intact. The *Overcast* was hammering the ground with blasts of multi-hued energy, pulverizing its way through the sublevels. The Thunderhead itself was heavily damaged, pouring smoke

from multiple breaches, the rumble of its thunderclouds no longer steady or harmonious. The dragon and alicorns were nowhere to be seen. Any of Red Eyes troops who survived had fled into the Everfree Forest. Which, I imagined, was just waiting to eat them.

Calamity had gathered everyone into the *Tortoise*, friends and *Overcast* escapees alike, and relocated to the shelter created by one of the downed Raptors. From the shredding of its hull, I suspected the dragon had taken it down. Fortunately, I had the *Tortoise's* tag on my PipLeg, so (after a brief spark of panic) I had no trouble finding it.

"Autumn Leaf?" Calamity asked as I arrived, panting, dripping with sweat.

"He didn't make it," I said, choosing not to elaborate. "Neither did Red Eye."

A pained expression settled on Calamity's face. "Fer the best, really," he said, turning towards the sky-tank's cockpit.

My heachache was pounding hard enough to rival the *Overcast's* bombardment, and it spiked to teeth-gnashing intensity with each epic boom. I wanted my friends, a bed, and a pony-sized healing potion.

I opened the back, and was immediately yanked inside and into a hug. "Littlepip, where have you been? I've been so worried!"

Relief flooded me and I hugged her back. "Learning to play rock-paper-scissors," I told her. I thought of the star-born explosive I'd left behind, due to go off any moment now, if it hadn't already. "Bet on rock."

My relief was replaced with mane-raising alarm as I spotted, over her shoulder and through wisps of her mane, the sleeping form of the albino hellhound. Despite how crowded the *Tortoise* was, the other ponies were cringing back, avoiding touching the creature. I hoped he was under Velvet's spell and thoroughly sedated to boot. My eyes drifted down over the body to lock on the shiny, cybernetic leg where, hours ago, nothing had been.

"You let yourself be taken prisoner in order to help the hellhound, didn't you?" I said dully.

“We had everything under control,” Life Bloom piped up from where he was tending to Reggie, the scarlet glow from his horn matching the glow around Reggie’s crippled arm. “Xenith’s back at the hut. There isn’t anything more I can do for her, and we didn’t dare move her. Fortunately, the alicorn didn’t seem to care.”

They left her *alone*?

“Pyrelight’s back there watching over her,” Life Bloom added.

Okay, I thought, remembering my time in Fillydelphia. *Not alone then*. That I could accept.

“Yes, and Calamity was sooo gallant,” Velvet cooed. “You should have seen him! Those Enclave hellhounds guarding us never stood a chance.”

My head hurt. A lot.

I moved for one of the rucksacks, fishing for a healing potion, as Calamity strapped himself into the harness.

“What in tarnation is that one doin’?” he asked suddenly, craning to look upwards out of his armored window.

I turned around and stuck my head out the open door of the sky-tank, looking upwards at the massive Thunderhead above the pulverized remains of the Cathedral. One badly damaged Raptor had re-melded into the *Overcast*’s stormclouds, and a second was moving up, trailing plumes of black smoke behind it as it struggled to keep altitude long enough to dock. The shadow of a third Raptor was visible through the smoke, approaching from the far side.

Approaching awfully fast.

I looked around, counting four downed Raptors. Three apparently from the cyberdragon and one from the artillery cannons the Cathedral used to have. That left two, the *Lenticular* and the Raptor that had gone off chasing it.

I floated in my earbloom, bracing myself, and turned on the Enclave’s inter-warship channel, ready to turn it off at the first hiss of static. Instead, I heard the voice of a mare.

“Raptor Lenticular! This is the Thunderhead Overcast! If you do not respond, we will shoot you out of the sky!”

There was no response. Several of the *Overcast*’s guns swiveled towards the incoming warship.

“Raptor Lenticular! Cut your engines. This is your last warning.”

The Raptor did not cut its engines. If anything, it looked like it was speeding up.

“Whoa nelly!” Calamity shouted out. “That bird’s gonna ram ‘er!”

The *Overcast* opened fire. But it was already too late. The blasts of super-intensified magical energy slashed holes into the *Lenticular*, causing the ship to bleed; but it stayed its course, not slowing.

I stared, my eyes growing wider and wider as I realized what I was seeing. The Raptor was bleeding! Pinkish vapor was pouring out of its wounds.

The *Raptor Lenticular* was full of Pink Cloud!

The *Overcast* had stopped its bombardment and was trying to move, but the massive ship had the speed and agility of a turtle. A new voice -- a gravelly stallion’s voice -- boomed over the military channel with an almost supernatural power. **“FOR CANTERLOT!”**

The *Raptor Lenticular* struck the *Overcast* with a rapturous explosion. Whoever was aboard had frontloaded the ship with every bomb on board. The explosion blew out both of the *Overcast*’s thunderclouds on the struck side and tore a massive hole in the side of the mobile siege platform, the Raptor wedging into the bigger ship like a poisonous dart.

I spotted the silhouette of a pony-like figure flee from the rear of the *Lenticular*, flying away on bat-like wings even as pegasi started to pour out of the mortally wounded Thunderhead, abandoning ship.

Beneath the Tortoise, the ground shifted, collapsing downward. The bomb I had created had gone off, silently vaporizing the earth beneath us. And now the ruins of the Cathedral were collapsing into a massive sinkhole.

Calamity needed no other encouragement. He beat his wings and pulled the Tortoise into the air, fleeing the scene with a tank full of escapees and twenty floating unicorns in tow. I turned and sat, looking out the back door, drinking a health potion.



We almost made it back to Zecora's Hut.

I heard the crack of the shot. And Calamity's yelp as the bullet from Gutshot's anti-machine rifle pierced the cockpit and struck into the wing-muscles on Calamity's right side, crippling him. The Tortoise dropped, smashing into treetops. My levitation spell imploded as I was thrown against the back door, which flew open, scattering ponies into the forest below.

My body slammed into a thick branch hard enough to snap it, breaking ribs, bruising my abdomen and knocking the wind out of me. I tumbled through the tree, feeling like I was being viciously pummeled by raiders. My right hindleg hit a branch badly and I heard a snap, followed by searing pain. I slammed into the ground on my back, my E.F.S. flashing warnings, and blacked out.

When I came to, Velvet Remedy was standing over me, her horn glowing as she focused on my broken hindleg. Reggie was standing at my side, her bad arm bandaged in a sling, blood pouring down a series of gashes along her head and flanks. She was staring forward, glaring daggers.

My eyes caught one blue suit of carapace armor, then another and another. We were surrounded by Wonderbolts. And they were having a heated argument. There were voices all around me. Two of them were Calamity's.

"What the hell is this?" Calamity's voice asked.

"Ya fell into the blue plants, didn'tcha Gutshot?" Calamity snapped back wryly. "Ah knew it burned yer feathers t' be second best, but Ah

never imagined you'd want t' be me!" His voice was slowly rising. "Have ya met me? *Have ya seen muh life?*"

I turned, following the voices, to see a bleeding and bedraggled Calamity staring down a mirror image of himself in Wonderbolt armor, the anti-machine rifle of his battle saddle pointed between my best friend's eyes.

"Gutshot, stand down," Skydive ordered, stepping up beside Calamity.

"Like hell I will," the Calamity-doppelganger shouted. "We still have a mission."

"Yes," Strafewise countered, approaching to flank the real Calamity on the other side. "But not this one. We've run the clock."

"Back away!" Gutshot shouted, trembling. They weren't blocking his shot. But he seemed unwilling to take it while they stood against him. "We can't fail this one. I can't fail this one!"

"We will be failing a lot more than orders if you pull that trigger," Jet spoke up, her voice low and rich like dark chocolate. "Things are not the way we thought they were."

"What the hell has gotten into you!? He's the enemy! Deadshot's a traitor!"

"Deadshot?" Calamity said, swaying from blood loss. "Dammit, are ya so fixated on that ya can't see what's right in front of yer face?"

A scream erupted right beside me. Everypony spun around to see Regina Grimfeathers slump over, a gaping hole in her breast, smoke rising from it. The light of life was fading quickly from her eyes.

Exactly like her twin.

"No!" I whimpered, my ears pasting back.

"Who fired that shot?" Skydive barked, but no shot had been fired. I saw the little tendril of blue wrapping around Reggie's right hindleg. And the others, coming for Velvet and me.

It should be Kage here, not me. Regina had said that; what else had she said that I hadn't heard?

"NO!" I shouted, leaping into the air, grabbing all three of us in telekinetic magic. Velvet Remedy reacted just as swiftly, throwing her shield spell over the ground, trapping the squirming vines beneath it.

This was not going to happen again! I was not going to lose Regina like I failed her brother. We had Velvet Remedy with us this time. We had Life Bloom. This was NOT going to happen!

"Life Bloom!" I shouted, but he was already ahead of me, casting a stabilizing spell on the griffin, halting her slide into death.

BLAM!

I spun around at the gunshot.

Calamity had Little Macintosh in his mouth, smoke coming from the barrel. His doppelganger, Gutshot, was trying to shoot back, unwounded. But nothing was happening. Calamity's shot had disabled the Wonderbolt's battle saddle.

With a roar, Gutshot threw himself at Calamity.

BLAM!

Gutshot fell to the ground, clutching his crippled foreleg. The other Wonderbolts moved in to surround him.

Calamity spat out Little Macintosh and looked at them apologetically. "Ah reckon there was no avoidin' that," he said glumly. "Everfree Forest was muh idea. An' Ah ain't never had a plan yet that didn't amount t' shootin' muhself in the hoof."



We had a long trek back to Zecora's Hut. Velvet Remedy's shield shimmered beneath us as we walked. Between the crash and the Everfree Forest, we'd lost ten more of the ponies I had rescued, most of them unicorns.

Of those who survived, four had wrapped themselves in cloaks of denial and galloped off. Red Eye couldn't be dead, after all. He was going to be a God. He was going to bring Unity. The others were trudging along with us, shell-shocked, not speaking a word.

None of us felt much like talking either. The only sounds were the distant crackling of flames, the plodding of pony hooves on a magical shield, and the mechanical hiss that the albino hellhound's leg made with every step. He was walking with us, at least for now.

The Wonderbolts had helped us find the ponies our crash had scattered across the forest. They weren't ready to act against the Enclave, but they were going to sit the rest of the conflict out, not helping the Enclave either. Skydive promised to "look us up" after the dust settled.

They had also helped find the rucksacks full of medical supplies. About half the supplies had survived the crash, and most of those had been used repairing the wounds inflicted in the crash.

Tracker had taken off with the Wonderbolts when they left.

Red Eye was defeated and gone. Autumn Leaf was defeated and gone. And yet, I didn't feel the least bit victorious. I felt like I had managed to mitigate failure.

I had to do better than this. Ahead of us lay Neighvarro and the Single Pegasus Project. At the same time, the Enclave was mounting a massive assault on Fillydelphia. Calamity assured me that the Colonel's death wasn't going to prevent that. They had their orders, and another pony was already groomed to step into Autumn Leaf's position. The Enclave wasn't like a Canterlot ghoul. It didn't die when you cut off its head.

After an hour, we stopped to take a break. Catch our breath. Life Bloom had been floating Reggie along above him, and now he and Velvet Remedy turned their healing attentions once again to the horribly wounded adolescent griffin. She was stable, thanks entirely to Life Bloom, his spell putting her into a sort of suspended animation. The same magic used by Cottage Cheese's medical pod. And by the control pod in the S.P.P. Central Hub. Non-idle curiosity pushed me

to stare, wondering what it would be like; I had to force myself to look away.

Turning my attention instead to my PipLeg, I realized that I still had an audio recording I hadn't listened to. The old audio log we had found in the Stable-Tec chest in Zecora's Hut. I slipped in my earbloom, turning it on.

"Um... hello?"

A sweet, familiar voice sounded in my ear.

"This feels weird. I know you can't actually hear me, Zecora. But Apple Bloom says that you were always a good person to talk to. And I really needed to talk. I can't bring this stuff to Apple Bloom and Scootaloo, and I don't really talk with my sister anymore, so...I hope you don't mind.

"This is Sweetie Belle, by the way. Not that you can hear me. But if you can, and didn't know...

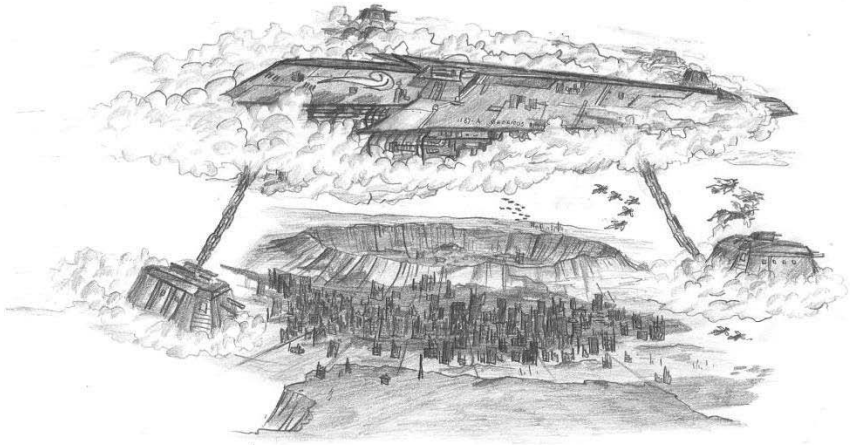
"I've been thinking about things. And I know this is going to sound silly, but one of the things I've been thinking about a lot is...

"...well...

"...rocks."

Footnote: Maximum Level

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



GALVANIZE

“The spark didn’t work.”

“But it did. A different kind of spark... The spark ignited inside me when I realized that you all are my friends!”

Faith.

We are all called, at one time or another, to have faith.

Faith in the Goddesses.

Or faith in ponykind, as Velvet Remedy was struggling to regain.

Or, as with Homage, it is faith in heroes, and the value of the Good Fight.

Sometimes the faith you are called upon to have is faith in yourself.

Faith doesn’t require us to be willfully blind or dogmatically stupid. But it does require us to take risks. To put our trust in something we know *might* not be true. Even when the cost of failure could be very high.

Especially then.

For some of us, faith becomes our central reason for living, for pressing on. Faith is what allows us to believe in a happy ending, even in our moments of greatest sorrow. It is what allows us the hope of rescue even in the most suffocating darkness.

And faith, more than anything else, is what the Wasteland is ravenous to devour. More than kindness. More than innocence. The Wasteland does its best to tear away your ability to believe in anything other than itself.

When you no longer believe things can get better, when you stop trying, that's when the Wasteland has won.

The Wasteland can kill us, but so long as we die trying... as long as we die *believing*... then its success against us is a pyrrhic victory at best.

I had been thinking of a story Spike had told us that night in his cave, one of many tales of the Mares before the Ministries. This particular tale was about a time when Twilight Sparkle's magic had failed her...

Do you know any spells for turning a hydra into a mouse? How 'bout a squirrel?

No! No small rodents of any kind.

...and she had been asked to rely on Pinkie Pie's irrational Pinkie Sense.

You'll be fine. It's your only hope. You have to take a leap of faith.

I am, almost certainly, about to die.

This is my leap of faith.



Two days ago:

"It's time to end this."

I thumped my forehoof on Zecora's table for emphasis, causing my Sparkle-Cola Rad to bounce. The contents of the bottle fizzled brightly. I still had the soda from... from when? Just after Old Appleloosa, wasn't it? Found it in the wreckage of Ditzzy Doo's original delivery wagon. Goddesses, that felt like so long ago. Well, I might as well drink it now. I wasn't expecting a lot of opportunities later.

It was the wee hours of the morning. When we arrived at Zecora's Hut late yesterday evening, Life Bloom and Velvet Remedy had done everything they could for Reggie. Fortunately, her wounds only mimicked those caused by magical energy; and through exhaustive work, they had been able to heal her. But the trauma and the restoration had taken a great deal out of her. Life Bloom had warned us that she needed rest, a lot of it, and wouldn't be in any condition to continue with us for a good while. Right now, she slept on the cot next to Xenith's. The one we'd kept the hellhound on the previous night.

Most of us, myself included, had taken the chance to get some sleep. Even Calamity took a nap after tending to very important hat-recovering. The escapees, those who hadn't left on their own, had bedded down outside -- the followers of Red Eye on one side of the hut, everypony else on the other.

Several of the ponies from the *Overcast's* prison had worked together to dig a grave for the foal who had died in captivity. The child's mother fashioned a remembrance marker by pulling a stone from an ash-clogged stream not far away and wrapping it in vines of softly glowing phantasmal flowers.

"Ah've been waitin' fer this," Calamity whispered to Velvet Remedy, who turned her surprised expression from me to him. "While ago, Li'lpip promised me that we'd find a way t' make all this death an' destruction worth somethin'," he explained as she opened her muzzle to ask. "Li'lpip's got a plan."

"Uh can't believe yur planneen tu drink dat," the albino hellhound muttered. I still wasn't entirely sure why he was with us, especially now that he could run (or dig) away. I expected that he was why at least

some of the ponies elected to stay outside, not that it would help should he turn hostile. But instead, he seemed almost genial, particularly towards Velvet, whose face he nearly severed not one day ago. "That shiny crud makes uh better 'splosive than uh drink."

Calamity's ears tilted. "It make a better what now?"

"If she don't drink it, Uh'll show you."

Calamity looked about as comfortable with and trusting of the newly friendly hellhound as I was. He turned his focus back to me, although he kept casting sidelong glances in the hellhound's direction.

"Littlepip, what are you planning?" Velvet Remedy asked, sounding both curious and a little put out that this was the first she knew about this. Calamity quickly whispered assurances to the mare he loved, insisting that I'd been keeping everything hush-hush and that even he didn't know.

"The Single Pegasus Project," I told my friends (and the assorted strangers in the hut with us). "We're going to bring back the sun."

Only Calamity looked unsurprised, and there were a fair number of gasps.

"You're going to... *bring back the sun?*" Life Bloom sounded like he couldn't possibly have heard that correctly.

"Yes!" I thumped the table again, the Sparkle-Cola Rad hopping farther away.

"We could see Celestia's sun? Feel her warmth again? Everypony?"

I looked at Velvet Remedy. "Something you said a while ago really stuck with me," I told her. "You said that you can't really stop something bad until you take away its reason for existing." I watched as she sat down and slowly called on that memory of being in Calamity's embrace, breaking down after the horror we stumbled upon at Fluttershy's Cottage.

"The Enclave exists because of the cloud curtain. That's the source of their control, through a stranglehold on crops and information.

Without it, the Enclave will cease to exist.” I knew that was hardly going to be an immediate effect, and so did they.

“Open the sky and they won’t be able to stop all the pegasi who look down and then decide to buck off the government who has lied to them,” I proclaimed. “Open the sky and they no longer have a reason to slaughter ponies out of fear that one of us might remove their precious clouds.”

“Open the sky,” Velvet interrupted cautiously, “And the pegasi will starve. We can’t do that.”

I paused, then nodded slowly. “I know. And we won’t.” I smiled as I looked at my friends, a smile that hid the chill in my heart. “That’s what makes us different than Red Eye. Well, one of the great many things. Red Eye would have just blasted the cloud curtain away. We need to get in, analyze the situation, and trigger a cloud-sweep from as many of the towers as we can without causing famine.”

“Fer how long?” Calamity asked, clearly concerned. “The Enclave’s kept population down so that everypony c’n eat comfortably on what they c’n provide, plus food t’ stockpile. Ya cut the farmland in half, they’ll be able t’ make that up from stockpiles fer maybe a year. Then ya got a crisis. They ain’t ready t’ live on scraps like we do down here. Y’all will have ponies starvin’ t’ death while others hoard. Pegasi raidin’ parties takin’ what they can from towns below...”

Calamity shook his head, “Ah tell ya, we do this, it’s gonna be a bloody mess.”

“Maybe for just a little while,” I admitted, but I assured him, “I know a way to fix that. I just can’t talk about that part just yet. But I’ll tell you tomorrow. We’ve got to meet with some people first.”

Calamity leveled a prolonged stare at me. Then his expression brightened. “That’s muh girl!”

Velvet Remedy cleared her throat, and Calamity jumped to rephrase, “Not muh girl, muh girl. Ah mean, not like muh mare. Ah jus’ meant...” Then he caught her snicker and shut up, blushing.

Life Bloom was still wrapping his mind around what I'd said. "You're going to... give us back... the *sun!*"

"Not just me." I smiled at the buck. "I'm going to need all the help I can get."

"When Homage started calling you the Lightbringer, did she know?" he asked, the question driving a wedge of pain in my heart. For a moment, I couldn't speak; I could only shake my head.

"Two problems, Li'lpip," Calamity stated, "First, ya can't get in. An' second, ya can't even get in t' get in. Not only is the S.P.P. Central Hub shielded by the grandmother of all alicorn shields -- somethin' that nopony has ever been able t' breach -- but it's surrounded by the Enclave's Neighvarro military base, an' that's shielded by the Blue Dome."

"The Blue Dome?"

Calamity sighed. "Remember when the Enclave captured us and had us in those blue energy cages?" he asked, prodding my memory. The first thing I remembered was Ditzzy Doo's prodding of the field (zap, "ow"), and I had to prevent myself from snickering.

"The Enclave erected a huge protective dome jus' like that over alla Neighvarro." He glanced towards the sleeping form of Reggie. "Keeps out rogue griffins and the like."

"Ya got plans t' get through those?" Calamity queried.

"Stealth mission?" Velvet Remedy asked warily.

"Actually," I admitted, "I was thinking something closer to a direct attack."

Dead, stunned silence. Broken first by the hellhound. "Und you let her make the plans?" He leveled a wry stare at Calamity and Velvet. "Un purpose?"

I tried to head off the coming avalanche of protests. "Look, the moment they know we're there, they will start bringing the full might

of that military base to bear,” I claimed reasonably. “And we won’t last minutes against that.”

“Ah, and thus the full-frontal assault makes sense.” Life Bloom rolled his eyes. “Makes our deaths quicker.”

I shot him a look. “We’re not Red Eye. We don’t have the force for a sustained battle.

“The way I see it, we have two options. Either we pull off the most flawless stealth mission ever...” I could read in their expressions how likely they all believed that wasn’t. “...or we pull a smash-and-grab that gets us to our objective before they know what’s hit them.”

“Ah surgical strike,” Calamity suggested, pondering. “Could work. Assumin’ ya c’n find a way past the two shields.”

I nodded eagerly, looking to the others. “So, who’s in?”

“She asks, without even tellin’ us half the plan,” Calamity snarked, exchanging amused looks with Velvet Remedy. Smiling back to me, he proclaimed, “We are, of course.”

“Uh’m not.” The albino cyber-hellhound growled slightly. “Attackeen uh winged pony base en the clouds? That’s uh long way tu fall.”

I flinched. I stared at the hellhound, and he returned my gaze, his eyes boring into me for a moment. He knew.

“Still, Uh know someone who might be able tu help you,” he offered reluctantly. “Eef the winged ponies ain’t killed ‘er yet,” he added. “Und yu cun rescue hellhounds as good as you rescue ponies.”

I wasn’t sure if he was challenging my skill or my willingness.

“Who?”

“Fluffykins,” he said. “She wus a Warclaw, one uf ur fiercest. Used tu run the biggest pack en Old Olneigh... before your Enclave snatched ‘er up.” The albino shrugged. “Long time ago. Before they came with their magic noises.”

"A test subject," Calamity concluded. "For the Enclave's behavior-control experiments."

"Most likely, she's dead. But ef not, you let her loose, und she'll take care uf any pegasi she cun find." As an afterthought, he told Calamity, "Don't be one uf 'em."

"Fluffykins," Reggie chuckled groggily, surprising all of us. I had no idea when the adolescent griffin had slipped out of sleep. "Scourge of the Enclave."

She looked blearily at all of us. "I'm in."

"No," Life Bloom told her. "You're not. You're not going to be in anything but a bed for at least a week." The two of them glared challengingly at each other. I shared a look with Velvet.

Calamity, already focused on the task ahead, inquired, "Okay, Li'lpip. What first?"

"First..." I paused, tapping the tip of my hoof on the table. "First, we have to get the ponies outside to safety. I want to take them to Junction R-7. So, I guess, first we need transportation."

I challenged Calamity, "Think you can get the *Tortoise* back up and flying?"

Calamity snorted. "An' here Ah thought y'all might ask fer somethin' hard." He turned and nodded towards the wing Velvet had bound in a cast. "We don't call 'em sky-tanks fer nothin'. The armor o' that thing damn near stopped a shot from an anti-machine rifle. If it hadn't, I'd have lost more than just the use of a wing." He frowned seriously. "Crash did more damage t' us than the *Tortoise*, Ah'll bet. But even if we get it fixed, Ah won't be able t' fly it."

I nodded sadly. Then, on impulse, I trotted over and gave Calamity a fierce hug. "We'll figure something out."

There were a few pegasi amongst the captives we had rescued from the Enclave's Thunderhead. Maybe we could ask one of them?

Velvet Remedy got up, walking past me. “Littlepip? Could I have a word with you? In private?”

I gulped. I gave Calamity a worried look, and he just shrugged. He was wearing the exact same expression I always pictured a father would wear while his wife insisted their daughter swallow helpful but icky-tasting medicine.

Velvet Remedy was walking out of the hut. I paused then started trotting after her.

As soon as I stepped hoof out of the doorway, the cyber-legged hellhound moved, swiftly crossing the room and taking up the doorway. I jumped back as he blotted out the light coming from the room inside, kicking up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle.

“Leetlepip,” he said with an almost whispering hiss. “Ain’t no small thing, you’re intenden. Tu bring back the moon und the blanket uf gems.” Blanket of...? Oh, he meant the *stars*.

All this time, I had been so focused on the idea that I was bringing back the sun, I had forgotten that what I was doing would return so much more to Equestria. Or that there might be those for whom the gift of the night sky might hold much greater significance.

Goddess Luna, I thought, must be so very disappointed in me.

“You do this, und even Uh might forgive you... uh leetle.”

I stared at him, paralyzed. He *did* know!

As if reading my thoughts (hellhounds, can’t do that, right?), the albino cyberhound growled, “The Splendid Valley packs declared themselves at war with ponies. When you’re at war, you don’t git tu complain when the enemy kills you.” He glared at me sternly. “Uh don’t blame you fur them. But the Ghost Farm packs? The pegasi put ‘em down there tu die, just like Red Eye did with those unicorns...”

His next words hit like a sledgehammer. “Und Uh notice which ones you didn’t rescue.”

Autumn Leaf had forced peaceful hellhounds into battle and then had his own guns fire on their position. He had intended them to die while helplessly driven against their will. If anything, his unrepentantly callous discarding of their lives had been a final, clear signal that even as he cried out for rescue, he had no regard at all for the lives of others.

But the truth was, I hadn't tried to save them either.

"I... I couldn't," I told the hellhound sadly. "They were violent. I don't have anything like Velvet's spell. And if just one of them slipped out of my telekinesis..." Something, I knew, that would have been all too easy -- all one would have to do was get close enough to a wall to shove off of it and they could push themselves out of my levitation field. "... and killed one of the unicorns, their collars would have gone off and we'd all be dead."

The truth was, I couldn't have saved both. And I chose the unicorns over the hellhounds. Unicorns who had been faithful acolytes of Red Eye and his new Unity over once peaceful hellhounds who had been tortured by the Enclave.

Yes, because then they will be free-willed, hyper-aggressive creatures who have just suffered mind-control at the hooves of ponies, Life Bloom had reminded us. Far less dangerous.

"I wish I could have," I admitted. "But I couldn't rescue both. And, yes, I chose the ones who wouldn't likely slaughter the rest of the ponies I was rescuing. Or, hopefully, anypony else."

Because if I had rescued them knowing that they would slaughter more ponies, just like if I had let Autumn Leaf go, then wouldn't I be at least partially responsible for everyone they killed afterwards?

Zebra logic was, perhaps, not so insane after all.

Velvet Remedy was waiting for me at the edge of the glade of phantasmal flowers.

With a sigh, I lowered my head, my gaze turned up to the (semi-) friendly hellhound. "Your people have every reason to hate me, but I really am trying to do the right thing, the best I can." That, I could

only assume, was the coldest of comforts. But I had to say it. I had to say something. “I’m sorry that I haven’t been able to do better.”

Another thought occurred to me. “After this, the pegasi will have plenty of reason to hate me too.” I felt sudden empathy for Scootaloo. “To save Equestria, I’ve become the villain of the piece.”

I moved slowly away from him, turning my gaze to Velvet Remedy. As I started to move towards her, the albino hellhound hissed again. “You du this, you give us back the moon and the jewels of the night, and maybe we’ll have reason tu see you as more than just a villain too.”

He coughed hesitantly. Then added, “Und maybe Uh know another who could help you. Tell me where you are gatherreen, und maybe Uh’ll send ‘im your way.”

I stopped, my body suddenly a battleground. My head loved the idea of another ally, a hellhound no less. And my heart leapt at a chance to do better. But my gut churned uneasily at the idea of giving the location -- a rendezvous for the ponies who had the fate of Equestria in their hooves -- to a monster whom I didn’t really trust.

The Enclave had enslaved them and sent them in to die. I chose not to help. And all this after Splendid Valley... the long history of that place and the way I had written its final chapter. Why would a hellhound ever help a pony?

I looked at the albino hellhound, my eyes drifting to his shiny new cyberleg, and I knew the answer.

Because of Velvet Remedy.

I wasn’t quite willing to trust him, but I was going to give him a chance. So I told him instead about a hardware store near a passenger wagon stop in Fetlock.



Today:

The first shot was fired less than an hour after dawn. I don't think anypony will ever know by who. But that shot lit the fire. Two massive armies charged forward over the badlands outside of Fillydelphia.

The orifices of the Enclave Thunderhead *Glorious Dawn* opened and spewed a black-carapaced plague that swarmed down from the sky. Hundreds of battle-armored unicorns and earth ponies, a great many of them survivors of The Pitt, galloped to meet them, firing assault weapons and high-powered rifles with enchanted bullets.

Griffins soared into the sky from the Fillydelphia Wall, anti-machine rifles firing at each target of opportunity. More than a dozen Raptors swooped in, their energy weapons turning Pinkie Pie Balloons into flying infernos. The first four crossed over the wall when Stern unleashed her biggest surprise.

Though badly wounded, Red Eye's cyberdragon had survived the fight in Everfree Forest, and for reasons only it could know, it still fought for Equestria. And it was pissed. The first of the Raptors was torn apart in a whirlwind of violence.

The sound of heavy, cruel thunder drummed the earth as the *Glorious Dawn* descended into the fray.

**Two days ago:**

"Calamity's under the impression that you killed his brother," Velvet told me directly. "I need to know: did you?"

Should I lie? Would that spare my friends pain? No, I'd been down that road before. Lying to my friends, especially Velvet, tended to turn out badly.

"Yes."

She stared at me quietly.

I was trapped in unpleasant déjà vu; hadn't I just had this conversation? I interrupted her silence. "And before you try telling me I should have given him a chance: you didn't see him down there. And you didn't see Friendship City." My voice was slowly rising. "He'd had chances. You have to want to change, or at least show a shred of remorse or decency or *something*..."

"Like you wanted to change?" Her soft voice sliced through the growing storm of my rant. I shut up, staring back at the mare who had shot me and in doing so saved me.

Deflating, I said simply, "If I had let Calamity's brother go, he would most likely have sought revenge on all of the wasteland. He had no regard for the lives of others, and Red Eye gave him every excuse he needed to turn his Operation: Caulterize into something more like Quarantine and Incinerate."

What was she suggesting we could have done? Kept him paralyzed while we tried to indoctrinate him with morals? Memory-therapy? My mind dredged up some of the less comfortable implications about the Ministry of Peace.

Then I stopped myself. Velvet Remedy hadn't suggested anything. All she did was ask the question; I was the one who galloped off in a questionable direction, my mind still wrapped up in my talk with the hellhound.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "I'm sorry. What was it that you wanted to say about it?"

Velvet shook her head. "Well, first I wanted to see how you were holding up," she told me. "And now I have a fair idea."

I moaned, lifting a hoof to my face. She was concerned about me. And probably concerned about my friendship with Calamity.

I cantered over to stare at the beauty of the softly glowing phantasmal flowers, their vines covering the ground in what looked like a maze for insects. Well, there was plenty of concern to go around.

Attempting to shift the subject, I countered, "How about you? You let yourself be captured by the enemy to help the hellhound who tried to use you as a hostage." I couldn't hide my disbelief. Or my worry. That was *not* a smart decision. As the Princess of Stupid Decisions, I should know. "What were you thinking?"

"I imagined myself in his position," Velvet Remedy confessed as she walked up next to me. She lowered her head to sniff one of the flowers before she continued. "Surrounded by hellhounds, missing a leg, my only chance of recovery dependent on somepony being willing to risk their life for my sake."

She smiled, "Strangely, it wasn't that hard to imagine."

I blinked. Whoa. Hold those reins. "That wasn't the same!" Not even close.

"No," she admitted openly, "But there were enough similar elements that I had little difficulty imagining what the poor boy was going through." Poor boy? The albino death machine? "And I knew that, while I could never be so selfish as to ask another to risk themselves like that, I would secretly be praying to the Goddesses that somepony would."

The look she gave me reminded me a lot of the look she had given me back in the boxcar nearly two months ago. But this was a more mature, wiser version of that look. "How could I not do for him what I knew I'd be praying somepony would do for me? That *he* would do for me should our situations be reversed?"

I thought about that. As I did, my curiosity snuck up on me and I found myself with my nose in the phantasmal flower patch. The flowers did smell good. An ephemeral floral scent that held a suggestion of mint.

"He wouldn't, you know," I told her.

"Should it matter?"

I took a moment to reflect, thinking of the things I had done, and for whom. Thinking, most recently, of braving the Everfree Forest, the

Enclave and Red Eye's Cathedral to save unicorns who were, in many cases, willing followers of Red Eye who didn't stick around to say thank you. Some of whom resented me.

I didn't even notice the lack of thanks, more concerned with their safety as they departed alone into the Everfree Forest. And even now, I didn't miss it. No, they would not have done the same for me. But that didn't matter.

"No."



Today:

"This is boring," Reggie complained as she turned and plowed into another bank of clouds, driving it back. Below, a maze-like swath of grey appeared, a small glimpse of the ruins of Manehattan. "There's an actual battle going on..."

"Just keep at it," Gawdyna ordered. "These clouds won't clear themselves." It was proving harder than she had expected. The cloud curtain kept trying to seal the gaps, filling in almost as quickly as they tore them apart. "Blackwing, Butcher, watch your flanks. You have a black drift moving in."

To make it worse, many of the clouds were charged. A thunderstorm had been building over Manehattan last night.

Reggie turned again, slicing into a thicker cloud with her right wing, attempting to cut it down into a more manageable bundle. She yelped as the cloud zapped her, making her feathers flare out awkwardly, smoke curling from the edges of her wing. "Dammit!"

The six-pegasi Enclave patrol seemed to come out of nowhere. Brightly colored beams of pink and green lanced through the air, two of them striking Gawdyna in the breast of her armor.

"Mother!" Reggie cried out in alarm, pulling out her twin Calamity guns and returning fire.

"I'm fine!" Gawdyna called back, drawing her tri-barreled, magical-energy shotgun as she dove behind a cloud bank. Three of the black-armored pegasi kept firing. Clouds were good for obfuscation, but made for useless cover. Their concentrated fire quickly vaporized the clouds.

Gawd wasn't there.

The pegasi swung around, alerted by their E.F.S. compasses as Gawd burst up through the clouds behind them. It saved two of them. Gawd unloaded all three barrels into the breast of the third, burning through his armor and into his heart.

A crack of thunder tore the air and a second pegasus was ripped apart, severed limbs spinning off, the clouds misted with red. "Say hello to *Little Gilda!*" Butcher whooped.

The remaining pegasus on Gawd backed up, firing rapid blasts of blue and gold from the multi-gem mini-gun in her armor. Gawd grunted at the effort, forcing her body to move more quickly than it wanted to. Three of the strikes tore along her left leg, igniting her body in pain. She swept the magical shotgun around to fire again.

One of the other pegasi dived in at Reggie. She brought up her guns, but he was too fast, spinning and bucking her in the face as he fired twin beams of pink at Butcher. One of the beams struck the Talon heavy gunner squarely, and Butcher dissolved into pink ash, *Little Gilda* tumbling down through the closing hole in the clouds and disappearing from sight.

"Fak!" Reggie yelled, her head spinning, one of her eyes swelling closed. She spun, trying to recover, attempting to bring her pistols back up to bear. The pegasus looped around to face her just in time for the adolescent griffin to get her aim.

Reggie fired both guns into the visor of the Enclave trooper just as his poisonous scorpion tail sunk through her Talon armor and into her back.

The pegasus Gawd had fired on melted away in a liquid stream of green, dissolving in front of her to reveal her daughter as Reggie dropped down through the clouds.

“REGGIE!” Gawd screamed.



Two days ago:

We had just started back towards Zecora's Hut when the alicorns appeared. Leading them was a midnight blue alicorn with a flowing, silky mane of very light blues, like frost, that reminded me distinctly of Trixie.

I had dropped into a battle stance, ready to try to dodge lightning bolts, Little Macintosh out of its sheath. Velvet Remedy stepped forward, horn aimed. “What do you want?”

Dammit, we did not need this. I'd have to draw them into the forest, away from the hut and the ponies we had rescued. Couldn't risk having any of them caught in the crossfire. Why the hell did this have to happen today?

“You,” the pretty-maned alicorn informed Velvet Remedy.

Oh hells no, I thought fiercely.

“We wish to continue. To make more of us,” the alicorn continued.

“No more Red Eye. No more Black Book. You will fix this.”

“You want to... procreate?” Velvet said slowly. It was beginning to dawn on me that the alicorns were acting non-aggressively. I felt a little stunned. “But... you have no males.”

Pointing out the obvious there, Velvet. That's the problem.

“You will fix this,” the other alicorns echoed the statement in a rather eerie chorus.

"I'm not sure we *can* help," I said. After all the trouble I'd gone through to eliminate the Black Book and Red Eye's apotheosis project, I didn't want to see an attempt to resurrect either.

"Not you!" the lead alicorn said sharply, the others behind her neighing. "We know you. You are The Destroyer. We do not seek *your* aid."

I wasn't sure if I felt more relieved or offended. Mostly, though, I just felt protective of Velvet, my friend, whom they were clearly targeting.

Velvet Remedy stared at them, slowly cocking her head, her ears swiveling. "Why me?"

"We remember your compassion at Maripony," the oddly-maned blue enlightened her. "You are The One Who Helps."

Hubajahwha?

"We bring you the Memories, so that you may fix this," the alicorn stated, her horn glowing a frosty blue. I only now noticed that she wore a satchel, old and grotesquely stained. Her horn's glow was echoed by one surrounding the satchel as she opened it and levitated out a PipBuck and what looked like a bundle of gore-encrusted wires with odd attachments. Including a mechanical eye.

Velvet Remedy gasped, taking an involuntary step back as the alicorn floated them towards her.

"So..." I said slowly, realizing what I was seeing. "Something of Red Eye survived after all."

Red Eye had been dying when he fell into that vat, yes. But he wasn't dead yet. And who knew how long the cyberpony's enhancements would prolong the dying process. And this was Red Eye. Of course he had an escape plan. And I had given plenty of time before the star blaster bomb went off.

Not that it did him much good. Those were Red Eye's cybernetics. He had been *harvested*.

I felt sick.

“We found his corpse in the Dragon Lair,” one of the other alicorns, a purple, claimed.

I fought to shove back the bile in my throat. As wicked as Red Eye was, this was a desecration he didn’t deserve. Instead, I tried to latch onto the more sterile facts the alicorns were presenting.

That made sense. The journal of Doctor Glue mentioned passages beneath the Cathedral, and the Dragon had to have been living somewhere. That would explain how it appeared so suddenly in the middle of the battle. And why Doctor Glue’s requests to use the tunnels to dump the bodies of his victims had received such slow accommodation.

“He had made it that far,” another alicorn explained, “before dying of his wounds and from the Holy Liquid.”

Velvet was staring at the machines torn out of Red Eye’s head with horror and revulsion. I almost expected her to faint. But when had she ever done that?

Memories, the alicorn had said.

Red Eye was recording everything. All his research. All his actions. Everything. His cybernetics were akin to black opal. The massive storage capacity of the PipBuck could probably store days’ worth of his memories. For the rest, he’d need multiple maneframes. I’d seen nothing like that in the Cathedral, but this was the stallion whose other headquarters was in the Ministry of Morale Hub in Fillydelphia. If any building would have the set-up to store that much spying...

Damn. That explained the sprite-bots too. He was probably using them as relays to transmit his “memories” back to the Fillydelphia Hub. I’d guessed before that he must know the real function of those robots, I had never envisioned them being utilized like *that*.

Velvet Remedy squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head forcibly. “No!”

A small blob of meaty red dripped off one of the wires.

The alicorns whinnied and stomped. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Calamity flying up, battle saddle on. Life Bloom was galloping behind him.

Velvet turned a softer gaze to them. "I mean yes," she told them gently. "I will help you. But not like this."

"There is another way?" the frost-maned alicorn asked, her voice surprised.

"There has to be," Velvet Remedy assured her, reaching up a hoof to touch the alicorn's face. "And together, we will find it."

Calamity landed, his eyes darting between Velvet Remedy and the alicorns. Leaning close to me, he whispered loudly, "So... uh... they ain't gonna attack us?"

I really had no words.

The alicorn heard him (not that doing so was much of a feat) and she shifted her gaze towards him, as did half the others.

"We have learned," she admonished Calamity. "Siding with those who oppose The Destroyer and her friends leads to failure."

I blinked. My own previous thoughts about the alicorns resurfaced in my mind: they never fell for the same trap twice.



Today:

"Hold the line!" the Steel Ranger shouted, his armor speeding through a reloading cycle as he crouched behind the rubble that until ten minutes ago had still been a mostly-intact Java's Cup. "Those winged bastards get no closer to Stable-Tec than right here!"

The zorching sound and the smell of ozone, melted metal and boiled flesh told him that he had just lost one more of his soldiers. Knights, all of them. Too young and too unprepared to be fighting for their home against enemies like this.

The reload cycle finished just as the squad of black-carapace-wearing ponies flew overhead. The Steel Ranger launched two missiles and watched them home in on a single target, blowing the Enclave invader out of the sky. The rest of the squad broke apart, swooping back to strike at him from all angles.

He couldn't get them all, so he focused on the ones in front and to his left, opening up with his grenade machine gun. He had a clip of magical energy grenades scavenged from one of the patrols of these bitches his squad had taken down before. No better time to use them than the present. So he was rather shocked when one of the Enclave attackers closing in on his right was ripped from the sky with anti-armor grenade fire.

The Enclave ponies banked sharply away, reassessing the new threat. The Steel Ranger turned to see another earth pony in magically-powered armor standing on the ridge of rubble across the street. Armor identical to his, except that it was painted in bands of rich apple red.

Without a word, the Steel Ranger turned away from the Applejack's Ranger, focusing on the enemy. The Applejack's Ranger galloped in, shifting to cover his blind spots.

The two of them fought together, side-by-side, until the ground ripped open beneath them, pouring forth Enclave-helmeted hellhounds.



Two days ago:

Dawn began to break on the horizon, sending streams of smoke-altered light through the trees. The flowers began to dim, their translucent green petals no longer appearing ephemeral but still no less delicate. The forest awoke silently, all the sounds of nature stilled, the creatures of the forest driven out or burned alive by the fires, their ghosts offering no sounds.

After Velvet Remedy had spoken with them a little while longer, the alicorns departed as swiftly as they had arrived. Or, at least, I thought

they did. The lead alicorn's horn glowed a frosty blue and the group of them blurred then vanished from sight.

"Whoa nelly!" Calamity whinnied. "We knew the blue ones could turn invisible, but they ain't never turned other alicorns invisible too."

"They're learning," I said, feeling equally shocked. "Growing."

Velvet's eyes widened at a realization. "They haven't even begun to see their potential."

There was a moment of silence as this new reality sunk in. Then, one by one, we started back towards Zecora's Hut, the earthbound Calamity slowly trotting next to Velvet as she took the lead.

"Littlepip?"

It was Life Bloom. He had fallen behind. And from the sounds of it, he wanted to talk with me. It was turning out to be that sort of day.

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking about how you claimed you had a way to deal with the impending food crisis," he began. "There's a food-production megaspell, isn't there?"

What? How did he...?

"It's the only thing that makes sense."

I hadn't told anypony about this, except for Homage. And I had only breached my promise to Spike with her because she would be one of Element Bearers. I hadn't even dared tell Red Eye.

"Or maybe a poison-cleansing megaspell," he considered. "If you purge all the poison from Sweet Apple Acres, you could feed a lot of ponies. Not nearly enough, but it would be a start."

Twilight Society. Of course. They did have access to much of Twilight Sparkle's spell research, including several of the spells that were woven into the Gardens of Equestria.

"Something like that," I admitted, trying to be intentionally vague enough to not betray Spike and Equestria's most valuable secret. "Yes."

“I’d like to see it,” he said next.

“No,” I replied swiftly. I quickly explained, “It’s not my place to show it. That’s up to someone else.” Then added, “It’s guarded.”

“Ah,” he said succinctly.

I began walking again, but he stopped me. “You’re not planning to just shut down the Single Pegasus Project, are you?” He looked at me seriously, his voice taking a slight edge. “You’re not planning on coming back, are you?”

Was it that obvious?

“Part of me wants to hug you and proclaim you my hero for what you are about to do,” Life Bloom granted. “But part of me wants to drop you, and keep you paralyzed until I can hoof-deliver you to Homage so she can buck some sense into you.”

I almost wished he would. It would be so much easier if this choice were taken from me.

“Somepony has to stay inside that place,” I explained to him instead. “The only way the Enclave will stop trying to eliminate everypony who could possibly take over the Central Hub is if it is taken over. And not just for a moment.”

Life Bloom nickered. “Well, maybe I’m just thinking with my friendship here, but have you thought about what this will do to Homage?” His voice was cross. “She’s already lost Jokeblue. What do you think this will do to her?”

My heart seized painfully.

“This will destroy her!” He stomped the ground for emphasis.

I rounded on him, my face scrunched in internal pain as my feelings of loss shifted into a gut-wrenching abhorrence at myself.

“I know.” I felt the first of many tears. I stared into his eyes while my vision blurred hotly. “But what if I don’t? If I selfishly put the two of us above all the wasteland and leave Equestria suffering for it?”

I answered for him. "She'll lose her faith in heroes, maybe even in the Good Fight itself. And she'll blame herself for it."

Life Bloom looked stricken.

"I'm not going to betray her cause and the reason she loves me just to keep her." My words were a knife. "That would destroy her too. That would destroy her worse."

I was betraying Homage with my choice, yes. But that would be a far more horrible betrayal. "Homage deserves better." And I was losing someone I had never deserved.

Life Bloom swallowed and turned his gaze away, ashamed.

I frowned somberly. "Besides, I can only get one pony in. Myself. And I'll have to be locked into that machine, put into an artificial coma, in order to run it." I looked up at the smoke-tainted clouds visible through the treetops. "I need to analyze the towers and the pegasus farmlands. Set off only the right towers. I can't do that by just throwing a switch."

Life Bloom considered that for a good while. He was so quiet that I didn't think he would speak again. I had almost started back, noting that the hellhound was once again in the open doorway of Zecora's hut, this time having waylaid Calamity and Velvet Remedy.

"We have to do better, don't we?" he asked in a soft, small voice.

"You are right. And you were right," he continued, finding a little more strength. "We've done almost nothing to help. The Twilight Society. We've sat back, hoarding our secrets, telling ourselves... hell, we're virtually the Enclave in miniature." I swiveled around to see the crimson-and-scarlet maned, white unicorn staring at the dirt, downcast.

"Even my joining you was little more than a token..."

In Zecora's doorway, the cyberhound was dangling my un-drunken Sparkle-Cola RAD in front of Calamity's snout.

"We're hardly deserving of the name we have taken." Life Bloom looked up, his own eyes as tear-filled as my own. "We have to do better."

We owe it. You and Homage... you've done so much, so freely. Hell, you're giving up *yourself* for all of us."

He paused, seeming unsure of what to say from there.

I merely nodded, turning my tail on him and trotting off. As much as my heart felt like it had been put through a blender, this was good. I needed Life Bloom thinking this way. I had a plan. And without Homage, it would be up to him alone to convince the Twilight Society to do their part.



Today:

The ancient ritual chamber within Tenpony Tower was alive with light for the first time in over two hundred years. It had been two centuries since the megaspell known as Celestia One had been activated. The ponies inside had ignored the destruction of the city around them, intent instead on bringing the full power of the sun itself down on those zebra islands and coastal lands that those Equestrian ponies believed held the launch sites for the bulk of the zebra's long-range megaspell missiles. The last time the chamber was used, entire islands had been plunged back into boiling oceans.

The attack had lasted less than half an hour before the pegasi had closed off the sun.

Now, once again, sunlight poured down the artificial chimney, through a well of multi-faceted mirrors that caught and reflected the glow of Celestia's sun, bouncing it down into the bleached-white chamber below, filling the ritual chamber with a monochromatic kaleidoscope of light and shadow.

A line of robed ponies plodded into the chamber. In the lead was an older, mottled brown unicorn. Behind him, a younger, white one with a few curls of scarlet and crimson mane poking out from beneath his hood.

Each moved with purpose, striding to their positions within the intricate, arcane mosaic of polished white tiles. Though not a one of them had ever cast a megaspell before, and in fact most never expected the opportunity to do so would fall within their lifetime, each knew exactly what to do. This was something they had practiced by rote. But this time... they could feel the charge in the air. This time, it was real.

They looked at each other. A few tapped at the mosaic tiles with their hooves or whinnied nervously, still not sure that they were really doing the right thing.



Two days ago:

I concentrated as best I could. This time, it was my turn to fly Calamity over the treetops of the Everfree Forest. We were going to locate the Tortoise, and I was going to levitate it back with us to Zecora's Hut, the only safe place to really work on it.

"We shoulda jus' brought it back with us the first time," Calamity had commented earlier. I agreed. But yesterday, we had all been so exhausted and depleted by the time the Wonderbolts flew off that none of us were thinking that straight.

Calamity hadn't said anything since. His sharp eyes were watching for shooting plants and other hazards while I tried my best not to drift off to sleep. The effort of flying was momentous. I'd only been up for a hoof-full of hours, but the last few days (hell, the last two *months*) had been so physically and emotionally excruciating that my body didn't care. It wanted rest. And a lot of it.

Not now, I tried to think at it. Not yet.

Calamity nudged for me to widen our search pattern. I looked up at him, enjoying seeing his face, and gave him a small smile. Calamity was a good friend.

The way my morning was going, any minute now either Calamity and I were going to have a painful heart-to-heart, or we would be intercepted by a monster. Probably a chatty one.

I almost groaned when Calamity's muzzle opened. I had so called it.

"Incoming!" he warned, eyes narrowing.

Oh. It's the second option. Yay.

Even so, I was absolutely not ready for what swooped out of the sky in front of us. I found myself staring into the eyes of a *reaper pony*!

It had the body of a dead pegasus -- gaunt, coatless, its body a pale and sickly white -- but the eyes of a dragon -- fierce, glowing-yellow irises with cat-like pupils, full of power and fierce life. From behind its shoulders sprouted large, leathery, bat-like wings. And nightmarish armor growing out of its flesh.

My heart seized. The reaper ponies were real! I mean, really real! Oh Goddesses, I wasn't ready to die! Not now!

"You are *Littlepip*!" the reaper pony proclaimed, its voice like an earthquake filled with knives. The creature shifted its fearsome stare to Calamity. **"You are *Calamity*! *Correct*?"**

Gah! It knew my name! The reaper ponies knew my name!

(*And it wants to talk*, my little pony rudely interrupted my panic. *SO called it.*)

"Y'all mus' be the demon," Calamity sussed out.

"*LIONHEART*!" it answered, nearly blasting us back.

Calamity flapped his good wing, backing us away from the reaper pony and its (quite possibly reaping) voice. That's when I noticed the reaper pony had a *PipLeg*! With a broadcaster, just like the ghouls in Stable One.

"Whoa, there," Calamity blurted. "Dial down the volume, will ya? It feels like you're yelling at us." He added, "With a hurricane."

“That is not possible!” the... Canterlot ghoul? Reaper pony?... announced. ***“The armor of the Palace Guards was enchanted by Princess Luna Herself that we may always speak in the Royal Canterlot Voice, so that our words would carry the proper weight!”***

Okay. Not a reaper pony. A survivor of the destruction of Canterlot!

“But do not fear! We are here to help!”

“We?” Calamity asked cautiously, raising an eyebrow. “As in royal alicorn pseudo-goddess we?”

“No!” the Canterlot ghoul blasted. ***“We as in we!”***

“Not followin’,” Calamity told him, looking around for a second bat-winged Canterlot ghoul. Or, for that matter, a second anything.

In response, a tiny white field mouse with cute little pink eyes scurried up the Canterlot ghoul’s hideous neck-armor and perched on his head, squeaking. The little fellow’s whisker’s wiggled cutely...

...and for some reason I couldn’t fathom, the tiny mouse struck an even deeper note of terror in me than the apparent reaper pony had.

Wait! my little pony insisted. *I should know this!*

My little pony slammed together bits of memory like a puzzle.

His name was Lionheart.

I remembered DJ Pon3’s broadcast after the Enclave attacked Friendship City. A broadcast focused not on the horror and tragedy, but on the heroic response she was seeing all across Equestria:

I have a tale here of two such heroes taking down one of those warships just south of Stalliongrad. Left a calling card: Lion & Mouse. Well, tell you what, Lion and Mouse. Drop by Tenpony Tower sometime.

The only Raptor taken down in a battle I wasn’t there to witness.

I recalled the rising panic of the communications officer on the Enclave inter-warship channel, just before it went deadly: *Are you reporting that the monster which downed the Mammatus...*

And DJ Pon3's last broadcast, which even as I heard it I realized had been recorded hours if not whole days before. (Homage wasn't going to make it easy for the Enclave to catch her, after all.)

I interrupt the Enclave's depressing-ass music for a very special broadcast. Today, I have with me two members of the Wasteland Resistance, none other than the Enclave-fighting duo of Lion & Mouse. And I'll be speaking with them about the good fight, the blows they have struck to the Enclave, and what everypony can do to lend a hoof.

And finally, Watcher: *Homage herself insisted she can't make it. And she told me to tell you that she's sending some more allies your way.*

The allies my marefriend sent me took out the *Overcast!*

Holy hot sex with Celestia!

"...a field mouse?" Calamity blinked. "Ya brought yer pet?"

"DJ Pon3 sent us!" the ghoul announced, confirming what I had deduced. **"As proof, she told me to give you this."** Lionheart produced a small, clear plastic bag with a memory orb inside along with a piece of paper which simply read: #8.

The mouse snorted, just a little, blasting the air with yard-long streams of terrifyingly solid *pink*.

"Oh," Calamity muttered. *"That mouse."*



Today:

Aboard the *Glorious Dawn*, ensign Fancy Lad adjusted his headset once again, listening to reports from the southern detachment of Raptors. The bombing runs were proving effective at clearing out embedded clusters of enemies, but they were losing an uncomfortable amount of bombing wagons to sniper fire.

"Goddesses damn them," he muttered. "They've seeded snipers amongst the slaves." He reached a hoof to a switch beneath one of his terminal monitors. *Raptor Nacreous* was in perfect position, and

otherwise only lightly engaged. He flipped the switch. "Senior Comm Officer, this is ensign Fancy Lad reporting. I suggest we send *Raptor Nacreous* to purge the slave compounds on south sector five."

"Copy that," the stallion's voice responded. And those were the last words Fancy Lad ever heard. He spent the next ten seconds spasming as fatal static poured out of his headset, his brain melting out of his ears and nostrils.

Likewise, nearly all thirty other members of the *Glorious Dawn's* communications center collapsed, many of them not even managing to scream. One of them, a mare who had put her headset aside to get a cup of coffee, now galloped for the elevator doors. With each yard, she staggered more painfully, her mind ripping apart from the soft hiss that flowed out of every headset in the room.

The mare collapsed, her eyes swimming in pools of blood, less than a hoof's reach from the elevator, but no longer able to stand and reach the button.

The elevator door slid open anyway, pouring out a thick, blanketing mist of pink, revealing the bat-winged ghoul and his little friend standing just inside.



Two days ago:

"Throw 'em at killeen joke 'till one uf 'em sticks?"

Velvet Remedy's eyes were shooting stilettos at the albino hellhound.

"Whut?" he asked, at least feigning ignorance. "Killeen joke turned uh male hellhound entu uh female pony."

Velvet blinked. Her eyes widened. I could almost see the spark of innovation ignite behind her black pupils. "oh. Oh!" She pranced in place. "I-dee-ah!" she sang out, then galloped over to the doorway of Zecora's Hut, virtually accosting Calamity and me.

“Oh, we just need to go to Stable Twenty-Nine!” She looked at us pleadingly. “Can we? Please?” Almost timidly, she added, “If that’s all right? And it won’t interfere with your clandestine plans?”

I nodded, walking through the doorway. “Of course we can.” After the gushingly thankful look she gave us, I couldn’t quite bring myself to tell her we would have been going there anyway.

“Greetings! You are Velvet Remedy!”

“Ohmygosh!” Velvet Remedy backpeddled as Lionheart’s imposing figure filled the doorway.

“Have no fear! We are here to...”

He was cut off by the pained yelp of the albino hellhound. We turned to see the cyberhound crouching in a corner, his paws clamped over his ears.

“Uh, maybe ya outta stay outside,” Calamity suggested. I suspected it was less for the hellhound’s sake than and more for ours; Velvet Remedy was already giving the whimpering cuisinart a poor-thing look.

I nodded to Lionheart. I wasn’t so nearly as concerned about the not-a-reaper-pony as I was about the “pet” he traveled with. She had managed to fill an entire Raptor with concentrated pink cloud in the space of less than two hours. The little beast could probably kill everypony in the hut with an accidental sneeze.

“Speakin’ o’ clandestine plans,” Calamity started, “Why don’t ya fill us in jus’ a li’l bit ‘bout what we’re doin’? What’s this big meetin’ ya got hidden under yer, er... horn?” The rust-coated stallion blushed a little. Apparently, there was a pegasus colloquialism that just didn’t apply well to unicorns.

I had two options: answer quickly if only for his sake, or delay by needling him about hiding things under my horn. The latter was so tempting.

“As I said, I’ve got a plan,” I began. “But we can’t pull it off alone. The way I figured it, we need the help of seven of the allies we’ve made these

last two months. Two of them are currently at Spike's cave, and one of them, Life Bloom, is with us already." The curly-maned white unicorn who had been laying pensively near Xenith's cot looked up at the mention of his name.

"Back in New Appleloosa, the night after the sonic radboom, I asked Watcher to use the sprite-bots to contact the others and gather them." I didn't bother mentioning that one of those crucial ponies, my beloved Homage, wasn't going to make it. "We're going to be gathering together at the cave in less than a day, and I'll tell you everything else once we're there." Well, almost everything. "But there are some things we need to do first."

"Spike's cave?" Calamity raised an eyebrow high enough to knock back his hat. "Good thing we managed t' get another pair o' wings." He winced as he tried to flap his bound and wounded wing. "Enclave tanks ain't designed fer griffin pilots, an' we'd never make that distance on hoof."

"You will be delivered swiftly!" came the bellowing voice from outside, the open door banging from the blast. ***"While I served at Her Majesty's pleasure, I would often be called upon to pull Her royal chariot!"*** (As if that would excuse using a powerful and dangerous ally, a hero in his own right, as nothing more than a chauffeur.)

"Oh that ain't gonna get old," Reggie snarked, rubbing her knuckles against her ears while the hellhound whined pathetically.

Calamity mulled the new information over a moment. "Alright, Ah'll wait," he told me, clearly getting a little antsy. "We trust you, Li'lpip."

"Good," I said sheepishly. "Because the next step in the plan is to piss off a dragon."

Shocked silence, magnified by the soft clank as somepony dropped something.

Blinking, she-said-what level silence. To which a small squeak was added.

"Ugain, you let 'er make your plans? Un purpose?"

Before anypony could respond, a small voice wavered up from behind us.

“Am I still a zebra?”

Xenith! She... she was awake!

“As best I can tell,” Life Bloom said, answering the bandage-enshrouded zebra’s question, “Yes.”

“*Xenith!*” came the resounding shout of joy from many muzzles, my own included, as we pounced the poor, barely-recovered zebra mare.

“Uh, should they be doin’ that?” the albino cyberhound asked, looking at Life Bloom with a disturbed expression, ears flattened back. He was already half-way out the door, his zebra cloak over his back. Between the new arrivals and Xenith’s awakening, the monster had apparently decided it was time to make good on his not-being-with-us stance.

“Oh yes,” he responded with a bright smile. “As a medical pony, I can definitely attest to the healing power of group hugs.”



Today:

From the blood-soaked badlands to the embattled ruins, the sounds of battle and the stench of death burned beneath the angry, red-tinted clouds of Fillydelphia, threatening to drown out every last touch of hope or good that the hellish city had left.

Suddenly, a brilliant light of greenish gold burst into the sky, swooping up from the Fillydelphia crater like a rising phoenix, beating back the murderous red glare of the Fillydelphia skies.

But only for a moment. Then that glow of hope winked out, disappearing through the blackened cloud cover. And Fillydelphia was once again plunged into hell.

Too busy fighting for their own lives, almost nopony noticed.



Two days ago:

"This... is it?"

I watched as Xenith struggled through her own crisis of faith.

The zebra was crouched down, staring hatefully at the strange, bluish rock from Sweetie Belle's storage container. Life Bloom was stammering nearby, once again trying to persuade her that she shouldn't be out of bed.

"This is the great nemesis of my people?" she said with a growl that would have done a hellhound proud. "*This* is what we suffered and killed and died over? It's just a rock!"

Xenith stood up over the chunk of meteorite, her body swaying alarmingly in the wake of the sudden movement.

"Just a stupid... meaningless... *ROCK!*"

Her hoof came up and slammed down on the bluish stone in one focused blow.

I'd seen Xenith's hooves strike bone-breaking blows to hellhounds and kill through Steel Ranger armor; even in my friend's weakened state, the hunk of star-rock didn't stand a chance. The meteorite was pulverized into a fine blue powder under her hoof.

Xenith stood there, breast heaving with panting breaths. Then wobbled and collapsed.

"Celestia have mercy!" Life Bloom ranted as he moved quickly to Xenith's side. "Do you people ever listen to your medics?"

Velvet Remedy answered succinctly. "No."

"You're not in any condition to be exerting yourself," he told Xenith sternly. Looking over his shoulder at Reggie, he re-iterated, "And neither are you."

"Then make us so," Reggie huffed.

"It doesn't work like that," Life Bloom stated. And didn't I wish it did. I was barely able to stand. Only the adrenaline from seeing Xenith wake

up was keeping me from hitting the floor and falling asleep and probably not in that order.

I kept telling myself I was going to have a nice, long, comatose sleep in just a few days. My body didn't care and wasn't listening anymore.

"Maybe your spells do not," Xenith intoned slowly, her richly exotic voice almost hypnotizing to me in my weary state. "But there are plenty of herbs and powders here which I could mix for such effects and more."

We looked around. To most of us, Zecora's Hut was full of rubbish. Amongst the shards of pottery and broken glass were numerous bottles, vials and jars of what, to us, was nothing but preserved weeds and desiccated garbage. But Xenith was seeing more. Much more.

"This hut... this was clearly once the home of a great zebra alchemist," Xenith informed us. "The wonders that these receptacles contain..." She trailed off.

"So..." Reggie said hopefully, "We're not going to miss out on the big fight after all?"

Xenith's gaze fell on me. "We will be ready for battle, little one. Just... could you help me stir?" She blushed slightly. "And stand up?"



Today:

Stern watched from the roof of what had once been Red Eye's office in the Ministry of Morale, as the cyberdragon, surrounded by six of those damned Raptors, finally let out a death wail and fell, twisting in the air as it tumbled back to the earth. Its body crushed the ruined buildings beneath it, a bellowing cloud of dust and rubble washing through the streets.

As pure luck would have it, the dragon's tail struck down against one of the Raptors, pulverizing the dragon killer's starboard propellers. The dragon had taken one last one of those black horrors with it.

“Good for you,” Stern grunted.

The roof access door slammed open behind her. The griffin heard hoofs galloping out.

“What?” she asked, her voice filled with measured annoyance at the intrusion. The sleek black griffin turned her white-feathered head towards the source of the bother and stopped when she saw the battered and bleeding zebra in a tattered cloak and haggard saddle pouch. The zebra was panting heavily, her scarred body almost shaking with drive.

Stern stepped back, considering the zebra. “Wait. I know you,” she said after just a moment, her eyes lighting with recognition. “You’re that fighter from The Pitt. The one Red Eye let go.”

Stern was not a stupid griffin. She knew where the few zebra slaves she had captured had come from. And even if she didn’t, it was impossible to miss the burning hatred in this one’s eyes.

With a flap of her wings, she took to the air, carrying herself out of what she knew to be the zebra’s rather impressive jumping range. “Sorry you came all the way home for nothing,” she told the zebra flatly. “But I have more critical things to deal with than you and whatever score you want to settle. In case you haven’t noticed, we’re at war.”

The black griffin gave the zebra a dismissive wave of her tail as she turned towards the area of the cities where the Raptors were beginning to separate, two of them already starting to burn away her ground forces and her city with their powerful plasma cannons.

Xenith panted, snorting, as she watched the Talon griffin fly away. Then she craned her neck back, pulling her bloodwing talisman out of the pouch. Xenith tossed the talisman over her head and groaned in momentary pain as she grew wings of her own.



Two days ago:

The day seemed to pass in a montage; I slipped in and out of sleep several times, mostly in transit aboard the *Tortoise*. Xenith had spent hours working on brews, most of which she had administered to herself or to Reggie (although one had been given to Calamity to help strengthen his healing wing). A couple of those brews, I knew from experience, were not merely of the healing sort. Once Xenith and Reggie were fit to travel, we began to move.

I barely remember Tenpony Tower, and I have only the haziest recollection of delivering the refugees to Junction R-7, save for one stark moment of clarity when I spotted our Overmare there. She was delivering the first of Stable Two's apple orchard to Shattered Hoof.

Something, I thought happily, that was going according to design. I had high hopes for the future of this place.

But my longest period of wakefulness started when Lionheart touched the *Tortoise* down in Fetlock. ***"This is where you wished to be? Are you certain?"*** The Canterlot ghoul's voice echoed painfully inside the sky-tank. ***"I see nothing here but rubble!"***

"That's cuz the real fun's underground," Calamity retorted, rubbing his ears. "And... ow!"

"Sorry!" Lionheart bellowed, not helping in the slightest. Velvet Remedy and I quickly disembarked.

It could have been worse. I had been concerned about taking a ride with "mouse". She may no longer be a gigantic, terrible, teeth-gnashing, sharp scaled, horned, pink-cloud-snoring, could-eat-a-pony-in-one-bite dragon, but she was still one of the most dangerous creatures in the Equestrian Wasteland. Possibly, in a way, even moreso than before now that she was no longer confined to the Royal Treasury, trapped inside a fused horde of gold, gems and valuables. From what I had gleaned from Lionheart, "mouse" had survived the crumble and fall of canterlot by just *being that tough*. As if the transformation hadn't somehow taken all that ancient draconic resilience and compacted it down into this new (and admittedly cute) form.

That was not what the spell was supposed to do. But then, dragons had magic of their own.

When I had put voice to those concerns, the former Royal Guard had responded by producing what I had at first mistook for a giant pink marble. On closer inspection, I had seen that the glass sphere had once been some sort of pet ball, the glass surface having warped so badly from the concentrated pink cloud inside that it became completely sealed.

“How does she get in and out?” I asked.

“How does she breathe?” Velvet wondered, aghast. She quickly checked herself. “Of course, she doesn’t have to, does she? She would be the ultimate Canterlot ghoul, I suppose.”

The gaunt, reaper-like pegasus had nodded to her, answering me cryptically, “*Dragon magic.*”

I went out on a limb and guessed he didn’t know either.

Velvet Remedy and I trotted carefully through the bleak rubble of Fetlock. I had my E.F.S. up, but my compass wasn’t showing any hostiles. It wasn’t showing any life at all.

A cold wind stirred up flakes of ash and debris. In all directions lay ruins which were once bright, happy homes for pony families. As we neared the waiting station for *Sky Bandit Stages*, my eyes caught black writing on a freestanding wall, centuries-old graffiti:

Everypony is gone.

I was moored in place by the overwhelming desolation of the Equestrian Wasteland.

My reverie was broken by the sound of a ponyhole cover scraping against asphalt as Velvet Remedy shifted it open with a hoof. She glanced at me sheepishly, probably realizing that would have been a better job for her horn, and then vanished into the darkness below.

I moved forward to follow her, but my ears caught a sound. A touch of... conversation?

Cautiously, I moved towards the shelter where I had fought my first manticore. As I neared, lights winked into existence on my compass and the voices became clearer. I breathed a sigh of relief as none of the new lights appeared hostile.

“...even got a fresh supply of Dash straight from the Angels,” I heard a stallion saying. “Just tell me what you need. The good doctor’s got your fix.”

“Uh?” replied a grizzled voice. “You’re selleen sticks? Uh don’t need sticks. ‘Specially sticks frum uh pony.”

“No,” the stallion repeated, skillfully hiding any hint of exasperation. “Fix. I have your fix. Drugs, my good doggy. Drugs!”

Rounding the corner, my eyes alighted on a pony dressed in what had once been high-society attire (probably from Tenpony Tower) before it had become so... well-traveled. He was accompanied by a brahmin and a griffin, the latter wearing Talon armor with an unfamiliar insignia -- neither Gawd’s nor Stern’s company -- carrying a rocket launcher over her back.

The customer that the stallion was attempting to engage in conversation was a heavily-grayed, elderly hellhound holding a brush gun modified with a scope.

The hellhound was crouched down, staring closely at the pony, a look of confusion on his face. “You got rugs? How you gonna stop they winged-ponies with rugs?” the hellhound barked. “Ur they flyin’ rugs?”

I cleared my throat. The stallion shifted an eye towards me, unwilling to fully turn his head away from the dangerous monster he was trying to sell to. A look of relief crossed his face.

“Doc Hoof, at your service,” he smiled nervously, taking a slight step back from the hellhound. “Don’t mind this fellow,” he added, not wanting me to provoke or shoot his customer. “He seems... genial enough. But I do believe he’s hard of hearing.”

Barkin' Saw. Our albino "friend" had indeed sent someone who might be interested in helping us. The hellhound who had seen the Enclave enslave his whole town. The deaf and senile one.

Yay?

Turning to Doc Hoof, I asked, "Do you have any healing potions or bandages? Medical supplies?" I might as well do something useful with the bottle caps I still had to my name.

"Oh yes!" the stallion whinnied proudly. "Ever since that Remedy lass invested, I've been able to procure quite the stock."

Wait, what? Velvet? When? I shook my brain, but the only time I could come up with was while I was behind The Wall in Fillydelphia. My little pony chided that I shouldn't be surprised. It wasn't as if my friends just stood around idly when I wasn't with them.

"Let's just see what the good doctor has in his magic bag, shall we?"

What he had was impressive.



Today:

Gawd stood on the dark grey cloud and stared into the quickly closing hole over Manehattan, favoring her wounded hindleg. A tear ran down from her good eye and over her beak, hanging on the tip of it before dropping off and disappearing into the same gulf that had swallowed her daughter.

The Enclave patrol had taken out two of their own, including her daughter, before she could finish them. And as a group of six more carapace-armored pegasi approaching from behind her proved, the first patrol had managed to send a warning before they were dispersed.

Gawd checked the load on her magical shotgun, a thin grimace drawing across her beak.

"Don't move," warned the Enclave soldiers as they drew near. **"One wrong swish of your tails, and both of you are ash."**

Gawd traded a sidelong glance with Blackwing. The other griffin gave a slight smile that said all that she needed to say.

The two griffins swung around, aiming their weapons as the sky erupted in deafening thunder.

“Yee-HAW!” Reggie roared as three of the six Enclave soldiers were obliterated by the sheer force of *Little Gilda*.

Gawd blinked in disbelief. Then recovered, just a feather’s breadth faster than the remaining Enclave pegasi did. Her shotgun vaporized one of them. Blackwing struck down the second, but not before a beam of light struck out, hitting her left wing, dissolving two-thirds of it.

Gawd swooped to catch the crippled griffin as Reggie annihilated the last pegasus with the supergun.

“Blackwing!” she called out, dashing forward. “Hold on! I’ve got healing potions.”

“Where...” the griffin asked, trying to focus, “...the hell... did you come from?” That poison, he knew, should have killed her. Or, at least, paralyzed her. The fall would have done the rest.

“What?” Reggie teased as she fretfully dug into her bags, ignoring the looks her mother was giving her. “Never seen a zebra-augmented griffin before?”

Gawdyna wasn’t sure if she wanted to hug Regina or give her backside a thrashing.

“Now don’t you dare pass out on me,” Reggie told Blackwing as she poured the healing liquid into the griffin’s beak. “We still have some clouds to clear.”



Two days ago:

“I know it’s not going to be as simple as turning a rock into a top hat,” Velvet was telling Elder Crossroads as I finally joined them in the bowels of Stable Twenty-Nine. “But I’m sure it’s possible.”

In the time it took to sound out Barkin' Saw and determine that the hellhound actually was a potential ally -- a process which started by having to explain to him that I was the pony he was looking for, not Doc Hoof -- Velvet Remedy had talked her way into the AJ Ranger's headquarters, gained an audience with their Elder, and pitched her request.

The new leader of the Applejack's Rangers mulled it over. "Any friend of SteelHooves is a lifelong friend of the Rangers," she began. "We'd be honored to lend our hooves... if you were asking any other thing."

Velvet Remedy's face scrunched like she had bitten something sour.

"But you are asking us to help propagate Equestria's alicorn problem," the brown mare with the cropped yellow mane continued. "You do remember that SteelHooves was known as the Mighty Alicorn Hunter, don't you? There was a reason for that. Theses are not..."

"They are not monsters," Velvet Remedy snapped. "They're victims. Of the Goddess. Of Red Eye. And now, when they finally have a chance at freedom and individuality, you're talking like they are a particularly unpleasant infestation that needs to be exterminated."

"We need to do better," I commented as I stepped fully into the room, my words echoing those of Life Bloom. My heart shared his sentiments. He saw how much the efforts of the Twilight Society had fallen short, how paltry they seemed. I was seeing my own in a similar light, particularly where the hellhounds were involved. Seeing Velvet and Crossroads, I sensed we weren't the only two due for this awakening.

Elder Crossroads looked between Velvet Remedy and me, then compromised. "The research you desire access to really belongs to ex-Scribe Rattle," the Elder decided. "Fortunately, he was one of the survivors of the Friendship City Massacre. He is still recovering at Tenpony Tower under the care of Doctor Helpinghoof. If you want access to his experimentation records and studies in transformation magic, you need only obtain *his* permission."

Velvet Remedy found that agreeable. More so, it gave her an excuse to visit the good doctor again. (The real good doctor, not the wandering merchant outside selling Dash to passersby.)

“We have secured Bucklyn Cross as an Applejack’s Rangers outpost,” Elder Crossroads whinnied. “His research is largely in the maneframe there. If he is willing to help you, have him give you his passwords. We’ll see to the rest.”

The brown mare looked to me, “And did you want something as well? Or was this a social call?”

I steeled myself. “I need every Applejack’s Ranger you can spare.”

The Elder lifted an eyebrow. “Battle coming?”

I nodded. “The big one.”



Today:

Xenith hit the gabled rooftop with a bone-cracking thud, skidding down the broken roofing tiles and thumping against the jagged remains of a chimney.

Stern landed on the apex of the roof with her hindlegs, cradling her shattered firing arm, and glaring down at the zebra who had dared challenge her in the air. Xenith had proven every bit the better fighter that she had shown herself to be in The Pitt. But being a better *fighter* isn’t worth much in “pegasus-fighting” when you’re up against a better *flier*.

And this zebra used her wings like she’d just grown them.

“This was a doomed fight from its inception,” Stern growled, deciding how best to finish the damn slave. Her preferred method, her anti-machine rifle, was no longer an option as the pain in her arm attested to. The zebra had seen to that. “Just who do you think you are?”

"I am no one," Xenith said softly, coughing up blood. Stern's eyes widened. Hadn't this one been mute? Maybe she was thinking of the wrong zebra. No, that wasn't possible.

"Then what made you think you could take me?" Stern hissed in disbelief, shifting carefully down the slope of the roof, silhouetted against the broiling red of the Fillydelphia sky.

"Because..." Xenith coughed again, moaning in pain as she tried to move, tried to get back up. "...I am not alone."

"What?" Stern managed, eyes widening, just before the second zebra appeared overhead, the wind blowing back the hood of her cloak as she drove her hooves into the black griffin's back with spine-shattering force.

"Don't. Touch. My. MOTHER!"



Two days ago:

Sunset spread out across the Equestrian Wasteland like a heavy blanket, the ruddy colors making the cloud curtain glow like a warning light. It looked like the clouds were bleeding.

Elder Cross had given us a full dozen Applejack's Rangers and offered us access to their armory. I personally declined the latter; this wasn't a battle that we could win with bullets. But I made sure that each of the Rangers was fitted for the fight of a lifetime.

"Paladin Strawberry Lemonade?" Calamity asked, sounding impressed.

"Junior Paladin," the mare answered humbly. "But yes. And I'll probably be a full Paladin after this." She didn't even know what "this" was, but that didn't shake the faith in her voice. Her chipper voice became slightly more subdued as she explained, "Promotions tend to come quickly in wartime."

"How is that struggle going?" Velvet Remedy asked demurely.

“Oh, the shooting has died down between us and the Steel Rangers. The Enclave Invasion sent the Steel Rangers back into their holes.” Based on what Crossroads had told me earlier, the Applejack’s Rangers, meanwhile, had divided their efforts between helping the rest of the wasteland against the Enclave, fortifying, and licking their own wounds. But I hardly expected the proud, young Paladin to put it that way. “Trottingham is ours. As is Manehattan. Fillydelphia is theirs, but it’s such a mess right now, why would we want it?”

Because there are several hundred ponies there in desperate need of your help? Or how about just because it has the Stable-Tec Headquarters and their maneframe? Or just because it’s the right thing to do?

I tactfully didn’t mention those out loud. Elder Crossroads had priorities well in hoof. There was no need to rain on the patriotic enthusiasm of the young Paladin. Joy now. Grim realities would come soon enough.

I shifted, gazing out over the Equestrian Wasteland through the narrow window of the Enclave sky-tank, taking it in with my own eyes one last time. In two months, I had seen horrors enough to spawn a lifetime of nightmares, cruelty and despair that could kill the soul. The wasteland was like a corpse -- seeming dead and gone, nothing but an empty husk -- but crawling with terrible things feeding off its rotting flesh.

Things I had fought. And fought successfully, although all too often at great cost.

“I am Littlepip,” I declared softly, the conversation just between the Wasteland and me. “Damaged, but not defeated...” I looked for something else to say, but only one thing came from my heart. “You don’t win.”

A moment later, we burst above the cloud curtain, and the twilight sky opened above us, twinkling with stars.



Today:

The little light of hope reappeared in the sky above Fillydelphia once again, punching down through the clouds of black and red like a shooting star. Streams of poisoned light flowed off of the star as it pulsed, each little flash brighter and brighter.

KRA-BRASOOOOOOOOOOM!!!

The little light of hope exploded in a blast brighter than Celestia's sun itself, a ring of sickly colors erupting forth from that center, driving winds before it and tearing the hellish clouds away.

Sunlight, pure and clean, poured into the poisoned city of Fillydelphia from a brilliant blue sky.

The expanding toxic rainbow tore apart the remaining Raptors before striking a fatal blow to the already failing *Glorious Dawn*. The great, black siege platform seemed to collapse under its own weight, tearing itself apart, raining pegasi as it plunged out of the air with a sick rumble.

The tiny speck which was once the glowing light of hope, continued to fall, dropping at breakneck speed towards the Fillydelphia Crater from whence it had come.

The shape of something that resembled a pony, only gaunt and strange with leathery, bat-like wings, arched out of the falling corpse of the *Glorious Dawn* and sped through the air to catch it.

**Two days ago:**

"NO!" Spike roared, the force of his shout threatening to blow the Tortoise back off the ledge outside his cave.

The giant purple dragon slammed a fist down on the mountain, standing in the entranceway of his home. "Littlepip! You know *why* I don't allow Steel Rangers in my home! And you brought a *dozen* of them here?"

Piss off a dragon. Check.

“Spike,” I said calmly. “These are Applejack’s Rangers! They’re the good guys.” Pointing a hoof, I admonished reasonably, “And you should know that. You’ve seen the good they’ve been doing. You’ve been *Watching*.”

Spike’s snout twisted into a begrudging frown. He crossed his arms, snorting smoke. “Well, I still don’t see why you had to bring them here.”

I sighed deeply. Time to pull out the big, puppy eyes. “Don’t you trust me, Spike?”

The dragon groaned. “Ugh. Only for you, Littlepip.” Spike lowered his snout and glared at the front-most Ranger. “But behave yourselves. No wandering. Stay in the front room. Got it?”

“Y-yes, your scaliness,” the pony managed from inside her magically-powered armor; the slight attempt at remaining tough felt humorous considering Spike could completely enwrap the mare with his tongue.

The lot of us trotted into the gaping maw of the Dragon Cave, Pyrelight and Reggie flying above us, the little pink orb squeaking as it rolled along between our hooves, the shadow of the mouse inside barely visible.

The darkness of the opening gave way to the brightness of the interior. I drew up short, gasping at what I saw. Spike’s cave home starkly was not how I remembered it.

Spike’s piles of gems had been removed, but not far: they had become a glittering mosaic that covered every wall, depicting images of the Ministry Mares in the joy of their youth. I recognized some of the scenes from stories Spike had told us when we had visited him here several weeks ago. Strings of gems were slung across the ceiling and strung between the multitudes of bookshelves like decorations. The gems were enchanted to glow with soft, colored light. The walls glistened, reflecting those lights like an inverted mirror ball.

"Do you like it?" Silver Bell chimed, galloping up to us. "I made the cave pretty!"

I nodded, stunned. It was beautiful and more than a little overwhelming.

"Oh my," Velvet purred. "Yes, you most certainly did!" She caught the little filly in a hug. I looked around and spotted Ditzzy Doo not far away, smiling.

"Regina!"

The cry came from Gawdyna, the older griffin bursting out of a group of ponies and soaring across the room reunite with her daughter.

Spike's cave was *crowded*.

Seven. I'd tried to gather seven allies. There were... a lot more than seven people here! I spotted Blackwing and her team of Talons. I blinked as I recognized the white coat and electric blue mane of Morning Frost standing next to her sunflower-coated friend Sunglint. Was Tracker here too?

No, I learned quickly. But before vanishing into seclusion, he had contacted them. "We heard you were planning something big," Sunglint said with a cheerful seriousness, "And we want to help. We feel just awful about everything the Enclave is doing! This... this just isn't right. Ponies shouldn't act this way!"

"I couldn't agree more," came the familiar voice of the amber-coated Wasteland Crusader.

My jaw dropped. They were here too? "Wha... huh... how?"

"Watcher told us," she said with a stubborn stomp. "You didn't think you were going to leave us out of this, did you?"

Well, yes, actually...

This was... I didn't have words. Hell, I didn't even know several of these ponies.

“You invited my daughter?” Xenith whispered into my ear, having spotted several zebras clustered in the crux of two towering bookshelves. It took me a moment, but I recognized Xephyr. And the zebra next to her, who had painted herself to be nearly black with thin white stripes, was Gloom.

Xenith looked slightly mortified.

I shot Spike a look. He just smiled and shrugged, deftly shifting blame. “This was more Homage’s idea than mine.”

Oh that so figured.

I waded through the room, feeling dazed. Every few feet, I was stopped by somepony (or zebra, or griffin) who wanted to greet me. All around me, conversations were bubbling.

Gawd thudded down in front of me, blocking my view of everything. Tears were flowing down her cheek from her good eye, and I could see her fighting to keep her composure. “Tell me it was worth it!” she demanded, her voice low and dangerous.

I froze. Oh Goddesses. She’d just learned about Kage.

“It was worth it, mom!” Reggie interrupted, flying up next to me before my brain could put words in my mouth. Gawd glared at her daughter, but Regina stood firm.

“Kage...” Gawdyna bit back a shout, tears flowing. “He was a fighter, a Talon. But he was *my son!*”

“He died like a Talon,” I offered, my words feeling lame as they slipped off my tongue. “Brave and steadfast to the very end.”

Gawd’s stormy demeanor did not improve. Reggie flew in front of me, nearly beak-to-beak with the larger and more grizzled version of herself. “Kage died strikin’ a fatal blow t’ the Enclave,” Regina told her mother. “Not an instant kill, no. But fatal. A slow death, like the thrust of a poisoned knife.”

Gawd did seem to appreciate that. But Reggie wasn’t done. “How many griffins died, mom, when the Enclave invaded the skies of our

homeland? How many more do you think will die before they're done if we don't stop them?" Reggie brushed back her headfeathers. "This was our fight long b'fore it was theirs."

The conversations around us had gone silent. Everypony (and dragon, griffin, zebra and phoenix) was watching. Reggie glanced back at me, giving me a small smile before rounding on her mother again. "An' so far, it seems Calamity and his friends have done most of the fighting for us. Was it worth it that Kage, your son, *my brother*, actually got in a blow? *Fuck yes!*"

Gawdyna Grimfeathers wiped her eye and gazed at her daughter. The rest of the room seemed to be holding its breath. Then I heard a whooping whistle, and the amber mare started stomping applause. Soon, the whole room was thundering.

"Well... okay then," Gawdyna said softly. "You didn't need t' yell. I am yer mother." Reggie looked sheepish and then enwrapped her mother in an embrace.

"Huh? Whut's goin' on?" Barkin' Saw asked nearby. "Whut ded she say?"



Today:

We emerged from the cloud curtain right beneath Neighvarro. And flew directly into the path of two of the Raptors.

Spike tore past one of them, breathing green fire across its propeller array as he passed. Half the propellers exploded in flame, the others dissolved outright. The burning Raptor canted, out of control, and began to dip into the cloud curtain.

"Victorious! This is *Raptor Noctilucent!*" a voice cried alarm over the Enclave military channel and into my ear. **"We're under attack! It's... it's a *dragon!*"**

Spike swooped up through the second layer of clouds, drawing out of sight of the Raptors and their parent Thunderhead. He drew up,

hovering just outside the wall of blue light that protected Neighvarro, his giant wings flapping slowly. Inside, pegasi were galloping out of barracks and buildings, staring up at the humungous purple and green creature who had positioned himself between them and the morning sun, casting his shadow across the eastern part of the base.

The Raptor Noctilucent tore up through the clouds, its weapons swiveling towards Spike, bright light building up inside the barrel.

Spike attacked the shield. The blue wall of energy buckled, warped and collapsed under the unstoppable force of Twilight's number one assistant.



Yesterday:

Breakfast at Spike's Cave. Spike didn't have any tables for ponies, so we were all gathered on the floor, eating breakfast thoughtfully procured by Lionheart late in the night. I wasn't sure where he acquired the rather large bundle of food -- which included fresh hay, vegetables and flowers -- but I had my suspicions, and I wasn't about to ask.

The majority of Spike's guests had traveled a long and often dangerous way to get to the top of the mountain, and most of us had been suffering various levels of exhaustion the night before. So shortly after the scene between the Grimfeathers, and with promises of long, important discussions and plans the following morning, most everyone had slowly found themselves a place to drift off to sleep.

Now, much better rested, and with the company of friends and heroes, those around me were taking to the morning meal with a lively energy. Calamity was in particularly good spirits. After Velvet's and Life Bloom's attentions and a good night's rest, his wing had finally regained enough strength to allow him to fly. Not well, and not fast, but he was hovering everywhere like a pro.

"This world is way too filled with morning people," Gloom mumbled, her mane drooping over her face, but not far enough to conceal her scowl.

"What are you bringing to the fight?" the amber mare asked Gloom with a level of enthusiasm that clearly did not sit well with the odd zebra.

"Before you get too ahead of yourself, her khaki-coated friend cautioned, "We don't even know if there will be a fight."

The amber mare rolled her eyes. "Of course there's going to be a fight. It's not like they're planning to just give the Enclave a good talking to!" Shifting back to Gloom, "So are you a sniper? Medical pon...er, zebra? Fight with your hooves like Xenith? (Isn't she awesome?)"

"If we are fighting, then I will fight," Gloom answered gravely. "With blade and poison, and with my life until they kill me. Then probably rise up as a vengeful spirit and haunt whoever's left."

The amber mare raised an eyebrow, scooting slightly away. "Alllllrighty, then."

"If this is a battle," Gawdyna said, sitting just a little ways from me, "then my Talons 'ave much t' lend t' the fight." Knowing Gawd, the word *lend* was meant literally. "We've been collecting a significant amount o' resources an' tools over these last few weeks."

"Yeah, that orb vault had turned out to be the ultimate treasure map," Butcher (who was now Blackwing's second-in-command) revealed, ignoring a displeased look from Gawd. "Last week, we were able to break into an old zebra vault and get at its armory. Check out some of the exotic new weapons we found sealed up in that place!" Butcher showed off some of the Talon's new equipment proudly.

"This nasty little melee number is something the zebra's called a 'chainsaw'," Butcher announced. "Never gonna be a replacement for *Little Gilda*, of course! But... damn!"

After rolling her eyes, Blackwing also chose to ignore Gawd's displeasure, showing off the new addition to her own arsenal.

Xenith identified the strange weapon immediately. “A crossbow,” she intoned. “An assassin’s weapon. Silent and deadly.”

“Like a fart?” Reggie snarked. Then suddenly her eyes lit up. She turned towards her mother.

Gawdyna pinched the bridge of her beak with her talons, her eye scrounged shut. “No.”

“No what?” Reggie protested. “I haven’t...”

“No,” Gawd re-iterated. “I ain’t lettin’ you have a crossbow so you can name it *The Fart*.”

Reggie whined, “But *mom!*”

I felt myself blush as I was suddenly reminded that the gun slinging griffin hero was indeed just an adolescent. I refocused on eating my flowers. Good flowers. Yes. Pretty and tasty.

“...just found an underground research facility where ponies were attempting to apply zebra alchemical techniques to coal,” Blackwing was telling Calamity. “It seems they were hoping to create everlasting coal. They never succeeded, but the did manage to produce an alchemically-treated coal that burns twice as fast. And about ten times as hot.”

“Word o’ warning,” Gawdyna said, leaning over to me. “If you ever think o’ havin’ kids, beware. No matter how much you love them, eventually, they will become teenagers.”

Next to me, Calamity snorted. I merely stammered, thrown a bit. “uh... no. Children... not really in the plans.” I mean, even if there was time, and even if Homage was here, it wasn’t like either of use was going to get the other pregnant! In fact, I was pretty sure pregnancy was right out with any pony I had ever fancied. Or griffin... oh, and aren’t these flowers delicious. Yes, stare at my plate. Munch, munch, munch. Yay for breakfast!

“Oh wow,” Gloom sing-songed. “Littlepip likes mares. You can tell.”

I nearly choked. “What? Why do you say that? I wasn’t doing anything.” My eyes shifted back and forth as I thought quickly. I was not checking out Gawdyna. Or her daughter. Or anymore. I’d made certain of it!

“You were eating flowers,” the strange zebra pointed out.

“So?” Xephyr butted in. “Gloom, I eat flowers. *You* eat flowers.”

“But it was the lesbian way she was *eating* the flowers.”

What?!

“That,” Xephyr informed her, “makes no sense.” Turning to me, Xenith’s daughter advised, “Don’t listen to her, Littlepip. Gloom is... strange.”

I nodded, unable to find my voice, a flower petal clinging to my lower lip.

Xenith’s exotic voice whispered behind me, “If you look at my daughter, I will paralyze you.”

Gah!

I wouldn’t! Never. But... it didn’t help that sometimes I sneaked a glance at Xenith herself. I found myself blushing almost painfully as Homage’s tease about a threesome replayed in my forebrain. I spun around, but Xenith wasn’t there anymore.

So instead I sunk low and tried to focus on anything but mares (of any species)... or flowers.

Other conversations were continuing all around me. In a far corner, I saw Ditzzy Doo engaged in a deep-looking discussion with Barkin’ Saw.

“You want tu know now?” Barkin’ Saw asked. “Whut kind uf buk es this?”

The ghoul pegasus scrubbed off her chalkboard and scribbled something in response.

My ears caught a plaintive draconic rumble on the other side of the chamber. “Mommy?”

Pyrelight had flown up to Spike's eye level, the pink-filled mouse-ball clutched in her talons. The huge purple and green dragon was staring at the rodent inside with a wrenching mix of emotions.

"You're not mommy," he complained. "You can't be." He reached out and gingerly touched the pet-ball with a claw tip.

Pyrelight nodded sagely. The mouse simply squeaked.

"What sorta big plans?" Calamity was asking Gawd. I had missed a shift in the conversation. But I didn't care. I clung to the new discussion like a life preserver.

"With Shattered Hoof under my wing, and the community you seem so intent on buildin' around it, I've been thinking that maybe it's time t' hang up my holster," Gawdyna admitted. "Mercenary work is a young griffin's game." She looked over at her daughter and the empty space next to her that Kage would have naturally filled. "I've accomplished more while runnin' the Talons than I ever did in the field. I'd have t' be blinded in both eyes not to see I have the opportunity t' build something lastin' here." She added, "And to turn a handsome profit in the process."

My ears perked up, my blush quickly receding. This had become interesting. I felt a spark of hope borne of Gawdyna's words.

"It doesn't take a tactical genius to realize that the Enclave is building up for a huge battle in Fillydelphia sometime very soon," Gawdyna pointed out, "And I'd be willing to gamble by the timing that this little pow-wow isn't unrelated. So here's the deal: I'm offering the full support of my Talons and our resources, but in return I want total freedom to take over Red Eye's resources in Fillydelphia."

"Say what now?" Calamity asked as I fought to pick my jaw up off the floor.

"Cooperation would be appreciated," Gawdyna said. "But in the very least, you and your allies don't get in my way. An' that includes the Applejack's Rangers."

"What... exactly are you planning?" I asked.

"Expand on what y'all 'ave been pushin' me t' do," Gawd claimed. "The area 'round Shattered Hoof an' Junction R-7 is becomin' a civilization. We're gainin' a population, an orchard, a water talisman... everything we need t' become one of the biggest thrivin' communities in the wasteland."

Well, yes. I had kinda been thinking along those lines, I had to admit.

"So, why stop there?" Gawd asked. "By takin' over Red Eye's factories, we could seriously have a shot at rebuildin'. A real New Equestria, not that poisoned Unity crap, with Shattered Hoof as its new Canterlot."

I blinked. Well, Gawd's plan was definitely ambitious. Still, "I'd love to see you take over Red Eye's operations, but only so long as you don't run them the way Red Eye did, through barbarism and slavery..."

Gawd waved a wing. "Settle yer mind, Littlepip. Ain't lookin' t' become the new Red Eye. Wasteland's seen enough o' that kind o' thinkin'."

I felt myself let go of a tension I hadn't realized was building in me.

"A new Equestria?" I pondered the idea. "A new Canterlot? But... who would be the new Princess?"

"You?" Calamity asked. "In Gawd we trust?"

Gawdyna Grimfeathers shook her head. "Monarchies are a pony thing. I'm lookin' fer something more inclusive, more open t' other people." She looked to her daughter, warming to the topic. "A republic perhaps, fashioned in the image of the legendary Griffin Clan Council."

"No Princess?" I said again, still trying to wrap my brain around the idea. "Not even an Overmare?"

"Nope," Reggie said. "Just an Arbiter, for when the heads of the Clans can't agree. Mother would be perfect for that."

We don't play politics and we don't take sides.

A crooked grin spread across Gawd's beak. "To be honest, I've already sent representatives to the buffalo, and I was hoping Xenith might serve as an intermediary with the Angels."

“Me?” Xenith peeped, seeming once again to appear from nowhere. She seemed about to protest, but stopped, looking confused. “Angels?”

I’d heard that name before. Just recently, in fact.

“That would be us,” Xephyr called out, apparently having been listening in. Either that, or the name caught her attention. “After we started making Dash like you taught us, the others decided we needed a new tribe name. We couldn’t use dad’s anymore.”

Xenith’s eyes widened.

“They wanted to name us something fierce, a name that would demand respect,” Xephyr claimed, “So I thought, since we’re living beneath a giant Doombunny, why not name ourselves after him?”

“You... named the new tribe... after Doombunny...?” Xenith looked pale. (Which was quite a feat for a zebra.)

“Ah didn’t even know the buffalo still existed,” Calamity whispered to me.

Velvet Remedy chimed in. “Not everything Red Eye was trying to do was bad,” she claimed. “I too would like to take charge of part of Red Eye’s work.” Gawd scowled, opening her beak to protest, but closed it when Velvet Remedy said, “...his plans for schools and medical centers.”

“Y’all are dividin’ up somethin’ that ain’t ours,” Calamity warned the two of them.

“I was mostly interested in the factories,” Gawd admitted, “But I have the Talons and the ex-raiders of Shattered Hoof to help. No offense, but how is one pony going to build schools and bring education and medicine to all the wasteland?”

“I...” Velvet Remedy blushed uncertainly. “I think I have alicorns.”

Gawd blinked.

Xenith scooted closer to Velvet. “If you do this, then would you please start in Glyphmark? Glyphmark needs a school. And a medical center.” She looked over at Xephyr. “It has a doctor. And...”

Xenith looked back at Velvet Remedy, her face hardened with determination, “I have decided. I wish to become their teacher. This is something I can do for them.”

Velvet’s eyes widened, as did her smile. She moved to hug Xenith, but the zebra had anticipated this and swiftly tapped the ground; I heard something break and the zebra vanished in a puff of unhuggable smoke. Velvet plopped back down, looking shocked for a good ten seconds before recovering.

“You’re right, Gawdyna,” she finally said. “Even if I do have alicorns, I will still need help. So I’ll make you a deal.” The griffin raised an eyebrow in response, all ears.

Velvet offered. “You help me do this, and in honor of Kage, I will use the name he came up with. And I’ll name the Fillydelphia school after him.”

“Uh...” Calamity tried to caution, then seemed to give up. Leaning towards me, he muttered, “Ah really hope yer plan involves defeatin’ both the Enclave’s an’ Red Eye’s armies in Fillydelphia.” He looked at Gawd and Velvet Remedy uneasily.

“The... name Kage came up with?” Gawd asked, confused. She looked at her daughter questioningly.

“The Followers of the Apocalypse.”



Today:

Walking on clouds was... weird.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to truly get over my discomfort. I just had to accept the general wrongness of it and press on.

“Ya sure about splittin’ up like this?” Calamity yelled over the driving wind and the sound of the defense array. Above us, Spike was wheeling and dancing, trying to keep away from the blasts of the defense cannons by placing the attacking Raptors between himself and the base.

“Don’t worry about me,” Velvet Remedy called back, smiling. “This old unicorn’s still got a few new tricks.”

“Old unicorn?” Calamity called back. “Where? Hidin’ behind Velvet?”

A cacophony of rending metal and explosions marked the second Raptor to be taken out by friendly fire. Fortunately, the Enclave soldiers left to operate the defense array were proving too novice to skillfully avoid their own ships and still hit Spike.

Unfortunately, a few of their shots were indeed hitting Spike. And his cover was dwindling.

“We need to go,” I called back to the two of them before charging off.

“Y’all better be okay when Ah find ya again,” Calamity told Velvet sternly.

The beautiful unicorn smiled and shook her head. “Of course I will.”

“They’ll come fer ya,” Calamity said, not for the first time.

“Let them,” Velvet replied. “They’ll underestimate me. Everyone underestimates me.”

Calamity and Velvet Remedy paused, looking into each others’ eyes, embraced in a passionate kiss.

A minute later, they broke apart. Velvet galloped off in a second direction, and Calamity in a third.



Yesterday:

"Sorry I'm late," the most wonderful voice in Equestria apologized. "Did I miss the briefing?"

Homage's voice brightened the room, lifting my spirits. It was as if my heart was being held aloft by a flock of butterflies.

"Nope," Calamity said to the sprite-bot that the voice of my love was coming from. "We were jus' about t' start. Glad ya could make it."

"Oh thank you!" I gushed at Spike. My eyes began to tear in joy. I was going to have one last time with Homage. Maybe not physically, but this was still more than I had hoped.

He stroked his spines back, looking a little embarrassed by the volume of emotion I was pouring out. "You're welcome." Everyone else in the cave was staring. "It was nothing, really."

"Oh, but it isn't nothing," I insisted. "It's *everything!*"

I couldn't help it. I threw myself around one of his ankles. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"If you start kissing Spike," Homage said, her voice sparkling with amusement, "I'm leaving the room."

I stopped, my eyes turning to the crowd, a blush rising.

"Uh, Li'l pip? Y'all were sayin' 'bout how the Enclave depends on the cloud curtain?" Calamity reminded me tactfully. "Y'know. The plan?"

"Oh, oh yes. That."

I pulled myself back up, brushed my mane out of my face and stared back at all the eyes turned towards me. This was it. This was The Plan.

Still, the little pony in my head wouldn't stop bouncing around like Pinkie Pie, cheering Spike and crying out Homage's name.

"The Enclave will annihilate every living soul in Fillydelphia and bury the industrial progress made there under melted rubble if they aren't stopped," I reminded them. "If Red Eye's forces win, the surviving pegasi will end up enslaved or with their heads on pikes."

“And Stern’s Talons aren’t likely to stop with just one successful victory,” Gawd added. “With Red Eye gone, she’ll be looking to take over his whole operation. Defeating the Enclave’s biggest force? She’ll take the war back to the clouds once she smells weakness.”

“This is the griffin who wiped out father’s tribe, isn’t it?” Xephyr asked. Xenith scowled, nodding affirmatively. “Well, then they can’t win,” the younger zebra insisted.

“Do we have any idea when the Enclave are going to attack?” one of the Applejack’s Rangers asked.

“Yes,” I told him. “Tomorrow morning.” The news was greeted by several voices of dismay.

“It will be the largest, fiercest battle Equestria has endured since the great war,” I re-iterated. “And, unfortunately, I’m going to miss it.”

“*WHAT?!*” The sound was a chorus.

“We have a chance to end things,” I told them. “Not just one battle, but the entire threat of the Enclave entirely. Forever. Tomorrow morning, I’m going to lead a group into the Enclave’s military base in Neighvarro, break into the Single Pegasus Project, and tear down the cloud curtain.”

“Wait,” Morning Frost said, tossing up a hoof. “You’re going to take on Neighvarro? I was stationed there, you know. It’s biggest military base we’ve... they’ve got! Do you know how many troops are stationed there? How about the Thunderhead and the Raptors? The shield? The defense array?”

“The Enclave brought the war down to us,” Lionheart announced, sending Silver Bell as deep as she could get beneath Ditzzy Doo’s wing. **“We are bringing it back up to them.”**

“Most of the troops won’t be at Neighvarro,” I claimed. “We have two advantages going in. First is the element of surprise. The Enclave isn’t expecting forces from below to actually attack them on their home... turf?” Had to be a pegasi-appropriate word for that. I pushed forward. “This will be an unexpected tactic.”

"Y'all c'n say that again," Calamity neighed.

"Second is the fact that tomorrow morning Neighvarro will be functioning on a skeleton crew," I revealed. "Every available pegasi from Neighvarro has been used to bolster the military force poised to hit Fillydelphia. Until that battle is over, there will be almost nopony left at the base."

I looked to Gawd. "This is the information Kage gave his life for. The one opportunity, the one window of weakness that we can exploit to take the over the S.P.P. and kill the Enclave for good."

Gawdyna Grimfeathers drank that in without comment.

"Once inside the S.P.P. shield, it might take hours to figure the place out. We can't count on what I'm going to do in there happening in time to save the people of Fillydelphia.

"So I need your help, most of you, in the battle for Fillydelphia," I told them. "I have a plan. But... look, what I am about to ask of all of you is more than anypony has the right to ever ask of anyone. But for the sake of everyone else in this room, and everyone out there, both below and above the clouds, I'm asking... no, I'm begging you to help."

"We wouldn't be here if we hadn't already said yes, kid," one of the Applejack's Rangers announced. "Get on with it."

There were whinnies of support all around the cave.

I took a deep breath. And, with that, I laid it out. Starting with the part I felt worst about.

"Ditzzy Doo," I said solemnly, focusing on the ghoul pegasus. She was listening from the back, one wing wrapped around her adopted daughter. "I hate this more than anything, but I need to put you right in the heart of the battle."

My heart seized as Silver Bell's eyes went wide. "Mommy?" she asked timidly.

Forcing myself forward, I told her, "I need you to perform another sonic radboom. This time, right in the middle of the conflict." I quickly

added, “But I want you to do so with as little risk as possible. If you can take out some of the Enclave’s ships, that’s wonderful. But the goal is to clear the clouds over the battle zone. So if you can pull it off at a higher altitude, keep yourself out of the firefight, that would be best.”

Silver Bell was looking at her mother with a painful expression. “But... who will catch you?”

“Lionheart will,” I managed. Looking towards the royal Canterlot ghoul, “I’m sending you and mouse into Fillydelphia. Your mission is to wreak as much havoc amongst the Enclave as possible, keeping their focus off Ditzy Doo. And to catch her if she needs it. Once the sonic radboom happens, I want all three of you out of the area as swiftly as possible.”

I had to admit, I was feeling a lot better about sending Ditzy Doo to Fillydelphia than I had in the days before now that we had “Lion and Mouse”.

“But for now, I need you to get Ditzy Doo to the Fillydelphia Crater.” To Ditzy, “Wait there until it’s time. No pony should bother you in there, and you should be glowing again in no time.” I hated this. But there was no other way. Looking at the loveable ghoul pegasus, I whispered to myself. “We can’t lose you.”

I realized I was banking an awful lot on Ditzy Doo being able to explode twice.

Ditzy Doo gave a cute little salute, then turned to Silver Bell, writing something on her chalkboard. The little filly nodded, embracing her new mother in a teary farewell. I sent all my prayers to Celestia and Luna that they would only be apart for a day.

Velvet Remedy wrapped her tail around Silver Bell as Lionheart trotted up to her. The little pink ball wheeled across the room in their wake as the two ghouls walked out of the cave.

“Hold on,” I called out to them. They two ghouls stopped, looking over their shoulders. The little ball smacked into Ditzy Doo’s left hindleg and rebounded with a squeak. “Before you go, I will need to

speak to Ditzzy Doo in private.” I need them to wait just a little longer. “Don’t worry. It won’t be long.”

Ditzzy Doo nodded patiently and sat down. Silver Bell pushed herself free of Velvet’s tail and scurried over to be with her wall-eyed mother.

I swallowed hard and steeled myself for the rest. One of the worst parts was over.

“Gawd, I need you and your Talons to clear the sky over Tenpony Tower and keep it that way.”

Reggie protested. “We’re not going to be in the battle?” Hopefully not, I thought in response.

“You’re critical to it,” is what I told her. She didn’t seem particularly mollified.

“And what are you offering in return,” Gawd asked. A few of the ponies around us murmured unpleasantly, but I knew Gawd wasn’t trying to squeeze me in a time of crisis. She just needed an offering, if only just a token one, to save face. After all, the Talons weren’t crusaders. They were a business.

“How about an opportunity to expand your influence into Tenpony Tower?” I offered. “I own what used to be a cheese shop. Perfect place for Gawd’s Talons or New Canterlot to set up a satellite office.”

Homage’s voice rang out over the sprite-bot, sounding slightly tinny. “Oooh, Littlepip. What are you planning?” From her tone, she already knew.

“Life Bloom...” I turned to the one member of the Twilight Society that we had with us. “You’re going to have to convince your friends at Tenpony Tower. Once the clouds are cleared in both places, we need the Twilight Society to bring the power of Celestia One down on that battlefield.”

Life Bloom blinked slowly. Then nodded. “You can count on me.” He added, “On *us*.”

“What’s Celestia One?” one of the Wasteland Crusaders asked. Life Bloom explained, leaving out the finer details. But the reality was quickly clear. Tenpony Tower had the ability to enact a megapell capable of tactical precision, and I was going to unleash it against both sides.

“We’re taking back what they stole from us,” the amber Crusader said in awe. “And then using it as a weapon against them.”

“Yes.” I let myself smile just a little at the wonder in her voice before continuing. “Meanwhile, a group of us will be hitting Neighvarro. Once we get to the heart of it, the S.P.P. Central Hub, I’m going inside. I’ll be analyzing the cloud curtain and then using the towers to tear away as much of it as I can without threatening the pegasi with starvation.”

Morning Frost and Sunlint objected.

I shared a glance with Spike before confiding, “There is a final step to this plan, one that will compensate for the loss of crops, but that’s going to take extra time to implement. Possibly months. But we do have that covered.”

I looked to Morning Frost. “You were stationed at Neighvarro. Why don’t you and Calamity give us an overview of what we are attacking.”

Morning Frost floated up her PipBuck and brought up a map of Neighvarro from its database. Velvet Remedy concentrated, her horn lighting up, the illusionary magic she previously used for her concert light shows now trained on presenting a mirage of Neighvarro that everyone could see. It looked like a cloud-bisected egg, the small red alicorn shield of the S.P.P. Central Hub at the core, the blue Enclave energy field surrounding the base like a shell.

We could make out several clusters of buildings including the barracks, the science center and even a collection of solar dishes like those outside of Hope. The base got its power from a combination of those dishes and a field of thunderclouds, the former largely powering the blue dome and the defense array.

Neighvarro was set into a higher patch of clouds than the cloud curtain itself. Between the two, the ominous bulk of the Thunderhead *Victorious* stalked the sky, barely moving. The *Victorious*' four Raptors prowled about it.

"And that's our target?" Paladin Strawberry Knight surmised. "We're here to help you take on that?" She sounded impressed. And a little confused. "How? We can't fly."

"Yeah!" The amber mare jumped up. "How can we help? The Wasteland Crusaders are ready!" Her two friends whinnied their affirmations.

I had no answer for them. I honestly hadn't intended for them to be here.

Pyrelight gave a little hoot and swooped down to whistle into Velvet Remedy's ear. Her eyes brightened. "Maybe you could," Velvet Remedy suggested. "Well, not fly, exactly. But Spike," she shifted her attention to the dragon. "Did you tell us that Twilight Sparkle had a cloudwalking spell? Would there be any chance that spell is somewhere in all these books?"

I'd forgotten about that. With a thrill, I realized that the cloud-walking spell should also allow me to hack into the Enclave computers. Wouldn't help me with their locks since it wouldn't alter my telekinesis or my tools, but this was still a huge improvement.

Spike coughed then puffed up proudly. "Hey, I was the number one assistant of the nerdiest unicorn in all of Equestria. Have you *seen* this library?"

"Wonderful!" Life Bloom jumped up with a grin. "Point the way. If you've got it, I can learn it."

Velvet Remedy cocked her head, staring at him. With a playfully put-out voice, she asked, "Really, is there any spell you can't learn?"

"Not so far," he admitted.

Spike looked the white unicorn over curiously. “How is that? Is your special talent... is it magic?”

Life Bloom laughed and shook his head, his crimson and scarlet curls quivering. “Oh nonono. I’m nowhere near as powerful as even Littlepip, much less a pony like Twilight Sparkle.” Powerful? Me? Since when? “But I *am* exceptionally versatile. Turns out, that’s my special gift: learning.”

Blushing a little, he confessed, “I can learn pretty much anything I set my mind to if I have the resources.”

He could have learned *anything*. And he chose to become a medical pony. A healer.

Wow. I hadn’t even... wait. Idea! “Spike? Do you, by any miracle, have the Ministry of Magic’s research into Spell in the Box?”

“I... think so,” the dragon said. “After the briefing, I’ll see if I can’t find it.”

Xenith spoke up gently. “And I can craft some bloodwing talismans,” she offered. “But I will not be joining you in this fight, Littlepip.”

Calamity, Velvet and I all turned towards our zebra friend in surprise.

Xenith shook her head solemnly. “My place is in Fillydelphia. Stern murdered my husband, destroyed our tribe,” she reminded us, no longer trying to hide who she was from Xephyr. “Enslaved me and thrust my foal into the cold, brutal wasteland without protection. If this battle is going to be the end of Stern, then I must be there.”

I nodded, frowning a little but accepting that completely. Xenith was right. This was her story to play out, no matter how much I might wish her by my side.

“Now remember, folks,” Calamity spoke up, stomping a hoof for attention before flying into the center of the room to hover above the floating mirage of Neighvarro. “These soldiers ain’t the bad guys. They’re the enemy only in that they’ll be shootin’ at us. An’ it ain’t like we ain’t invadin’ their home.” He stared over the assembled ponies and

others. "These soldiers ain't done nothing wrong. Many o' 'em will be fresh recruits still bein' trained. They ain't done nothin' t' harm Equestria or its people.

"The ones who have? They're all gonna be in Fillydelphia. An' the pony in charge..." he choked just a little, "...Colonel Autumn Leaf? The one who ordered the Friendship City Massacre an' almost every other atrocity? He's dead, folks.

"We ain't goin' inta Neighvarro lookin' fer blood. We kill only in self-defense." Calamity's words were forceful and brooked no argument. "We ain't goin' in t' slaughter. We're just punchin' a hole."

Another reason I didn't want Lionheart involved in Neighvarro.

And now came the other hard part. I turned to Strawberry Lemonade and the eleven other Applejack's Rangers. "And to answer your previous question: no. You're not going to be part of the assault on Neighvarro."

"Fillydelphia then?"

Again I shook my head. "You're going to be here."

"Here?" Strawberry Lemonade asked, sounding disappointed.

"*HERE?*" Spike blurted.

I nodded. "Yes. Here. Right here in this cave." I looked up at Spike. "The group of you are going to defend this cave, and its extremely important secrets, from anyone who might take the opportunity to attack while Spike's gone."

"Gone?" Spike repeated in disbelief.

"Yes," I told him. "We need you with us. We can't do this without you. Spike, it's time to stop watching."

He looked between me and the Applejack's Rangers. "But..."

"What would Twilight Sparkle have done?" I asked. From his expression, I didn't need to say anymore.

"Wait," Calamity said. "Yer sending Spike inta battle against the *Victorious* an' four Raptors?"

“Doesn’t the Enclave call those *dragon killers*?”

Spike chuckled wryly. “Guess this was pre-ordained. To be honest, I always found that name insulting.” He made a wave with his claws, “Part of me always wanted to put them in their place for that.”

Morning Frost looked at Velvet Remedy’s illusion of Neighvarro. Then stared up at Spike. “Do you think you can take down the Enclave shield?”

Spike lowered his head, staring at the data on her PipBuck. “Magically enhanced Type Six photonic resonance barrier. Let me do the math...” Assistant to the most geeky unicorn indeed.

He sat up, making an elaborate show of counting on his claws, occasionally mumbling something like “carry the three”, before leaning back and giving us a wide, dangerous, sharp-teeth-filled grin.

“Oh yeah,” he purred. “Probability of hindrance: zero percent!”

I couldn’t help but grin.

“And you three,” I said, turning to the Wasteland Crusaders. “I want you here, helping protect this place. Just in case.”

“And what are the chances of someone attacking this cave in the few hours you are gone?” the olive-coated buck asked.

“Hopefully, none,” I prayed. “But while I can’t explain why, this cave is the single most important place in Equestria. And it must be protected at all costs.”

Paladin Strawberry Lemonade shook off her disappointment and stepped up. “Then we will guard it with our lives. You can count on Applejack’s Rangers. None shall pass.”

Yes. Everything was shaping up better than I could have expected.

“I’m pretty sure I can’t get through the shield around the Central Hub though,” Spike added cautiously. “What are you going to do once you get there?”

I opened my muzzle, then shut it again. In truth, the whole thing was a gamble. An educated guess, fueled as much by faith as fact. "I'm going to do what I do best," I told him simply.

"Drop somethin' heavy on it?" Calamity asked.

"Get shot full of holes?" Velvet Remedy offered wryly.

"Stare at flanks?" Reggie snarked.

The voice of Homage floated out of the sprite-bot. "Orgasm?"

Eep! "Homage!" My ears and cheeks burned like Celestia's sun. When had I fallen on the floor and why were my legs twitching like that?

Scribbling swiftly, Ditzzy Doo offered up: *Squeak and blush?*

I could hear the giggles.

Arrrugh! "Okay, fine!" I whimpered, giving up. "I'm going to do something I'm sort of good at." I sighed, covering my face. "Gawd, what I have to deal with..."

"Hey, leave me out o' this one, kid."



Today:

Velvet Remedy was the first to reach her destination: the Enclave Broadcast Station where the Enclave was tied into the Radio Override System of the S.P.P.

"I'm sorry," she sang out, "Pardon me. Excuse me..." as she dropped each of the technicians in turn with her anesthetic spell. She turned around and propped the doors open wide behind her, then proceeded to look over the controls.

"Now, if I were a shut-down-everything button, where would I be?"

She glanced up as the propped-open doors swung shut again. Then went back to her work. "A-ha!" With a jab of her hoof, the R.O.S.

began to reboot. Within two minutes, the overriding Enclave Broadcast was back on the air.

Velvet Remedy trotted over to a microphone, checking the settings on the soundboard, then cleared her throat.

“Hello Equestrians. And good morning,” she said sweetly.

“Now I know I’m not DJ Pon3, but I *am* a good friend, and I’m sure sh-sure he wouldn’t mind if I entertained you all for a little while. I have some wonderful new music that I wrote myself, but first let me tell you a little about what’s going on in the Wasteland today...”

The doors to the station banged open, half a dozen Enclave soldiers bursting in.

Without skipping a beat, Velvet purred, “...starting with the young bucks and mares of the Enclave who just came in to shut me down.” She waved at them with her tail. “Pull up a place boys. Let me play some real music for you.”

“Back away from the controls, lady,” one of the Enclave soldiers ordered. **“Surrender. You’re unarmed, and if I see your horn start to glow, we all shoot. Don’t make us kill you.”**

Velvet Remedy looked put out, pouting with her lower lip and fluttering her eyes. “But boys, I don’t need guns or magic. I have something with me that’s much more powerful than those.” Velvet smiled pleasantly. “Kindness.”

The Enclave soldiers looked at each other. One of them started to laugh.

“Kindness? What the hell kind of weapon is that?”

There was a flash in the center of the room. Within the flash appeared a purple alicorn, her horn glowing, her hooves ringed with all the ammunition and power packs from the Enclave soldiers’ magical armor.

The air shimmered behind the talkative one, revealing a midnight blue alicorn with a silky, frost-colored mane. The oddly-maned alicorn leaned close and whispered, “The kind that earns you friends.”

**Yesterday:**

"They need to see," I told Spike after the mission briefing had broken up.

I expected resistance. Instead, Spike agreed readily. "I've already shown Ditzzy Doo," he confessed. "As one of the spirits of the Element of Harmony, she deserved to know."

"One o' the what now?" Calamity questioned. He and Velvet Remedy were standing with me, along with Spike, Ditzzy Doo and the floating sprite-bot that channeled Homage.

I opened my muzzle to attempt to explain, but Spike suggested we just show them.

Ten minutes later, we were standing before the wonder of the Gardens of Equestria, the sun shining down through the mountain's natural chimney and glowing off the spine of the Crusader Maneframe and its web of cables. The Elements of Harmony seemed to shine in the glow of Celestia's sun, resting on their pedestals.

I had explained it all. Everything.

Ditzzy Doo sat at the pedestal holding the Element of Laughter, staring reverently at the necklace with the little balloon-shaped gem.

Calamity was the first to speak. "The spirit o' Loyalty?" He seemed overwhelmed. "That's... a lot. Ah'll try t' live up t' that..."

"You already do," I assured him.

"The Elements of Harmony require many things," Spike reminded him. "But they don't require you to be perfect."

"Kindness?" Velvet Remedy sounded faint. "But... Are you sure?" She leaned closer to me, speaking hesitantly. "In case you haven't noticed, Pip, I can be a bitch sometimes."

I thought back to Velvet's kindness to the dying alicorn at Maripony. To her taking a stance against attacking the hellhounds. To her holding Silver Bell back in her barn.

It had taken me far too long to recognize who was right in front of me. To see both my friends for who they were. In truth, I should have seen it back in Tenpony Tower, when they explained how they felt about each other, both of them expressing what they saw in the other in terms of their own virtues.

"Yes," I affirmed. "I'm sure."

"But... what about Fluttershy?" Velvet Remedy pleaded.

The dragon answered, "The Elements of Harmony are passed on, sometimes even while the former Bearers are still alive. It happened with Celestia and Luna. You're not taking it from her. This is natural."

"You mean... even if she comes back?..."

Spike blinked. "If who comes back? Celestia?"

"Fluttershy."

"What?!"

Velvet Remedy explained. "We can save Fluttershy. Bring her back. Maybe... it's risky but..."

"Fluttershy's dead," Spike said, sounding fairly certain.

"No," Velvet Remedy corrected him. "Fluttershy's a tree."

Ditzy Doo fluttered over, landing between us. She kicked off her chalkboard and took a piece of chalk in her muzzle, scribbling: *What's going on?*

"Velvet Remedy thinks Fluttershy's a tree," Spike explained.

Ditzy Doo cocked her head, one eye focusing on Velvet while the other seeming to stare up at Spike. She rubbed her hoof on the chalkboard and wrote, "Fluttershy was a friend." Ditzy added, "You know she was a pony, not a tree, right?"

"She's not a tree, Velvet," Spike insisted.

"But she is a tree!" Velvet Remedy exclaimed. She turned to Calamity and me for support.

"Ayep," Calamity said.

"Killing joke got her," I explained, affirming, "Fluttershy's a tree."

It took Spike and Ditzzy Doo quite a bit of time to process that. This was somepony they knew, a good friend, particularly to Spike. One of his mares. The idea that she was still alive, and that she might even be saved, was a *lot* to take in.

Meanwhile, I had unpleasant news to break to the others. "After tomorrow, your top priority will have to be finding the two remaining ponies with the virtues needed to use the Elements of Harmony and set off the Gardens of Equestria. By your estimation, Calamity, you'll have about a year before things get really bad. I hope you can do it by then."

"Wait," Calamity waved a hoof. "Y'all say that like yer not comin' with us."

My heart felt like it was being squeezed. "I'm not," I said, feeling tears. "I can't." I explained to them, as I had to Life Bloom, that the Single Pegasus Project needed a pony. And that saving Equestria required that pony to stay.

"Why you?" Velvet complained.

I sighed heavily. "Because of all this." I glanced around at the Gardens of Equestria. "Because, in the end, I'm expendable. And you're not."

"Not to us!" Velvet insisted vehemently.

"It's okay," I consoled her softly. "This is... it's the right thing for me." I smiled, tears dripping down my cheeks. "I finally know what my virtue is."

"It's not fair!" she whined.

It does not matter that it is unfair, Xenith had once told me. It still is.

Zebra wisdom.

Velvet Remedy leaned into Calamity and cried.

Calamity wrapped a wing around her. “Ah agree with Velvet. Ya ain’t expendable. Y’all are a big damn hero, an’ our dearest friend.” He tipped off his hat. “Y’all do what ya have t’ do. But take this with ya. Ah want ya t’ have it.”

Seeing Calamity’s gift, Velvet Remedy floated out the Fluttershy Orb. “And this. From me.”

“One year?!” Spike’s head jerked towards us. “That’s insane! I’ve been looking for over *two hundred* years.”

“An’ Li’lpip’s found four o’ us in jus’ under two months,” Calamity smiled, looking at Spike with lidded eyes. “Perhaps y’all are doin’ it wrong.”

Ditzzy Doo held up her chalkboard: *He found Littlepip.*

Spike sputtered, stared, and slapped his palm cross his eyes, dragging his hand down his snout, bending it until slipped from his hand and snapped back with a boing. “I’ve been so stupid!”

“What?”

“I’m so sorry,” Spike looked to me apologetically. “You’re not unimportant, Littlepip. You’re the most important part.”

What now?! No. I needed to be unimportant. I knew my virtue and it wasn’t any of the ones the Elements of Harmony were looking for.

“I told you that your group wasn’t the one that was needed because it was obvious to me that you and SteelHooves weren’t ever going to be Bearers,” he explained rapidly. But it takes more than just being loyal or honest to be a Bearer...”

Oh crap. You’re going to make it more complicated *now*?

“...just like it doesn’t require that the Bearers be perfect paragons of their Virtue. There’s more to it than that.” He looked at us all. “I mean, it’s not like the ‘destined few’ just happened to all live in Ponyville. Fluttershy, Applejack, Rarity... I’m sure there were plenty of ponies

with the same virtues, but it wasn't enough to just have the virtues. That wasn't what made them suitable to be Bearers.

"It was only when they accepted the call to act, and became friends in the process, that they became worthy in the eyes of the Elements."

"The Elements 'ave eyes now?" Calamity questioned, taking it a little too literally.

"I've seen it before: the Elements won't work for ponies who don't possess the right virtues, true. Or who aren't friends. But they also don't work for ponies who aren't willing to stand up and truly fight against disharmony and evil."

"They have to fight the Good Fight," Homage agreed.

Spike continued, "It was when they all stepped into the Everfree Forest, braving it together, that they truly started to become friends."

"Well now," Calamity said, "Ah reckon any set o' good ponies who were willin' t' brave danger an' face down evil together are likely t' become friends."

"Exactly," Spike agreed. "There's a word for accepting that call to action: galvanize."

I was lost.

Spike turned to me again. "I was so fixated on how it happened with Twilight Sparkle that I forgot. But even Nightmare Moon thought the spark didn't work, and she was Luna, who with Celestia had been a former Bearer. The only way she wouldn't have known better was if the very nature of the spark changes each time."

I began to glean where this was headed, and opened my muzzle to protest. But the dream-words of Twilight Sparkle and her friends floated through my mind.

It's happening differently this time, isn't it?

Well duh. Do you think it was the same when it was just Celestia? Same is boring.

Ah reckon it's different every time.

"Last time, it happened inside Twilight. Last time, the spark was an epiphany. This time, the spark is a *pony*."

Spike stared at me. "Littlepip, *you're* the spark."

But... what... how...

"A *different kind* of spark."

"Daymn," Calamity whinnied. "When the Five are present, a spark will cause the Sixth to be revealed." As everypony turned to him, he grinned sheepishly. "Hey, Ah was payin' attention!"

I dropped to the floor, my head swimming in cloudy confusion... then suddenly clearing like the little pony in my head had performed a sonic rainboom.

At that moment, I finally realized what most of you probably figured out right from the prologue: the true meaning of my cutie mark.

A feature not to be forgotten: PipBucks keep track of the location of tagged objects or people. If a pony somehow got lost, it could help find them.

Like I had found the Ministry Mares. Their stories, which cried out to be remembered. And through the statuettes created through Rarity's sacrifice, the mares themselves.

Like I had found Velvet Remedy, even without the aid of a tag. And I had found each of my friends... and a whole lot of good, heroic people, many of whom were gathered in the main room of this very cave.

I had gotten my cutie mark when I had found that little foal and reunited him with his parents, the first worthwhile thing I had ever done in my life.

My special talent was *finding the right people*.

"But... don't this mean we still need Li'l'pip?" Calamity asked suddenly. "We ain't got but four."

Velvet Remedy answered with a hesitant but conviction-filled "No."

She smiled sadly, wiping tears from her eyes. "Have you seen the next room? Littlepip has done her part. We know where to start looking." The lovely charcoal-coated unicorn looked up at Homage's sprite-bot. "And even if the other two aren't in that room, we know where to look next. We look to each pony who has been galvanized to action, to fight the Good Fight, by the example of the Light Bringer that DJ Pon3 has beamed into every corner of Equestria."



Today:

A spectacular explosion of effervescent purple ripped through the New Hope Solar Array.

"Now that's how we do it down in the wasteland!" Calamity whooped as the defense array fell silent. The rust-colored buck's well-placed explosion had severed both the power connections to the active dishes and to the nighttime reserve batteries as well. Fortunately, he was all but an expert at repairing things, and the knowledge of how to dismantle them came with it. Plus, he had come with a sack full of explosives looted from the *Overcast*, and one special little surprise.

Calamity sniffed at the air. "Well, what do ya know. It's like the end o' an empire... with radishes."

Above, Spike roared, signaling his thanks, as he turned to engage the *Raptor Noctilucent*.

A blast of yellow light scorched Calamity's mane and burned his right ear, the bulk of the grazing shot hitting the wall of the solar tower next to him.

Calamity spun, searching the air above and the spaces between the solar towers. He had flown into the New Hope Solar Array with several pegasi on his tail. Practiced in stealth, he was able to lose them long enough to rig the detonation. He had hoped the explosion would keep their attention as he made his escape.

He spotted the two Enclave pegasi as they opened fire again. They weren't power-armored elite fighters. Just recruits on guard duty.

Calamity dove for cover, darting between towers. His recently healed wing ached badly, protesting the workout. And his body was beginning to feel the lack of sleep from the night before. If they cornered him, he was dead. Or they were. Most likely the latter.

He didn't want to kill these ponies. And that mean running away. Or hiding.

More shots passed above and below him. One struck his armor just above his battle saddle. Dammit. If he could just lose the damn pursuit...

He spotted a door. It could be a dead end, trapping him. Or it could be the perfect place to hide. Or even an escape route.

Calamity made a snap decision.

Dodging and wheeling, he pulled his attackers farther away, then the moment he had some cover, made a hard loop around for the door. His wing screamed in protest, threatening to fail.

Calamity reached the door, only to find it was locked.

"I think he flew back this way," he heard one of the Enclave guards say.

Gall-fucking-dangit!

Calamity heard a heavy barrage of magical energy erupt somewhere overhead. He looked up to see Spike tearing into the plasma cannons of the *Raptor Noctilucent*. As he watched, one of the smaller guns got off a horrific lucky shot, sending a beam of deadly magical energy right into Spike's right eye. The dragon howled, twisting as he slipped off the Raptor, tumbling out of sight.

The door beside him opened, a guard pony flying out to see.

Calamity bucked him over the head, knocking him unconscious, then dragged him back in through the door, closing it behind him.

The rust-colored pony's eyes went wide as he stared at the shelves of tiny, glowing, alien energy cells, each about a hundredth the size of the alien battery used in the star blasters. Above the shelves was a placard, reminding the Enclave pegasi: *Remember, you are first and only line of defense between Equestria and the things that fall from above.*

"Hol-lee shit..."



Last Night:

"I'm so sorry..." I told Homage, my voice trembling. My friends were all off making their own preparations. It was just me and her, me alone with the sprite-bot in a secluded corner of the cave.

"For what?" Homage's voice was soothing. "You did good."

"I'm sorry for leaving. And... because..." I thought of the dead, all those I didn't save back in the Everfree Forest. "Not good enough."

"Stop focusing on the few you couldn't save and remember that they all would have been dead if it weren't for you." Homage chided. "You saved the wasteland from Taint. And not just what would have been spilled. By obliterating both Maripony and Red Eye's Cathedral, you've protected Equestria from all of this happening again."

"And if you have to count, be sure to count all the ponies whose lives won't be ended in horror or murder because of the evils you have put an end to."

I wept.

"I'm not coming back,"

"I know," she replied, her voice slightly tinny but still the most beautiful thing in all of Equestria. I grasped the sprite-bot between my forehooves, holding it closer and leaning my forehead against its grill, my horn brushing one of the antennas.

"What is the most important thing I give you, Littlepip?"

I was surprised by the question.

“It’s not the orgasms, is it?” she prodded.

“No,” I quickly insisted. “It’s...” I paused, trying to find the words. “The solace.”

“Well,” Homage told me through the sprite-bot, “Then I think you are a very silly pony.”

I blinked back tears. “What?”

“You’re about to plug yourself into the central control for all the Towers,” she pointed out. “The same towers I use for my broadcasts. You’re not leaving me, not where it counts. The S.P.P. is what I do.”

I... I hadn’t thought of it that way.

“And you’ll have access to the entire network,” she added. “You’ll be able watch over all of the Equestrian Wasteland.”

I blinked. The little pony in my head made a quick note to access those records as soon as possible and check in on all my friends. Especially Xenith and Ditzzy Doo. I would need to see what happened in the battle for Fillydelphia. The Central Hub should have at least a few recent hours of stored data.

“You’re not going to be losing me at all. We’ll be closer than ever.” Then, bemusedly, she noted, “Although I guess this means I’ll need to find a second home.”

“What?” I asked softly, still processing the new reality.

“Someplace I can modify the way I want, so I can take my showers outside...”

Huh? Why would she do that? To enjoy the sunlight? I opened my muzzle to protest. It didn’t seem safe. A monster or raider with a rifle...

“...you know, where you can watch.”

!

Thud.

From the floor, I whimpered, “Have I mentioned how evil you are?”



Today:

“...Imagine when the battle’s won,

And we raise our faces to the sun...”

Velvet Remedy’s voice sang, sweet and defiant, in my earbloom as I galloped down the gleaming white hallways of the Enclave science center, protected by the field of the MG StealthBuck II.

She was singing to all of Equestria now. The entire wasteland, wherever there was a radio, they were hearing her voice. The song was a rousing anthem, something to embolden the spirits of Equestria’s fighters. To give them strength.

“...Equestria will live forever!”

Something to galvanize.

I reached the cell block with a few minutes of invisibility to spare. A quick sweep of the area told me all I needed to know. The cell doors had no accessible locks. They were operated entirely from the terminal in the guard office. It had a cloud-interface.

Fortunately, I could do those now.

I slipped into the guard room and started hacking while the two guards were busy talking about the attacking dragon. My ears perked when one of them claimed the defense grid had gone down. My heart leapt. Calamity had been successful.

Which meant that the albino hellhound’s little lesson in explosives had probably paid off. Maybe it was a good thing I didn’t drink that glowing soda after all. I hated to think what it would have done to my insides.

The password was “invincible”. Right.

The terminal brought up the door controls as well as a host of guard alerts. Most of them were from the last twenty minutes and had to do with the currently ongoing attack.

One of them was not.

Disposal Order #34. Subject: Fluffykins.

I didn't need to read it. I knew what it was. The order was dated this morning, three hours ago. Assuming the guards here weren't any swifter than they appeared, that meant Fluffykins the Warclaw was still alive. And that the Enclave was about to execute her. After all, their hellhound control had just been field-tested and battle-tested successfully. They didn't have any need for her anymore.

It was with a sense of justice bordering on pleasure that I opened her cell door, then moments later trotted past, floating a present across the gulf of clouds to the small metal platform she was confined to.

"A present from a friend," I called out as my invisibility failed. Part of me wanted to linger, if only long enough to see Fluffykins open it and make sure she realized what she could do now. There was a note with the present, but I wasn't certain Fluffykins could read.

But I couldn't do any of that. It was time to run. No looking back. I could only hope that I had made a difference. That I had given her a way out that was better for her than what she had been given before.

I wanted to do right.



Last Night:

I had a big day ahead of me, and the talk with Homage had wrung the last of the energy out of me. I really just wanted to sleep.

The party in the main chamber was not co-operating. I could feel the heavy pounding of drums as much as I could hear them, and Velvet Remedy's chocolate-sweet vocals swam into my ears.

Tonight was the last night before a big battle. One that would define the future of Equestria. And many of them might not be coming back. The party had been Silver Bell's idea, naturally. But none of them were going to spend their last night reading a good book.

"Raise your hoof!" Velvet Remedy's voice called out repeatedly, part of the famous Vinyl Scratch and Pinkie Pie duet.

I tried to bury my head under a pillow. Apparently, Spike had a lot of pillows.

"Hey, Littlepip!" Spike poked his head into the Gardens of Equestria chamber where I had slipped away. "Silver Bell's starting *Pin the Tail on the Pony*. Wanna play?"

I groaned.

"Whoa. Déjà vu," Spike said. "You really should join everyone. It's the last night before... you know. You should spend it with your friends."

I groaned again, but tossed off the pillow and sat up. Maybe Spike was right.

Against my real wishes, I followed him back in the very bright, very noisy main chamber.

And was promptly swept up in the games and festivities.

There was Pin the Tail, and pillow fighting and piñatas. Toy races and table tennis. A bookshelf had been turned over and used as a snack table, covered in every sort of preservative-laden, centuries-old sweet that anypony could get a hoof on, including a huge mound of MoM-approved snack cakes. Velvet Remedy, in all her glory, was belting out one fierce dance tune after another, her horn providing full musical accompaniment and a dazzling light show.

I danced with more ponies and griffins and zebras in one night than I ever imagined I would in a lifetime. And the little pervert in my head got a fair helping of flank-staring during the conga line.

And there were presents. Very special presents crafted by Life Boom, who has spent most of the day studying up on *Spell in a Box*. Cloudwalking presents.

But most importantly, it was *fun*.

That night, that party... I think it was the most pure fun I had ever enjoyed in my life.

Spike had been right. This was better, and so much more important, than sleep. These were moments of joy with *my friends*.

At the end of the party, Life Bloom passed me one last present, wrapped in a pretty bow. "It's what you asked for," he told me. "I need to go back. I'm hitching a flight with Ditzzy Doo and Lionheart. If I'm going to make it to Tenpony Tower in enough time to give the little speech I've prepared, I need to go now."

I floated the gaily-wrapped box onto my back. "Thank you."

"Who's that fer?" Calamity asked, trotting up to me as Life Bloom trotted away, swiftly moving to where Ditzzy Doo was once again saying goodbye to Silver Bell. A few hours should be more than enough for her to get her glow on, and she hadn't been about to leave before Silver Bell's party.

"It's a gift for Fluffykins," I told him.

Calamity sighted. "Li'lpip, y'know we ain't gonna have time fer that." Calamity was right. We each had our targets within Neighvarro, and we had planned our attack to avoid the barracks. We had to move quickly. No time for sightseeing. But...

"Just this once," I told him, "I want to do right by one of them."

Calamity frowned, shaking his orange mane. Little flakes of color rained out. "Ya ain't gonna be savin' 'er, Li'lpip. Ya let that monster loose, an' she'll rip through every pony she sees 'till they put 'er down." He pointed at the box. "This ain't gonna give 'er her life back."

"I know," I confided. "But if she's still alive, it's what she'd want." She was a Warclaw. She wouldn't want her life to end imprisoned and tortured to death. Who would?

"An' when did ya start factorin' the wishes o' hellhounds inta yer plans?"

I looked into Calamity's eyes. "When I saw how Autumn Leaf treated them."

"Well ouch," he winced. Calamity gritted his teeth. "That was a li'l low. Ah know he was a mass-murderin' bastard who needed t' be put down, but he was still muh brother, and Ah'm mournin' his loss."

I knew Calamity felt the pain of his brother's death, but the idea that Calamity might be in mourning hadn't really sunk in. "I'm sorry," I said regretfully.

"Well," he replied, accepting the apology, "Ah asked."

"You've got confetti in your mane," I told him.

"Ya do too."



Today:

"Hold it right there, ya traitorous, thievin' scumbag! We're under attack, an' you think it's a good time t' pilfer supplies? You're stealin' from the ENCLAVE ya worthless shit. NO PONY steals from the Enclave!"

Calamity had just finished relatching his saddlebags when the voice tore through the air behind him. "Hello, dad." He turned around to face his father.

The drill sergeant froze, staring.

Calamity stared back, eyes locked with his father.

Then he sighed. “Ya know, Ah always reckoned Ah’d have loads t’ say t’ ya iff’n Ah’d ever have the chance,” he said wearily. “But now that Ah do, Ah got nothin’.”

The older stallion glared. “Calamity?” Then he raged. “You?! You’re the one attackin’ yer country? Yer own kind? Yer with the damned DRAGON? YOU!?”

Calamity simply shook his head. “There are so many things wrong with that, Ah don’t know where t’ start.”

“And ya came here, killed ponies, why? Jus’ t’ steal?”

Calamity glanced back at his saddlebag before answering. “Ah came here t’ save ponies, dad. An’ these? They’re jus’ a li’l insurance policy. Somethin’ where all muh friends better leave here alive if the Enclave ever wants ‘em back.” He pushed past his father, heading for the door.

“Hold it RIGHT THERE, you traitorous piece of FILTH!” the drill sergeant bellowed.

“Or what?” Calamity asked. “Ya ain’t gonna shoot me. Fer all yer faults, ya ain’t Autumn Leaf.”

“Ah’ll BEAT YER ASS till ya WISH AH HAD!”

Calamity looked back at his father, considering this. “Ey-nope. Ah’m pretty sure ya ain’t nothin’ but a loud old buck, all bark an’ no bite.” Calamity offered, “But feel free t’ prove me wrong. Ah’m bettin’ Ah’ll trounce ya. An’ that will prob’ly lose ya whatever respect the troops have left fer ya.”

He turned away, walking towards the door. “Bye dad.”

“THAT’S IT?!” Calamity’s father swooped past to block the door. “Ain’t ya got nothin’ t’ say fer yerself, ya...”

Calamity cut him off before he could find more colorfully derogatory language to spew. “Ey-nope.” Then, with a second thought, he added, “Ah’m sorry mom died. Ah’d say somethin’ ‘bout how badly ya dealt with it, but Ah reckon ya already know.”

My best friend pushed past his father and opened the door.

"Ya got her mane, y'know," his father said softly, letting his traitorous son past. "Ah really liked her mane."

Calamity spread his wings and flew away, saying nothing.



This Morning:

"So, Barkin' Saw," I asked. "Feeling ready to ride a dragon?"

"Really not comfortable with this," Spike re-iterated as he lowered himself down enough for the hellhound sniper to climb onto the makeshift saddle Calamity had cobbled together while I was talking privately to Homage.

Within minutes, we were flying over the clouds. Spike had me in one of his hands, and I was floating Velvet and Calamity behind us. My pegasus friend could fly on his own, but not well enough or fast enough to keep up with a full-grown dragon.

The world above the cloud curtain was breathtaking. The air was crisp, fresh and warm in Celestia's light. The sun gleamed off the clouds, a rolling canvas bright, clean white. I felt a little wretched knowing I was bringing war here.

As we passed other mountain tops, I spotted one that looked like it had been gutted. All that remained was a gleaming skeleton, like the mountain was a carcass whose bones had been picked clean. I called over to Calamity, pointing it out.

"That there was Stable Ninety-Eight," he informed us. "Weren't many pegasi stables. Most o' the ones we did 'ave were built into the mountains. Clouds ain't much protection against megaspells, an' pegasi 'ave more need o' vertical space than most ponies, callin' fer a different design."

The bare, exposed remains slipped behind us. "Enclave stripped all the ones they could find down t' the last plate o' metal ages ago." He

added, “An’ they been takin’ what’s left from the frameworks as needed.”

Several minutes later, we caught sight of a pegasus city. The stark contrast between those buildings -- gorgeous monuments to the past -- and the ruins I was used to picking through broke my heart. It was a window back into the beautiful, sunlit past of Equestria as much as any memory orb.

But something felt wrong. The city, for all its splendor, was achingly hollow. The ancient, towering buildings and flowing rainbow waterfalls dwarfed its scattering of inhabitants in both scale and grandeur.

The pegasi felt like termites in a tree. Or like mice, carving out their own little mouse-holes within a much greater home.

It was not the thriving civilization I had envisioned.

Spike lowered into the clouds, the dampness plastering my armor to my coat and matting down my mane, the vision of the preserved world immediately gone, replaced with a haze of grey and white. We would travel the rest of the way obscured by the cloud curtain until we were virtually under the base itself.



Ten Minutes Ago:

Brilliant, blazing light erupted across the sunlit skies over Fillydelphia. Beams of purest sunlight, thin as tree trunks, rained down from the crisp blue like white-hot javelins, incinerating everything they touched.

The Twilight Society guided the megaspell’s power judiciously. Instead of bringing the megaspell’s full power to bear, destroying the landscape, they wielded it with surgical precision. Celestia One struck down the worst, the most dangerous, on both sides. The goal was not to win the battle, but to end it. And to save as many of the innocent and the helpless as possible.

In the end, the ponies in the ritual chamber decided, they had chosen to do the right thing after all. Not the pleasant thing. Not something, if

they had their preference, that they would ever do again. Not something that would make it easy to sleep at night. But the right thing.



Right Now:

My hoof hit the hard red barrier, sparks of energy crackling out from it. The shield felt as solid as a steel wall under my hoof.

I reared up and slammed my hoof against the shield surrounding the S.P.P. Central Hub once again, and fell on my tail when I rebounded.

I wasn't going through!

But... But I had been so sure! I was three-fifths alicorn. More importantly, I had something nopony who had attempted this had brought: I had a perfect replica of the soul of Rainbow Dash!

Of all of the Ministry Mares, actually. Right here in my saddle bags. If the bones of Luna hadn't been enough to get through, if the Enclave's goal to use the severed head of Rainbow Dash had been attempted and failed, then it stood to reason that the shield's bypass was designed to register something much more important than mere genetics.

I had to be the one who could get in. I had been promised this. I had it all worked out!

This was my purpose. My destiny!

I began to cry. Right now, so many were fighting, probably dying, because they had faith in my plan. Faith in *me*.

How could I have been wrong? Again?

Sunshine and rainbows, she had promised. I heard the sound of explosions and massive energy discharges from the remaining Raptors. My crying became weeping.

I had put so much, risked so much... and on what?

Don't listen to her! the potted plant had insisted. *She just wants you to fail.*

Oh Goddesses! What have I done?

Pinkie Pie's voice came back to me. *Everything will end in sunshine and rainbows!* she announced gleefully. *As long as you're willing to face the fire, that is.*

Face the fire?

I looked up at the heavens, the bright blue of an endlessly deep sky.

"What fire?" I whimpered. I'd already been through Everfree Forest. I'd faced Canterlot, the Enclave, and so much more. "Haven't I already been through enough? Can't I please just win now?"

A dark shadow washed over me.

As long as you're willing to face the fire.

"Spike!" I shouted, waving my forearms desperately! "I need you!"

As the huge purple dragon banked and landed, I wanted to run to him. I wanted to ask him if he trusted Pinkie Pie. Trusted her predictions and her advice.

But I didn't. It wouldn't matter if he trusted her or not. This wasn't about him.

This was *my* leap of faith.

"Whatcha' need, Littlpip?" Spike asked. He looked bad. The Raptors had gotten several good strikes in on him. His scales were scorched or slagged over much of his body. He was having a difficult time sitting up straight. Spike had lost several of his scales, and was bleeding from the blistered pit where his right eye had been.

I walked up to the shield and turned towards the wounded dragon, pressing my body back against the hard field of crackling energy.

"I need you to breathe on me," I told him flatly.

"WHAT!?" Spike roared!

“Please. Just do it. Quickly.”

“No!” Spike reared back. “You’ll die! I’m not going to kill you!”

“Please. You have to.”

“No!”

Oh Goddesses. Why are you making me do this.

“I lied,” I told him.

“What?” He looked confused, hurt and deeply worried. In the middle of all this...

“I lied about Twilight Sparkle,” I confessed, my heart ripping apart.

I told him the truth. The whole truth, every awful, soul-wrenching detail.

“All...” Spike stammered finally, his voice just a whisper. “...all this time...”

His face was an apocalyptic storm of emotions. He hated me. And he hated me for making him hate me. In the end, he did the only thing he could do.

He roared.

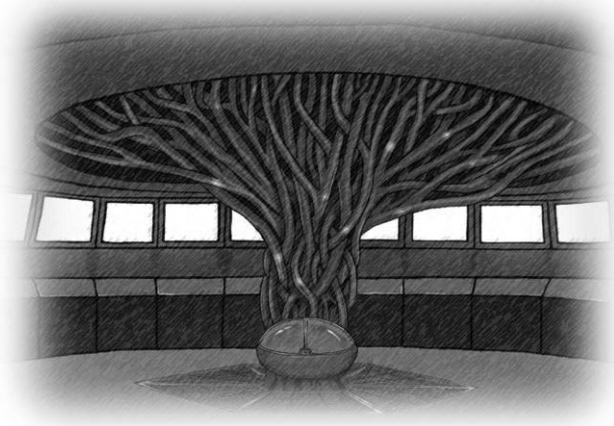
I was blinded by the blast of greenish flame. The pain was beyond unbearable. I screamed, and my lungs filled with fire. I could feel my skin bubbling and searing away.

I tried to hold onto my most precious memories, my memories of Homage. But one by one, those memories burned away like my flesh, consumed in searing agony until just one was left. The memory of Homage’s last words to me as DJ Pon3, addressing me across the wasteland.

You are my message.

Then that too was gone. And everything else. Even pain.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



THE VIRTUE OF LITTLEPIP

“But it was not until the end of this long road that the Stable Dweller learned the true meaning of that greatest of virtues: sacrifice.”

Sacrifice.

The Wasteland will try to tear you down, make you a monster or strip you of your will to fight. The Wasteland... and to a lesser degree, life itself. Every day is a struggle against the forces that attempt to compromise and erode anything good in your heart. It helps to have a cause, a purpose; but I have seen too many who have put their faith in those alone and been lead grievously astray. Every pony has a virtue, whether they realize it or not. And it is your virtue and your friends, together, that form your greatest defense.

Raiders are those who failed to weather the moral ravages of the Wasteland. Velvet Remedy was wrong: they *do* have a reason for existing. The Wasteland is the cause to their effect.

I had finally discovered my virtue. I should have realized it when I first looked into the mirror of the soul. But I was too blinded by what I saw -- a blood-coated, dying raider -- to recognize what the mirror was

actually showing me: the first time I truly acted in the spirit of sacrifice. The time when, even though I stood no chance of survival, I placed myself between a helpless caravan and what I believed to be a pegasus raider intent on slaughtering them.

That “raider” had been Calamity. And that act had initiated the first and closest friendship I have ever known. I should have recognized the truth in the mirror, but it took Pinkie Pie to help me see *how* to see.

You’re just looking at it wrong, she told me, pointing to the mirror, but not to me. Pointing instead to the approaching caravan and the family I was giving my life to protect. *Look behind you*.

My virtue is sacrifice.

I believe in Pinkie Pie, in sunshine and rainbows. But of all the Ministry Mares, I think it has been Rarity, not Pinkie Pie, that I’ve felt the greatest connection to. The mare whose last act was to save her dearest friend. Who tore apart her own soul for those she loved.

My feelings are not surprising, for sacrifice and generosity are closely tied. But generosity is a much grander virtue with a much wider scope. I am not generous. I have never given anything but myself; and upon reflection, my sacrifice was often selfish -- a vehicle to protect those I love from facing harm even when it was their right to do so. My mistakes in Fillydelphia are perhaps the most brutal example.

After my final discourse with Red Eye, I began to realize that I had been like an over-protective mother, stifling the growth of those I loved. Only now, finally, was I learning to let go. And still, it was the hardest and most painful thing for me to do. Sending my friends into battle against the Enclave without me... putting Ditzzy Doo, the spirit of laughter and one of the most beautiful souls in the Equestrian Wasteland, on the front lines... it tore my heart out to not merely allow others to sacrifice, but to ask them to.

No, I was not truly generous. I was not Rarity, not even Red Eye.

Nor was I truly Applesnack. But sacrifice lies in that space between generosity and perseverance -- between the desire to give so that others

don't have to and the drive to never give up, no matter the danger, no matter the cost.

I cannot give enough thanks for my friends. They guided me, protected me, and allowed my virtue to blossom into something that just might, in a small way, help save Equestria itself. Without my friends...

Virtues can become corrupted, metamorphosing into dark and twisted shadows of themselves. This is a truth I have both seen in others and felt in myself. Without the fortifying strength of friendship, sacrifice becomes self-destructive, the sort of false nobility that drove me to blindly leave Stable Two, even though part of me believed all I would find beyond the door was oblivion. I quiver to think what I would have become, and what would have become of me, had I not met Calamity when and how I did.

Without the camaraderie of friendship to light the way, it is so easy to get lost. I have observed this, and I have witnessed so much worse.

Monterey Jack committed suicide. That was not the virtue of sacrifice at play, not even a corrupted manifestation of it, but the utterly selfish absolute lack of it. Monterey Jack abandoned everything, even his children, because he no longer had the ability to make even the most simple of sacrifices: living.

Selfishness tells us that it is more important for *us* to have, to get and to not suffer, than it is for anyone else. Just by merit of our experience being ours and everyone else's not so. Generosity is not immunity to those impulses, but an ability to act counter to them, to give to others at the cost of not having for yourself.

Sacrifice demands you put at risk that which you hold precious. To do so even when another might be willing to instead. Especially then, so that no other has to.

I faced the fire, not for my own sake but for the chance to save lives, to remove the "cause" to the war's "effect", and to give ponies across the Equestrian Wasteland something precious, something vital which had been stolen from them.

I hoped that I was helping give them all a better world. And yet, at the same time, I couldn't help but wonder if it was a world I would have any place in?

The mirror had shown me my virtue, but I had not seen it, distracted by the image of what I had become. All the lives I have saved can't wash the blood off my hooves or stop the nightmares borne from all the horrors I have witnessed. When the Overmare had invited me back into Stable Two, I walked away. I knew the truth. That day I truly tasted the virtue of sacrifice and recognized it for what it was.

But I don't think I truly understood sacrifice until today. The day I died.



I died.

I remember the first time I saw Velvet Remedy. The couple living across the hall from my mother and me had gone to the Stable's "Best Young Talent" show in the Atrium. They'd left their little colt with a babysitter.

According to the babysitter, she'd only turned her tail for a few moments. But in those seconds, the colt had slipped in the bathtub, hit his head and drowned. She called for emergency help; the clinic was only a few halls away, adjacent to the Atrium, and the medical ponies made the gallop in under a minute. Half the Stable seemed to arrive within four, including Velvet Remedy, who had been singing when the news broke. She'd cut her song, rushing along with the parents and the gawkers, to see if the colt was going to be saved.

The colt was revived. Mother said (repeatedly and to anypony who would listen) that the colt had been "clinically dead" for over two minutes. I remember thinking how beautiful Velvet Remedy looked as she tried to follow the medical ponies taking the colt back to the Clinic and was directed away. To think: the crush that set all of this into motion had started that evening.

I died. I came back.

Faith doesn't require you to be willingly blind or dogmatically stupid. I knew as I faced the fire that it was going to be more painful than anything I'd suffered before, and I was almost certainly going to die. But I also knew there was a chance, if only just a chance, that death might be... survivable. And Pinkie Pie had promised me sunshine and rainbows. Faith *does* require that you take risks. Sometimes, you have to risk *everything*.

I said I would burn It, Rarity had insisted to Applejack after the other mare had called her on still having the Black Book. *And I tried... I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia.*

The Black Book. A soul jar bound with a living soul. If It could survive the trip, soul intact, then there had been a chance, if just a chance, that so could I.

Returning from death by incineration was, admittedly, more severe than coming back from drowning. And a whole league beyond regrowing a leg.

I came back.

Didn't I?

Everything was darkness, like the nothingness I had once feared was outside the door of my Stable home. The darkness was cold. I wasn't in pain. But I could feel myself breathe. Feel the beat of my heart. The press of my clothing and the weight of my saddlebags on my back.

I also felt cold, polished rock beneath my hooves.

The room around me rushed into being the second I realized my eyes were closed and, in doing so, instinctively opened them. I swayed, hit with a tsunami of intense relief that left me feeling strangely euphoric (and more than a little bit foalish).

I was in what I guessed to be a reception room. I chose to assume I was in the Central Hub of the Single Pegasus Project. If this was heaven, it left a lot to be desired. If it was hell, then hell was lame.

I was in a sizable, circular room with cool azure walls visible between cloud-white columns rising from a mist-covered marble floor. Above me, clouds floated in patterns beneath a dome of hazy, slate blue. The walls were covered in painted snowflakes, each with a beautiful, clear gemstone set into the center. A shower of diamonds.

There were railings, counters and carved marble furniture, all covered with a glistening sheen of frost. The room was chilly, but not freezing -- the frost itself was enchanted, radiating the cold that filled the chamber. The frost had slowly spread to cover much of the columns and patches of both the walls and the ceiling. In another fifty years, the entire room might have been covered.

There were two exits. Behind me, a set of gabled, silver double-doors which matched the ones I had seen on the exterior of the Central Hub while I was banging on the shield. Opposite those grander doors was a single, small, unassuming door which must have lead further inside.

A latticework of metal and icicles arched between two of the pillars between myself and the smaller door. Three huge monitors, each nearly the size of a pony, were mounted on the latticework, their screens a dull, dead grey.

A nearly identical latticework arched between the two pillars nearest the set of silver doors. The icicles formed words between arching bands of silver: *Winter Vestibule*.

But, my little pony protested irrationally, *it's summer*.

Against a far wall, I spotted a few empty wall-vendors and a Sunrise Sarsaparilla machine. A bottle of sarsaparilla stood on the arm of one the chairs next to me inches from the bones of a forehoof; the magical coating of frost on the chair had turned the liquid contents ice-cold.

All about me, collapsed on the furniture or scattered about the floor, were the skeletons of ponies. Those on the floor formed small islands of bone in the mist. Maybe a dozen in all.

I trod carefully. If my suspicions were correct, one of these skeletons might be the former body of the Goddess Celestia.

I winced as my hoof came down on the metal clamp of a clipboard. Looking down at it, I was struck by nostalgic memories of Calamity and SteelHooves joking about Stubbornite. A small smile played across my muzzle before I refocused my attention.

Spike had, to my knowledge, never sent anything to anypony other than Princess Celestia. I had only my faith in Pinkie Pie's words that, this time, his fire would take me where I needed to be in order to bring sunshine and rainbows back to Equestria. I could not deny that the reason it might do so is because that location, and Celestia's final resting place, might be one and the same.

The shield around the S.P.P. was designed to let either of the Princesses through. And I had never found Her bones in Canterlot. It seemed to me that if She had died there with Her sister, then Nightseer would have probably been wearing both. Although perhaps not; perhaps, as the alicorn's name suggested, she had a particular affinity for the Princess of the Night and Moon.

Near the silver doors was the corpse of a mare. Not a skeleton, like the others, but an intact body, her eyes opened wide, staring at nothing. The "Winter Vestibule" was not cold enough to freeze the body, but the chill was enough to dramatically slow decomposition. Still, I suspected she had not been here for more than a few weeks. (And it disturbed me deeply that I had become enough of a connoisseur of death and dead bodies that I felt I could make such estimation.)

There were no marks, no wounds or signs of trauma. Like me, she was not burned. She was just dead, her eyes wide open, as if in mortal terror. Had she, my mind conjectured, died of shock? When I faced the burning death of dragon's fire, I had been hoping for this. I had no doubt that, for her, it had been completely unexpected.

As I reached out a hoof, gently closing her eyes, I wondered what her last thought had been. My hoof froze an inch from her face as it struck me that I might know those eyes. Though weeks of slow decay had rendered them strange, they could have been the eyes of that one

Enclave mare -- one of the intruders into the dragon's cave -- that Spike had slain.

I... didn't understand.

Why was she here? And if she was, then why wasn't the room full of propeller parts and everything else consumed by Spike's breath?

I stared at the decomposing body of the mare in confused dismay. I had faced the fire of a dragon based on faith, thin evidence and a crippling desperate lack of options. If she was sent here the same way, then something must have made her different, just as something had made *me* different. But she wasn't guided by a precognitive voice from the past. She wasn't the Lightbringer. She wasn't even a message.

...But then, in a twisted way, wasn't she? Spike had certainly been trying to "send a message" to the Enclave. A dull pain began to thud in my mind as I thought about it.

Did forces such as destiny, purpose and intention play a part in dragon magic? If so, then it was not in the way ponies conceived of such things. Maybe they mattered in a more mysterious and nebulous existential way. I doubt Spike *intended* to send this mare anywhere... any more than he had planned to send the Black Book.

I felt a sudden weakness in my knees as I glimpsed the breadth of my lack of understanding. I felt suddenly like I had taken my leap of faith without even grasping the idea of gravity.

The chill of the room began to seep in as I stood over the Enclave mare, deep in thought. I recalled part of a tale Spike had told us: how a hiccup had sent a bundle of scrolls tumbling down on Celestia's head. It was an accident... but they were scrolls. Their purpose was to bear messages. The Black Book itself desired for its influence to be spread.

Or maybe this dead mare wasn't who I believed she was, and I was just spinning nonsensical wheels in my head.

How does she get in and out? I had asked Lionheart, looking at a pink-warped glass ball which had, centuries before, been designed to hold a small pet.

Dragon magic.

I winced, an unpleasant ache in the back of my brain. Dragon magic. One more thing to add to the list of Stuff That Makes My Head Hurt. Right up there between Enclave politics and rock farming.

But still below pony-pulled train engines.

I finished closing the mare's eyelids down over her staring, lifeless eyes. Then, shuddering slightly from more than the cold, I rotated about and started towards the small door.

Even from across the room, I could see I was in trouble. The door had a cloud-lock. If it was locked (and when was anything ever easy), then I couldn't open it. The cloud-walking which had allowed me this far wouldn't affect either my tools or my telekinesis, neither of which could interact with clouds.

My trot dropped to a slow walk as I began to realize that I had come all this way, risked so much from so many, and I might be stuck forever in this cold, tacky room.

The three screens erupted into life.

Above me, glaring with an expression of cold and evil rage, was an ebony alicorn. Her vast black wings filled the screens to the left and right. On the center monitor, her turquoise, dragon-like eyes stared down at me with utter contempt from behind a helmet forged of bluish metal.

"You trespass in the sanctum of Nightmare Moon!" she said icily. **"I give you this one chance. Leave. As swiftly as your little hooves can carry you."**

I backpedaled in shock, my hooves stepping into the ribcage of a skeletal pony, causing me to trip and summersault backwards, coming to rest awkwardly against the rotting corpse of the unknown pegasus.

Nightmare Moon.

Or, I quickly suspected, a security system designed to emulate her.

Rainbow Dash had formed the Shadowbolts. It made sense that she might have drawn on similar iconography when designing the internal security for her Ministry's greatest project.

I planted my hoofs firmly on the cool floor and glared back at the screens full of Nightmare Moon.

"I... I'm not turning back now," I announced.

"You cannot continue!" Nightmare Moon insisted. **"And I will strike you down if you try. Turn back now, while I'm still feeling generous enough to give you the chance!"**

And exactly how would I do that? Was she going to drop the shield to let me out?

A bar of static crept up the left screen, distorting Nightmare Moon's right wing.

It didn't matter.

I turned away from the three screens, casting my gaze about the room. I couldn't pick a cloud lock. But maybe I didn't have to. Maybe, somewhere in this room, there was a key.

"What are you doing?" Nightmare Moon demanded.

Ignoring you, the little pony in my head thought as I began to search the room. The cloud lock probably meant a cloud-key. I had to find it while the spell persisted and I would be able to pick it up in my hooves or teeth.

Panels slid back on the frost-encrusted ceiling. Ceiling turrets dropped down, threatening but not yet taking aim. **"Stop that!"** the image of Nightmare Moon cried, insisting, **"There's no other way inside. Don't waste your time."**

I couldn't help it. A smile broke across my muzzle. "Oh, but there is," I told her. "Know how I know? Because it's making you nervous."

The image on the right screen flickered with static then righted itself.

Wait. Security programs can't get nervous.

I turned to face the screens, my eyes growing wide.

“Last chance,” the face of Nightmare Moon warned me, full of regal anger. **“Leave now!”**

“No. I’m not leaving!” I told her defiantly. “Because the lives of good ponies are at stake. Because the evil attacking the innocent has to be stopped. Because Equestria deserves the sun...”

I stepped towards the screens, watching as a wave of distortion warped the images of Nightmare Moon. “I’m not leaving because this is my destiny,” I stomped, staring coldly at the flickering images of the evil, black alicorn. Looking into those dragon-like eyes, as if willing my gaze beyond the screens, beyond the façade.

I took a deep breath and spat out, “And because *you* are not Nightmare Moon.”

The screens flickered and the images of Nightmare Moon vanished, to be replaced with a much kinder visage.

“Destiny is what you make it to be,” Celestia told me.

I told myself this was another layer of the security program. This wasn’t actually Celestia. The gentle Goddess had transcended death, rose up to the heavens. Even now, She was watching over all the ponies of Equestria. Hearing our prayers. Not... this.

This wasn’t what I believed.

“Stop with the games,” I spat crossly.

“Get out!” the image of Celestia commanded, spreading feathery white wings across the right and left screens in a stance of royal dominance. “This place is not for you.”

I shook my head. “Get out how?”

“However you got in.”

My jaw dropped. She... it... didn’t know? “Weren’t you paying attention?” What sort of crappy security system was this? “Spike sent

me. Sorry, don't have another dragon in my saddlebags." The Celestia-image mouthed Spike's name, looking surprised.

"You had yourself burned alive?" the voice of white alicorn asked softly. Wide, lavender eyes stared at me through the center screen.

"Besides, wouldn't he just send me..." Wait.

Slowly, reluctantly, I asked, "You *are* Princess Celestia, aren't you?"

"Yes, my little pony," the majestic image of the white alicorn said. A line of static started to crawl across the center monitor. "And who are..." The alicorn trailed off, seeming to really look at me for the first time. "Wait. Don't I know you?"

"Know me?" I repeated, feeling like I was losing the ground beneath my hooves. "Why would you know me?"

"I watch... so many ponies," the image of Celestia confessed. "In my prison, all I can do is watch and listen. Until, sometimes, I cannot bear to watch any more..."

Prison? That... oh Goddesses.

Was I actually believing this? That I was speaking to Celestia Herself? That the Goddess... Princess... was somehow trapped here? Why else would She refer to this as a prison? But that meant...

"...But I do remember watching you before," Celestia interrupted my epiphany, her voice taking on a motherly tone, almost gentle but not without an edge. "You are Littlepip, she of the colorful vulgarities, am I right?"

Of the...?! EEEP! Celestia knew me... and for *that?! I wanted to hide. But there was simply not enough everything in the universe to bury myself under.*

"The pony on the radio has had good things to say about you," Celestia continued, my embarrassment compounding with Her mention of my inflated reputation.

Of course She had been hearing everything Homage had said, and all the DJ Pon3's before her. They had, after all, been tapping into the S.P.P. towers to broadcast. Using Twilight Sparkle's emergency broadcast station no less. *All I can do is watch and listen.*

"You are not like the ponies who have sought to enter this place before. The horrible things they did in their efforts to get inside..."

I winced, the little pony in my head cringing in sympathetic heartache as I imagined what it must have been like for Celestia to see an alicorn wearing Her Sister's bones. "I put Luna to rest," I told Her quickly, wanting to ease the harmful memory. "I burned Luna's bones, and slew the monster who desecrated Her."

My words felt weak and pathetic in my muzzle, but the expression on Celestia's face was of such undeserved gratitude that I found myself bowing before Her just to escape it.

"Rise, my little pony," Celestia chided softly. "I am no one worth your deference." I glanced up in surprise at Her melancholy words, not moving from my position. "There are too many dead because of me for any pony to show me such reverence. I would bow to you if I could."

I stood up quickly. "What? No!" I was appalled and, to my surprised, a little cross. "What happened wasn't your fault! The war, the megaspells, the horrible things we have done in your absence... none of it is your fault!"

Celestia merely looked at me sadly. Her perfect voice began to soak with the sound of the tears she couldn't really shed. "But it is, my little pony," She insisted. "I chose the site for Luna's school. There were three sites equally suitable, but I chose Crescent Moon Canyon because it amused Me. Because I wanted to see My Sister's face when I told Her I was sending Her students to the moon..."

And now I could see tears in Celestia's eyes, static warping the image on the central monitor. "I put those children there for a *joke!*"

I... I hadn't imagined...

My nerves felt covered in ice. My eyes burned. I felt the heat of a tear trickle down my right cheek as I began to cry for my Goddess.

“And that’s not the end of it,” Celestia claimed. “When the zebra’s struck, Luna and I worked together, holding up the shield, giving all our subjects time to get to their Stables, even though the Cloud was killing Us. We took shifts, at first, each of Us holding the shield while the Other gathered healing supplies, then while the Other just rested...”

Sacrifice.

“...but My Sister,” Celestia’s voice trembled, “was younger. Weaker. And no matter what I did, I couldn’t prevent Her from dying in My arms.” Tears streamed down from Her quivering lavender eyes. I held Luna until Her body grew cold...”

Oh Goddesses... Goddess. Luna have mercy on Your Sister.

“...and then, stricken with grief, I flew away. I abandoned dead Canterlot, letting the shield fall, unleashing a fatal flood on the poor towns below.”

Applesnack died, I recalled painfully, in the seconds that followed. He hadn’t seen Celestia’s flight from the Royal Castle, but that could be forgiven. He was focused on the horrific wave of pink coming to consume him.

As terrible and painful as Her confessions were, Celestia was not finished. “I... I was blind with grief, with the loss of My Sister. But as I flew over Whitetail Woods, I saw zebra megaspell missiles, three of them, heading towards Canterlot. The zebras were not content to murder Luna; they intended to obliterate the city that had become Her grave. To wipe the entire mountain off the map. To utterly *erase* Her...”

I remembered the words of SteelHooves: *I heard rumors in the days after the apocalypse that after the shield fell, the zebras launched megaspells to finally obliterate the city. But if that is true, then those missiles never reached their destination.*

Whitetail Wood.

Kage used t' call it the most poisoned place in Equestria.

Timidly, I heard myself squeak, "What did you do?"

"I destroyed them," Celestia said, her sad voice taking on a hard edge, "My grief turned to rage, and I tore them apart. Reduced them to dust as I flew between them."

Good for You! the little pony in my head said with an angry stomp.

The blade of anger evaporated from her voice, leaving only regret. "The winds carried the radiation and poison of those weapons across all of Whitetail Wood, covering Equestria's once beautiful forest and poisoning the reservoir. All the way to the edge of Ponyville."

As Celestia spoke, my thoughts traveled back to my first minutes outside the Stable -- to just how sick and poisoned Sweet Apple Acres had been, the very ground making my PipBuck click.

"My rage..." Celestia bemoaned. "When it left me, I felt like I had been stripped of My flesh, My heart. My soul was raw. And... I was afraid." The expression on Celestia's face was unfathomable. "I was dying, and I was afraid."

I wanted to hug Her. To bury my head in Her royal white coat and weep. For Her. For Luna. For everything.

"I should have let Myself die," Celestia said. "That way, at least, I could have been with Luna. But I didn't. I was selfish. I've lived so long that death, ending, was alien and horrifying to me. So instead, I let my cowardice bring Me here..."

Here. The Single Pegasus Project.

"That's not cowardice," I offered earnestly. "That's... normal." The idea of anything about the Goddesses being normal was jarring to me. "We all fear death. That's part of being a pony." With a second thought, I added, "It's part of being alive."

Celestia seemed mildly thankful for my effort. "...and as a reward, I have been trapped here, in My prison, My purgatory. Listening to the victims of My sins, unable to act. Unable to help." She seemed to look past me, Her gaze shifting across the bones. "I've done what I could to prevent anypony from becoming like me. And to prevent those camped outside from gaining access to this place."

I opened my muzzle. Tried to say something, to protest, to find some way to console Her. She listened for a moment before gently cutting me off. Instead, a voice I had heard months ago filled the Winter Vestibule.

"Hello? Is there anypony out there?" the long-dead stallion asked, his voice heavy with resignation. He didn't really expect the help I knew he would never receive. *"Please, we need help! I was bringing my family to the Stable up near Sweet Apple Acres when we were attacked by raiders. Only my son and I survived. We made it to the Stable, but it's still sealed up. There is no way inside. My son, he ate one of the apples from those damned apple trees up near the Stable, and now he's terribly sick. Too sick to move. We've holed up in the cistern near the old memorial. We're running out of food and medical supplies. Please, if anypony hears this, help us... Message repeats."*

I was struck by a ghost of the realization I first had hearing it. The unnamed father had already lost hope, and by the time he made that recording, he was just going through the motions.

And Celestia had been hearing that broadcast, reciting the death of a colt from the poisons She had spread across Whitetail Wood, playing over and over again for who knew how many years. Until I came along and shut it down.

I broke down crying.

Celestia wept with me.

"You are not like those camped outside," She repeated when my resolve to complete my mission overrode my sorrow and I finally began to wipe my tears.

I knew She must have meant the Enclave. It struck me as odd that She wouldn't have known who I was when I first appeared. She didn't seem aware of the battle raging just beyond the shield, or the purpose of my appearance.

All I can do is watch and listen. Until, sometimes, I cannot bear to watch any more.

"Celestia," I asked gently. "When did You stop watching?"

Her answer should not have surprised me.

Friendship City.

It had been the Equestrian Wasteland's darkest hour. If I had been watching, unable to help, I believe I would have averted my gaze too.

It took me a few minutes to fill Celestia in on what She had missed.

"What... what did happen to You?" I finally asked, my voice cautious. I tried to brace myself for whatever answer would come. I needed to know, but I didn't think I could bear hearing of even more of my Celestia's pain. "How is it that You are here? Like this?"

My first assumption would have been that Celestia had entered the control pod Herself. But if She had, wouldn't She have done a long time ago what I intended to do now? And hadn't the Ministry of Awesome's systems confirmed that the Central Hub was empty?

"I came here," Celestia told me. "I knew My body was dying. But I knew of the Crusader Maneframes, of the chance for continued life they offered. So I came here." She looked askance. "Part of Me had hoped that, in taking control of this place, I would be able to help all my little ponies. That I could still do some good to try to make up for my failures. But when I downloaded Myself into the Maneframe, I found Myself trapped. Helpless. I have control over a few security systems, but that is all. I can only listen and watch."

Downloaded?

My forehooves raised to my muzzle as I gasped.

None of that download-your-brain nonsense, Rainbow Dash had explained to Luna. I had them disconnect all that stuff. I want a living pony running Equestria's weather, not some machine that thinks it's a pony!

"Rainbow Dash... Apple Bloom..." I said weakly. "Celestia... they disconnected the mental download system from the controls. That was part of the design." I had known this, but I had imagined they would have removed that part of the Crusader Maneframe completely, not left it intact but severed.

Spike had once asked me: *Have you ever heard the old saying 'The portal to hell is opened with the incantation of good intentions'? If there was a moral to their story, I guess that would be it.*

"I know that now," Celestia said mournfully. She had made a mistake. A simple, understandable mistake with numbingly tragic consequences.

It was the story of Equestria's fall in miniature. DJ Pon3's words rang in my head. The one great reality of the Wasteland, the truth of the matter: *every pony has done something they regret.*

The rational part of my mind reared up. If that was what had happened, then this wasn't really Celestia I was talking to. It was just a program. Just the illusion of memories. Downloading your mind into a Crusader Maneframe doesn't actually put *you* into the computer. It just makes a copy of your brain. The only way that...

I thought of Elder Cottage Cheese and his unholy intentions. He had planned to truly live forever by not only turning the Crusader Maneframe into a duplicate of his mind, but then transferring his very soul into the machine. Using it as a soul jar.

My face rose towards Celestia, my eyes opening in terrible realization as Rarity's words once again whispered through my mind.

I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia.

Princess Celestia had, for a limited time, been in possession of the Black Book.

"You..." I stared, aghast.

"Yes," Celestia confirmed regretfully, not even needing to hear the question. "The spells were so easy to learn that I knew them the moment I opened those pages. And how could I have resisted just a look?"

I felt a black chill.

"When you live as long as I have, boredom becomes an enemy," She explained. "In its own way, as dangerous to me as Discord. Especially when I was alone."

Celestia sighed. "In the centuries after I banished Nightmare Moon, I turned to learning everything I could about the mysterious, the secret and the forbidden. I even learned tidbits of zebra alchemy and dragon magic -- those few things which a pony such as Myself could possibly perform. Later, I even built a school to teach the things I had learned which were safe."

Dragon magic? Was that how She sent scrolls back to Spike? I couldn't help but ask.

"Yes," She told me with a nostalgic smile. "I learned that from the dragon you now know as Mouse." She continued, "The secrets of the Black Book were a temptation that played on centuries of habit."

No wonder the shield around the S.P.P. Central Hub was so invulnerable. No wonder it had lasted so long. It was being powered by Celestia's *soul*.

Another thought occurred to me: this was it, then. I was never getting out. Not that I had ever intended or expected to. In the very least, I couldn't leave until the threat of the Enclave was dismantled entirely. It did no good to end the war today if it just started again tomorrow. Still, the reality of my eternal incarceration was like a heavy blanket.

Yet I held my head up. I would never see my friends again. I was going to be hated and villainized by the pegasi. But it was all going to be worth it to bring the sunlight back to Equestria. To stop the Enclave...

...hell, it would be worth it just for Silver Bell to get to see real rainbows.

I stepped towards the small door. My only regret was that I wouldn't be with Homage again. That I wouldn't be able to hold her one last time.

I stopped, looking up at the screens. "Can I see them?" I asked. "My friends? From in here?"

"Of course, my little pony."

My heart leapt, the little pony in my head bouncing about with unexpected anticipation. My first instinct was to ask about Homage. But I had a friend for which I felt a much more pressing concern.

"Please, Celestia," I begged. "Show me Ditzzy Doo. Show me what happened to her. I need to know if she's alright."

Princess Celestia vanished, Her image replaced by scenes of the battle for Fillydelphia. Each monitor showed footage recorded by the S.P.P. towers, two showing recent events while the third played in real time.

I watched as Ditzzy Doo, like a golden-green light of hope, rose out of the Fillydelphia crater and flew up through the clouds. And I watched as she came back, her sonic radboom clearing the skies over Fillydelphia, allowing the rays of Celestia One to strike. I watched as she fell. And I cheered when Lionheart caught her.

On the central screen, I could see Ditzzy Doo, right now standing on the overturned hulk of a chariot, gazing wall-eyed over a sea of scrambling slave-ponies, her blackboard in her teeth:

This way to freedom and muffins.

Beyond her, a gaping hole had been torn in the wall, the wreckage from the barrier used to bridge the moat of toxic sludge. Lionheart was standing beside the passage to freedom. Near his hooves, a dozen monsters from the sludge-moat lay dead, their pink-tainted corpses surrounding a triumphant-looking white fieldmouse.

"Thank Celestia!" I said without thinking.

Then, blushing, I asked, "Show me Xenith?"

The screens changed. I watched my zebra friend infiltrate Fillydelphia until she had reached Stern. I saw the fight that began on the rooftop of the Ministry of Morale and that ended on a gabled rooftop on the far side of the city.

I looked on as, right now, Xenith lay bleeding and barely conscious under the cover of a cave formed from rubble as her daughter, the doctor of Glyphmark, tended to her wounds. In the background, the sky erupted with light as a concentrated sunbeam flared down from the heavens and detonated an Enclave bombing wagon.

If Celestia One was working, then that gave me hope for my other friends as well. "Could you show me Reggie, please? And Life Bloom?"

The monitors replayed the sight of Gawd's griffins clearing the sky over Tenpony Tower, interspersed with glimpses of the Twilight Society. (Celestia was somehow able to show me inside the megaspell chamber!) The left-hoof monitor was showing Gawd and Reggie as they flew towards the roof of Tenpony Tower, supporting a wounded Blackwing between them.

"If I do become Arbiter of a New Canterlot Republic," Gawd was telling the wounded griffin, "I would be honored to have you as co-council."

"Don't you think you should choose a pony for that?" Blackwing suggested. "You wouldn't want to give the impression that Equestria is under griffin control."

It took me a moment to realize that they were missing someone.

I turned to the other monitors in time to watch the fight begin. I felt a sharp pain as I looked at Butcher and realized she wasn't going to survive. I gasped when Reggie was struck by the poisonous tail. And whooped when she shot back up through the clouds with *Little Gilda*.

"Who would you suggest then?" Gawd asked on the left screen as the surviving trio neared the rooftop. A pony galloped out onto the roof to greet them.

I heard Reggie's voice. "Life Bloom?"

"Enough," I said with a wave of my hoof, not needing to see any more. Those who survived the fight would recover, but we had taken losses. I knew we would, but that didn't lessen the hurt. If anything, we had gotten lucky that it wasn't much, much worse. "Show me Velvet Remedy?"

On the central screen, the beautiful, charcoal-coated unicorn was singing into a headset as she trotted between wounded Enclave soldiers lined up inside the protective barrier generated by several green alicorns. She had set up a triage for the enemy, helping out everypony wounded in the battle. As I watched, a purple alicorn teleported inside the shield, bearing another fallen soldier. Velvet Remedy interrupted her song once again, rushing to the wounded pegasi's aid.

The side-monitors displayed how Velvet Remedy had taken over broadcast center. Without a shot fired or a pony wounded.

I had never felt more proud. Joyous.

And yet, my knees felt weak and a nervous sweat broke out over my body as I asked timidly, "Celestia, please... show me Homage."

This time, only one screen lit up with a view of the wasteland. Celestia reappeared on the other two, watching me tenderly.

I could see contrails of black smoke in the sky. The camera shifted downward, zooming in on a ridge of rock. Amongst the rocks was a small cave, little more than an indentation, that somepony had built ramshackle walls into, and sparse furniture, all scaled for very small ponies. A little sign was nailed to the front, the word clearly painted by a young foal.

ROCKOPOLIS

No fillies allowed!

Through the almost-rectangular window, I could see a very dirty, very haggard Homage, her mane in filthy, tangled strings, curled up amongst a few empty cans of centuries-old tomato paste. Hiding.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe.

Then, impossibly, Homage shifted. She looked up. Right up at the camera that was high on a tower so far away that she couldn't possibly see it.

Her muzzle opened. And she mouthed the words: "I love you, Littlepip."

I broke down crying again.

"Homage has been using the towers for a long time," Celestia reminded me. "She knows them." And somehow, my Homage... the mare who had seen ghosts, found weapons from space and had encounters with strange ponies who lived in blue boxes... could feel that she was being actively watched.

My horn glowed and I floated up to the monitor, pressing my hooves against it, just trying to be closer. "I made it," I told her. "I burned alive, but I'm okay."

"She can't hear you," Celestia said.

I lowered my hooves, still floating next to the screen as I drank in the sight of the mare I loved.

With that, Celestia informed me, "I could send you back."

A portal of green dragon fire erupted in the room behind me.

"Back to Spike. You could be with her tonight."

"What?!" I fell back to the floor with a thud. I *couldn't* have heard that right.

But I had. The green fire behind me, Celestia explained, was like that which She had once used to send messages through Spike. Once I burned to death again, Spike would literally burp me out, alive and whole. Indescribably painful but... efficient. And a little bit gross.

"Now that you know how to get here through dragon fire, you can return to your friends and your loved ones," Celestia offered me. "You

can go, help them with their fight, and send someone else in your place tomorrow. You don't have to do this anymore."

The image of Homage flickered away, replaced by the sight of Celestia's gentle, caring eyes.

"You deserve to be happy."

I found myself faced with two choices: the small door that led deeper into the S.P.P. or another death by dragonfire, this one able to send me back to my friends.

It was almost too much.

"I can't!" I told Her, almost wailing. "We'll never get this close again. The Enclave is too strong. They'll regroup... and if we don't win today, they won't give us a second chance."

"The magic of Spike's fire is not short range, Littlepip," Celestia claimed. "You don't have to get this close again."

I rocked on my hooves. That was true. And I wanted so much to be with Homage again. To be with all my friends. I didn't want the life I had grown to love, despite all the pain and the horror, to end here.

That's natural, my little pony echoed.

I thought of my talk with Velvet Remedy two days ago. How could I ask from somepony else what I wouldn't give myself?

Especially, my little pony added, *when it means asking them to die for you. Even if it might only be temporary.*

"Everypony I know..." Of the ones I could entrust something like this to, at least. "...they all deserved to be happy too. Just as much, or more, than I do."

I stared at the monitor where Homage had whispered her love, and I thought of what Homage would say. I couldn't help but snicker as I realized she would probably ask if I'd been staring at Celestia's flank.

Celestia raised an eyebrow as I began to giggle.

I giggled because I knew what Homage would say if she could see me now. She wouldn't beg me to step through that fire. She wouldn't ask me to be with her at the cost of another.

Nor would she feel the need to push me to stay. All the things she had to say on that subject she had already said last night. She'd trust me to make the right decision. No need to hammer the point.

"You're laughing?"

I nodded, failing to stifle a chortle. "Because I know if Homage was here, she'd probably tell me: Don't do anything too naughty with the Goddess until I can figure out how to make it a threesome."

Celestia's eyes went wide. As I realized what I had just said aloud, and to whom, my face broke into the fiercest blush. But Celestia's expression caused me to collapse in laughter.

"You have... an interesting mare-friend," was all Celestia could manage to say.

It took me a moment to recover, wiping tears of an entirely different sort from my eyes. I knew what I had to do. On the other side of the shield, Spike believed he had killed me. I couldn't imagine what he might be feeling, or how he would react when my friends rejoined him. I couldn't leave him like that.

Concentrating, I floated up the clipboard, searching for ink. Finding none, I shattered the Sunrise Sarsaparilla bottle with a hoof and used one of the shards of glass to draw blood, ignoring the slight pain (compared to burning alive, a small cut was *nothing*), and using my blood to write a message:

Dear Spike,

I'm alive.

I'm inside with Celestia.

Thank you. I'm very, very, very sorry. Please, some day, forgive me.

Littlepip

PS: It hurt a LOT.

Without a word, I sent the message back through the portal.

Celestia watched in silence. When I was done, She smiled at me. "I'm proud of you, Littlepip. But I'm holding the fire open for you."

"Why?"

"Because I know now where I've seen you. Twilight's last act was to save you," Celestia informed me. "Was it for this? For you to give up your life just a week later?"

She who I had worshipped as a Goddess was trying to dissuade me from my mission. Not because I was not worthy, but because I was worth too much?

"Life is a gift," I told Her. "I'm not so selfish as to ask anypony else to give theirs up so I don't have to."

"Life," Celestia remarked sadly, "is not always a gift. And death is inevitable. Or, at least it should be. Even my Sister died." The melancholy in her voice was unbearable. "That's the real evil of the Black Book. It changes that. It steals death from you and calls it a gift. It's lying. I've lived so long, alone, watching ponies die. I've seen more than you could know. Please, trust Me when I say that the ponies you save by sacrificing yourself will die soon anyway."

I couldn't believe my ears. This was not the Celestia that I worshipped. "What are You saying?"

"I'm saying... isn't it better for the gift of a slightly longer life to be given to those who have truly earned it, who deserve it most? Isn't it better to hold onto those you love?"

As hurtful as it was to hear these words from the One who was supposed to be my gentle and loving Goddess, She... wasn't without a point.

"And if the war I allow to continue today should kill Homage tomorrow?" I asked, "Or kill the pony another loves, somepony else's

Homage? How could I live with that? And how deserving would I be of another day? How could You even ask?"

"I..." I could hear the undercurrent of pain in Celestia's voice. "I suppose I've always played favorites."

I thought of her favorite student. "And... what would Twilight Sparkle do, if given this choice?" I felt immediately awful for invoking Twilight, realizing how much that must hurt Her. What right did I have? Particularly after what I had done?

Celestia fell silent. I wondered if I had driven Her away (for whatever quality of "away" Her prison allowed Her).

"When Twilight was younger, she wanted to do what you are doing. She wanted to brave the Everfree Forest alone. To not risk anypony else," Celestia told me. "Her friends would not let her. After that? I'm not sure. I'd like to believe that she'd stay with her friends, and they would work a way through it together. But..." But the Ministries.

I felt a flare of protective anger. Was Celestia suggesting my friends had failed me? Or was I reading too much into those words?

"But her friends," I pointed out, "were also willing to step back and allow her to do what she had to do. Even if that meant, for a moment, leaving her vulnerable."

"And you know what happened," Celestia replied gently. "Twilight was always weakest when separated from her friends. And you will be too."

I felt the presence of the statuettes in my saddlebags. They were stronger together. Better.

Oh! Ooooh. Oh, Goddesses... or Goddess, as the case seemed to be.

I began to understand. Not just what Celestia was saying, but why She was saying it. I began to grasp why Celestia had become so different from the Goddess whom I prayed to.

"Celestia..." I began cautiously, "How long have you been without your friends? How long have you been alone?"

Again, Celestia was silent. Then, after a long and somber pause, She answered. "Longer than I've been here."

"You don't have to be anymore."

"Littlepip..." The eyes of the alicorn on the screens widened.

"No pony should be alone, Celestia." Not even one like you. "Ponies need friends. They need the... the magic of friendship. Without it..." I trailed off. The ponies of Equestria had lost their sun in more ways than one. But I could change that.

"I'm here. And I'm not leaving you."

Celestia said nothing.

The green flames evaporated.

The small door unlocked and opened, revealing a short hallway leading to another door. Inside the hallway, a small alcove held the download device. The metal helmet, encrusted with lights and gems, was laying next to the long-horned skull of a large, winged pony skeleton.

Celestia's skeleton.

I took a few steps forward, then stopped. Focusing, I wrapped the bones of Princess Celestia in my magic and floated them out into the Winter Vestibule.

"Please," Celestia asked, "As you did for My Sister."

It took me a little while to find a way to set the bones on fire, but eventually the pyre crackled. I realized I would need to do the same for each of the skeletons in here before I settled into the control pod. But I could burn them all together. Celestia's bones deserved the honor of their own fire.

Sitting beneath the monitors, I watched the funeral, Celestia watching with me.

I was startled when a mechanical whine started somewhere in the Central Hub and hidden fans began to suck the smoke from the room, replenishing the Winter Vestibule with fresh, summer air. Between the

fire and the air, the enchanted frost began to melt and the fog on the ground faded away.

Finally, I stood up again. It was time.

As I walked into the hallway, Celestia opened the final door.

The Crusader Maneframe of the Single Pegasus Project reminded me of a tree. The large, central stalk glistened with running lines of mystical energy. Lights blinked in arcane sequences along branches that stretched out from the trunk, connecting to smaller maneframes that lined the walls. The metal oval of the control pod was nestled amongst root-like conglomerations of wires,. It struck me simultaneously as being like an egg, fallen from a nest and cracked, and a rabbit hole, dug into the base of a tree, leading mysterious places.

Three other doors marked cardinal points. The writing above them claimed they lead to the Spring, Summer and Autumn Vestibules.

A stray memory fluttered through my head like an errant butterfly.

Okay, here's another one, Spike had said, telling us stories of his long-gone friends, the Ministry Mares. *This is the story about Twilight Sparkle's first Winter Wrap-Up.*

What's a Winter Wrap-Up? Calamity had asked just before the shaken-up Sparkle~Cola I had passed to him hosed his face.

I chuckled as I remembered his expression.

In the aftermath, Spike had explained that, normally in Equestria, the changing of the seasons had been accomplished in part by magic. Later, I had heard Rainbow Dash bemoan the need to abandon the war effort once a year to help with Winter Wrap-Up.

Somehow, I had forgotten the scope of what the Single Pegasus Project was designed to do.

One part of Winter Wrap-Up, the part Applejack had always been in charge of, was planting seeds for the next year's crops. Even that, I realized, was under the Single Pegasus Project's purview. That was, in

fact, part of what the Enclave had hacked into, altering it to fit their needs. Cloud seeding.

This was going to be a *big* responsibility.

I lifted the hatch to the control pod, looking inside at what would be my new home. The interior was plush, comfortable. Like a cloud, but solid. Just in case the operator wasn't a pegasus, I suspected. Likely thanks to the oversight of Apple Bloom.

The headset looked an awful lot like the one in the hall. But there were enough differences to distinguish the two. No flashing lights. Quite a few more gems.

I concentrated, my magic unfastening my saddle bags and letting them drop to the floor. As I removed my armor, I opened those bags for the last time, floating out the small number of keepsakes I had brought with me. Treasures full of memories and ghosts.

Calamity's hat. The Fluttershy Orb from Velvet Remedy. The drawing by Silver Bell. Gifts from my friends.

One by one, I set them down in a circle on the interior edge of the control pod. I wanted them close to me while I "slept".

Little Macintosh. The statuettes of the Ministry Mares.

Never did learn what finally happened to Rainbow Dash, the little pony in my head mused. Probably for the best. It's good that there are still some mysteries.

The ashes of the filly from Friendship City.

And finally, Orb #8.

That last one I set next to the headgear. The very last thing I would do before closing the hatch and sliding into a controlled coma was to watch it. I knew it would take precious time, but never seeing it was one sacrifice I wasn't willing to make.

I wasn't a *paragon* of my virtue, after all.

I looked at Calamity's hat. The memory from our first visit to Spike's cave had reminded me that there was one friend I hadn't looked in on yet.

"Please, Celestia, if you would," I asked as I trotted back out into the Winter Vestibule, "show me Calamity."

The screens changed to pictures of frantic battle. On one screen, Calamity was dodging pursuit as he tried to plant explosives in the New Hope Solar Array. On another, he was facing off with an Enclave officer in some sort of store room. On the third...

Spike flew across the screen, the camera turning to track him. Between two of his clawtips, I could see he was clutching the clipboard.

I heard the explosive report of Spitfire's Thunder. Calamity was strapped onto Spike's back with rope, as was the hellhound Barkin' Saw. My pegasus friend's wing had been inexpertly wrapped in healing bandages; he'd overstrained the healing limb and now it wasn't working at all.

Together, Calamity and the hellhound sharpshooter were sniping incoming missiles before they could reach the dragon.

"If Li'l pip's okay, then let's get Velvet an' get outta here!" Calamity shouted as he fought to reload. "Fall back t' y'all-know-where."

Blood dribbled from Spike's destroyed eye. A painful grimace crossed his bloodied snout. "The Enclave know me," he growled despondently. "They know where I live. Soon as word gets out, they're going to retaliate." Calamity understood the severity of Spike's tone when he said, "They'll hit the cave. With everything they can."

My heart skipped a beat. The Gardens of Equestria!

"Ayep," Calamity said grimly. "That's why we pull everythin' we got back there. Form a line o' defense." As Spike banked to avoid a barrage of plasma fire, each bolt wider than a pony, Calamity scrambled not to drop the anti-machine rifle. "All we gotta do is keep 'em out 'till Li'l pip can clear the clouds. After that, we got Celie-One as a defense!"

I felt a surge of panic and fought it back down. It would be hours before they even got back to Spike's cave. Longer before the Enclave could regroup. But the sense of urgency that I had somehow allowed to slip had returned in full force.

"Celestia," I asked, realizing how much there would be to do. "Will you help me?"

"Of course, Littlepip."

I walked out of the Winter Vestibule and back into the small hallway. I paused at the alcove with the downloader.

"They won't understand," I said, realizing it not for the first time. "The pegasi especially. They won't understand why." Not that it mattered. I was trying to do the right thing for everypony, for *everyone*, the only way I knew how.

I heard Scootaloo's voice in my memories.

This isn't our Equestria anymore! It's not the happy, safe, pleasant world any of us grew up in. I don't understand how it could have gotten this way. H-how... how it c-c-could have gotten this bad! Somepony needs to figure it out! And fix it! And...

And if I have to become the villain of the piece to do that, then I will.

I was Scootaloo. At least a little.

"I'll be able to watch everything, right?" I asked. "Will I be able to talk to them? Or, at least, send a message?"

Celestia was quiet a moment. Then, "Not as the system is now," She informed me, "Or I would have done so long ago. But with a good toaster repairpony, that will be easy to fix."

My ears burned a little but the little pony in my head pranced in glee.

I looked at the download device. It was meant to make a copy of a pony's entire mind in a few hours. How quickly, then, could it make a simple copy of a couple months?

"I want to send a message," I told Celestia as I wrapped the helmet in my magic, turning the download station on. "I want to tell them what really happened. To explain. Even if they never believe me. I owe them all that much."

Again, I asked, "Will you help me?"

Again, the answer, "Of course, my little pony."

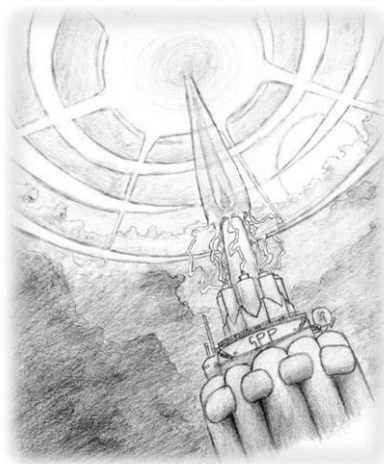
Two months. The copy process should only take minutes. Add an hour for editing and adding in a few thoughts...

I slipped the helmet onto my head and started up the arcano-tech device. I felt the odd sense of mental "pressure" as the device synced up to my brain, and experienced an odd taste, like that of muffin-flavored cake. I took a deep breath as I tried to figure out just how to begin.

Then I began, thinking::

If I'm going to tell you about the adventure of my life -- explain how I got to this place with these people, and why I did what I'm going to do next -- I should probably start by explaining a little bit about PipBucks...

EPILOGUE



OF FORGIVENESS AND FALLOUT

Two weeks!

It's been two weeks since the afternoon that Wastelanders everywhere have come t' call the day of sunshine an' rainbows. The day that massive surges of rainbow light an' sound -- sonic rainbooms -- burst from twenty-three of the great towers, clearin' away the blanket of clouds that had covered the skies above for all our lives, an' the lives of everyone an' everything born after the great war.

For me, there's a memory that will forever symbolize that day: I looked up, watchin' those expanding rings of fantastic rainbow light burst the clouds, sending showers down on the Wasteland. And as I turned my face towards the sun for the very first time, I saw how the misty rainfall sparkled. And then, I spotted a balefire phoenix, her coat a majestic, iridescent emerald an' gold, dancin' an' cavortin' amongst the ephemeral rainbows forming all across the sun-drenched sky.

It was the single most beautiful sight I had seen in my long life.

Thank you, Littlepip. From all of us.

Now children, as you know, the sonic rainbooms also tore most of the remaining Enclave Raptors out o' the sky. The few that remain have returned t' the sides of the Enclave's remaining Thunderheads... and turned their firepower on the pegasus ponies who have risen up t' throw off the Enclave's tyranny.

The war is over, but it would appear that the war was just the prologue t' another bloody chapter in Equestrian history. Civil war tears apart the sky; and here below, the remnants of Red Eye's armies have divided into war camps, each determined t' carve out a swath of the Wasteland as their own little empire, the ground soaked in violence an' the blood of anypony who challenges them.

But this time is different, children. Because this time, we have hope. Hope that the Equestria of tomorrow will actually be a better place than the Equestria of today. And that we may actually know peace in our childrens' lifetime.

Hope brought t' us by our Lightbringer, yes. And more importantly, hope brought t' us by ourselves. By our embrace of our nobler nature. Over the last few weeks, the actions of so many of you have shown more brilliantly than the sun itself, so much that it's made this ol' DJ cry. Children, ol' DJ Pon3 ain't never been prouder of ya.

Now listen up, children. Ol' DJ Pon3's got a message for all you faithful listeners, an' this one's important. The word of the day is "forgiveness".

We've all suffered at the hooves of the Enclave. And I know just how easy it would be t' direct all our hate towards every pony out there with wings. But the Enclave ain't every pegasus. An' even a great many of those in the Enclave weren't keen on what their leaders were doing. Many stood up against them, an' many were murdered for it. We need t' embrace our pegasi sisters an' brothers, welcome them. Things are gonna be hard for them. Hell, hard for all of us. We need t' show love, tolerance an' acceptance. We need t' be the sort of ponies the Stable Dweller trusted an' believed we could be. The sort of ponies you've proven you can be.

Same message goes for the alicorns. They ain't the monsters they used t' be. They're ponies, hurt ones at that. Yes, there are several poisonous apples out

there -- some o' them just don't seem t' know any other way. But most of those alicorns are just lost. They're trying t' figure out who they are, t' reckon their place in this world. (Not unlike a certain little unicorn who stepped hoof out of a Stable less than three months ago.) And there are some, more than just a few, who have chosen t' side with the heroes of the Wasteland. So if you see an alicorn, keep your weapon loaded, but try talking first. You just might find a friend.

Remember, children, it's the one great truth of the Wasteland: we've all done somethin' that we regret. We all need a little forgiveness. And that's the truth of the matter.

And with that said, I've got a special treat for all of you faithful listeners. I have here in the studio Velvet Remedy, here for a rare interview with yours truly. I know I usually farm out interviews t' my number one assistant, but this is a special case. And Homage has been rather busy.

But first, some news!

The fires of Everfree Forest have finally died. Bizarrely, a lot of the forest, the trees at least, seems unharmed. Given time, the undergrowth is likely t' grow back. However, I have it on good authority that the Applejack's Rangers have taken up a project t' convert much of the forest's area t' farmland, pending negotiations with the Children of the Cathedral, a relatively non-hostile band of Red Eye remnants who have made their home in the wreckage of the Thunderhead Overcast.

In related news, hostilities between the Steel Rangers an' their heroic offshoot, the Applejack's Rangers, seem t' have ceased, save for a few localized pockets of fighting. Apparently, the threat of genocide from above has helped put their conflict into perspective.

Fierce battles continue throughout the ruins of Fillydelphia, most notably between Talon mercenaries and the emerging Red Eye remnants' warlords. Unless your checklist of things you need t' do by the end of the day includes violence an' bloody dismemberment, I strongly advise you t' avoid Fillydelphia for the foreseeable future. If you are amongst those civilians still trapped inside the ruins, seek out the nearest Talon not engaged in active

hostilities. If at all possible, the griffin will do her or his best t' get you out of the warzone.

Now, as many of you know from my first return broadcast, all those mysterious towers turn out t' be part of a pre-war weather-control system called the Single Pegasus Project. And that Littlepip, the mare I formerly referred t' only as the Stable Dweller (and other titles), is currently in an induced coma, hooked into that system. Additionally, Celestia Herself is bound, in mind an' soul, into the S.P.P.'s security system. So, I guess everypony who believed that Celestia was up there somewhere looking down on us was right.

And that brings us t' a bit o' good news... and a bit o' bad news.

Ysee, Littlepip was willing t' sacrifice everything she had for all of us. Her friends honor that... but they're doing all they can t' mitigate the price. Cuz that's what friends do. They help each other, best they can.

Despite the best o' efforts, it doesn't appear control o' the Single Pegasus Project's security an' weather-control systems can be integrated. Turns out, even if we had the technology, attempting t' install it would require a full shutdown and tearing 'part several components of the Crusader Maneframe. And... that ain't an option.

The good news, however, is that they've rigged up enhanced communication between the disparate systems. Not only does this mean that Littlepip and Celestia will be able t' share time together, but that both will be able t' periodically converse with us down here as well.

Sunlight and Celestia Herself have been returned t' the Wasteland. Words... they just ain't able t' express the magnitude o' that.

And in further good news... the first message from Littlepip t' all of us has been received. Now, it's a bit of a mess due t' the way it was mentally transcribed, but the Twilight Society's expert in memory magic -- a pony who I will add is a trusted friend -- has taken it upon himself t' sort an' edit the memory dump; an' we expect t' have that message available for everyone livin' in the Wasteland within another two weeks.

(And before you ask, my friend has assured me that the editing being performed will not diminish the message in any way, that it ain't gonna be

a short message by any stretch, but that nopony needs t' know about every time Littlepip ate or had a bowel movement. To my friend, I can only say: I applaud your sacrifice.)

Finally, a bit of personal news: I, your voice in the Wasteland, am going away again. Hopefully, it will not be for as long as my last "vacation", an' it is definitely under better circumstances. You see, children, now that the war is over an' the sky has opened, I've got a quest of my own t' undertake. A role in the Good Fight that demands my personal attention. I'll report in whenever circumstances allow, but this may be the last bit of news you hear for a little while.

Now, I hear some of you faithful listeners askin': hey, DJ Pon3, does this mean Littlepip is up there keepin' an eye on us all the time too, like a new, benevolent Goddess?

Well, I can tell you she wouldn't much care for the comparison, an' the last thing she wants is t' be prayed to. That's not a role she seeks for herself. Plus, I have it on good authority that she'll be gettin' some long an' well-earned rest.

On the other hoof, even though I know she ain't that kinda pony, I'd still hesitate t' throw 'round the ol' "may lightning strike me if" phrase quite so casually now. And I, for one, am already buildin' up my stockpile of colorful Littlepip swears!

An' on that note, I introduce Velvet Remedy! Hello, medical pony! May I call you Velvet?

Of course you may. We're going to be traveling together for a while. Familiarity is expected.

Heh, yes. As it turns out, faithful listeners, Velvet here will be accompanying me on my little sojourn. As will her husband, Calamity: hero of the Battle of Dragon Mountain. How is Calamity doing after his surgery, VR? Can I call you VR?

No. And he's recovering nicely. The implants are compensating for the permanent muscle damage, and I believe that he will regain his full flying capabilities with sufficient exercise and nagging.

Ah yes. The nagging, I suspect, is the most crucial element to recovery.

Did I hear you say “enhanced” communication? Well, that explains it. I thought I heard Homage saying something about the towers, spare parts from Stable Twenty-Nine and... a threesome?

Hey, is it my fault the mare’s a perv?

Not touching that one. And you know why.

Ha! Anyway, let me first say how joyous it was t’ hear your broadcast that morning two weeks ago. Ol’ DJ Pon3 ain’t never been so happy t’ be upstaged.

W-what? I didn’t! You weren’t even...

Whoa. Just a joke. But it’s no joke that your voice was a blessin’ in a pretty dark hour.

Oh! Thank you. I just did what I could.

And from what I hear, you got a little quest of your own that you’re rearin’ t’ take on before we all begin our little adventure. Why don’t you tell us about that?

Yes. We’re going to try to save Fluttershy.

Fluttershy was one of Equestria’s greatest heroes, and eventually became one of the Ministry Mares: the Mare of the Ministry of Peace. She was the gentlest healer and the kindest soul that Equestria has ever known.

Yes, she made mistakes, errors in judgement, that played a role in the apocalypse. But her mistakes were borne of kindness and a genuine effort to save lives. The portal to hell is opened with the incantation of good intentions. And what she has suffered in the last two centuries has been beyond the pale. The punishment has far exceeded any crime.

Tragically, a Wasteland specialty. Fluttershy sounds like the sort of pony the Equestrian Wasteland really needs. What happened? And how can she be saved?

Two centuries ago, she was brutally transformed by killing joke. It may be possible to reverse that cruel magic and save her. For the last week, Xenith has been working on a brew -- a modification of an old recipe to relieve the transformations caused by poison joke -- and it is finally ready.

Morning Frost has volunteered to fly us out. (I don't want Calamity pulling a sky chariot until he has fully recovered.) The fires of Everfree Forest should have cleansed the area of killing joke, but we're not taking any unnecessary chances.

Now Velvet, I hate to bring this up, but it has been two hundred years. What is the chance that this will even work? And even if it does, she might not survive the transformation. She might die of old age the moment she is restored.

We... I know. But Fluttershy deserves our efforts to try. And even in the worst case, she deserves peace. After two hundred years of undeserved torment...

Sorry... please... give me a moment.

Take your time.

I...

Thank you. I'm alright.

Hey, no problem. This is understandably emotional. You were saying?

I was... about to say: just in case, we've created a recording that we are going to play for her before we attempt this. The recording is from all of us... I believe your assistant Homage took part in making it and helped Littlepip and Celestia add their voices as well.

The recording lets Fluttershy know that we love her. And, perhaps more importantly, that for the mistakes she made, she is forgiven.

We're going to play this for her before we try the brew. And afterwards, if we are not successful in saving her, the recording will be integrated into a gravestone marker, set to play once a week, at sunrise, for the next ten years.

That's... kinda beautiful. Of course, I really hope that it isn't necessary.

Again, thank you.

No, VR. For all you've done, and all you're going to do, from all of us in the Equestrian Wasteland: thank you!

In that case, everyone deserves thanks. We all did our part.

And, if I may ask, how are you doing in the wake of it all? I know that, since your return, you've seemed a little... melancholy.

Really? Well...

A lot happened. To me. To you. To Equestria. Can't go through all that and come out the same pony. But that's just... life. Life always changes.

Aaaaand... I'm afraid that's all the time we have today, faithful listeners. Ol' DJ Pon3's got some packin' t' do, an' I need t' program a good week or three o' music before I go. One final announcement: earlier, I was able t' spend some time with Velvet here in my recording studio; and startin' today, Velvet Remedy's Equestrian Anthem will be part of our musical rotation.

Knew you'd enjoy hearin' that!

But for now, I leave you with this song, an ol' favorite. I dedicate this one to Strawberry Lemonade, Amber Waves, and every other pony who gave their lives at the Battle of Dragon Mountain. You stood fast, defending valiantly without even knowing what you were dying to protect. Only trusting that your sacrifice was for the good of all Equestria. Your bravery and loyalty are unparalleled. And I promise you this: you didn't die in vain. Someday very soon... as soon as my little quest is complete... everyone will understand your sacrifice. And history will remember your names with reverence.

Thanks for listening, chiiiiildren!

♪ *"I want to calm the storm, but the war is in your eyes.*

How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?

When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding

And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won't survive?"

♪ *“All things will end in time, this coming storm won’t linger
Why should we live as if there’s nothing more?
So hold me ‘neath the thunderclouds, my heart held in your hooves,
Our love will keep the monsters from our door.”*

♪ *“For I know tomorrow will be a better day.
Yes, I believe tomorrow can be a better day...”*



Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria...
TEN YEARS LATER...

“Then I began, thinking...” she said softly, reading the very last lines of the book. They were also the first lines, although she wasn’t sure if any of her listeners had noticed. The story had come full circle.

These were the moments she lived for. Just spending time with the children. Seeing their eager, attentive faces as she read to them. The reading room was like an island of peace. No worries, no pressures, no ponies seeking her advice or counsel. She had never been comfortable in a position of leadership, but the ponies outside had put her on a pedestal. She hated the spotlight, and she knew she hadn’t earned the trust they put in her. The reading room was one of her favorite retreats.

“...If I’m going to tell you about the adventure of my life -- explain how I got to this place with these people, and why I did what I’m going to do next -- I should probably start by explaining a little bit about PipBucks.”

She gently closed the book, drinking in the tranquility of the ending. Yes, these were the moments she lived for. The peace and quiet before...

“What?” whined the little apricot pegasus sitting in the center of the other foals. “That’s *it*? It can’t end there! That’s a lame way to end the story!”

“Now Thunder Rush...” she began. Rush was Tracker and Mist’s filly, and had inherited her father’s disposition.

“I want action!” Thunder Rush interrupted. “And I want Rainbow Dash!”

A timid yellow unicorn offered, “I kinda like the ending.”

Rush rolled her eyes at her playmate. “You would.”

Well, it was tranquil while it lasted. “Now children...”

“It’s a true story, right?” the yellow unicorn, Flower, asked.

Even as she nodded in response, the filly Thunder Rush promptly disagreed.

“Of course not! It’s *obviously* just a fairy tale. No pony could survive getting shot *that* much!” The filly rolled her eyes again with exaggerated exasperation. “And come on. You don’t really believe there were *that many* monsters in Equestria, do you?”

“Oh, but there were,” she responded, hating to interrupt. “I was there.”

The apricot pegasus just crossed her forelegs and sat down with a harrumph.

One of the colts in the back, a brown and white spotted foal, piped up, “Were you really a tree?”

She took a deep breath, fortifying herself to face the question that always came after this one. "Yes, Cliff. It's true."

She heard curiosity in Flower's voice as the filly asked, "What was it like to be a tree?" And there it was. The question.

"I don't want to talk about it," Fluttershy said, the words feeling rehearsed. There were things she couldn't think about too much. And her time as a tree was high on her list of forbidden thoughts.

"Now why don't you all go out and play," she suggested.

Most of the colts and fillies didn't need to be told twice. The far doors swung open, letting in a dazzling blast of sunlight. A miniature stampede left the reading room almost vacant in seconds. She blinked, realizing that little Cliff had stayed behind. The colt galloped up to her on his tiny hooves and threw his forelegs around her. She fought back the urge to jump away and hide.

"You're the best storyteller, Miss Fluttershy!" he said happily. "Thank you for the story!"

Then the colt too was drawn by the pull of the midday sun and scampered off to join his friends.

Fluttershy stood in place for a moment staring out the open doors at the mission and at Junction Town beyond. These ponies, they called themselves the Followers of the Apocalypse. They knew of her past, her great mistakes, but they neither hid from the truth nor hated her for it. Instead, they embraced it as a lesson. And still, astoundingly, looked to her with a reverence she found uncomfortable.

Still, if she was going to be given a position of authority, she was going to use it. She'd spent two hundred years unable to do anything to help anyone. No more. She just... had to do better this time. And this time, she was going to stay close to her friends so that they could help her.

She spotted the Followers' leader, Velvet Remedy. The charcoal-coated unicorn looked her way, smiling. She lifted a forehoof and waved. Fluttershy waved timidly back, her eyes catching the ornate golden PipBuck, encrusted with a nightingale-shaped gemstone, on Velvet

Remedy's foreleg. She remembered when that had been a necklace. Her necklace.

She found herself smiling, happy it had found a new Bearer. Although it had taken her a while to grasp the somewhat abrasive mare as a beacon of kindness.

She wasn't surprised that the Element had taken a new form. After all, before it was a necklace, it had been a heavy, round rock. And the book did help explain why the Elements chose this new appearance.

Fluttershy picked up the book in her mouth and walked over to the bookshelf.

The Book of Littlepip was a good book, she thought, despite some of the darker parts that she had to skim over when reading it to the kids. The book had helped her understand things, answered many questions.

Xenith's potion had reversed the curse of the killing joke, restoring her physically to how she had been just before it touched her. But her mind...

It had taken years for her to recover, and she had only been able to find herself again, to put herself back together, thanks to the constant attention and help of her friends -- both her new friends and her old ones.

Velvet Remedy had been right. The little statues of her friends had helped her put herself back together. Without them, she probably would have remained broken, insane, forever. The statuettes of her friends were the second set like that she had been given in her life. The first was from Rarity. The ones she had now were from Velvet Remedy. With them, she could weather the loss of her friends. And it felt sometimes like they were still right there with her. Sometimes, in her sleep, they would stand by her against the monsters that lurked in her head.

She hadn't understood how or why until Velvet Remedy had given her *The Book of Littlepip*. Now, thanks to the book, she knew. It was,

however, rather disconcerting to know that there were little statuettes of her out there somewhere, radiating the essence of her soul.

The statuettes were in her saddleboxes. She took them wherever she went, taking them out only to put them on the mantle above her bed at night before she slept. With Angel.

The eternally petrified form of her dearest pet and longest friend watched over her each night, guarding her. It was maybe macabre, maybe somewhat unhealthy, but she slept better with him there. He kept the nightmares away.

As she slid the book back into its place on the bookshelf, she again thought that, yes, it was a good book. Deeply painful at times. But it was nice to feel like she knew Littlepip. So many of her new friends did, and (despite some of her bad times) she seemed like such a nice pony.

Fluttershy had tried to talk to Littlepip once. But even being in one of the tower stations made her very uncomfortable. The Single Pegasus Project, she had to admit, freaked her out. Littlepip had called it “peaceful”, but Fluttershy had panic attacks at the mere thought of the place -- of being trapped, unable to move, watching helplessly.

She felt her heart racing and shoved the memory away. That place was on her list of things not to think about too much. Sometimes, her mind was like a minefield. She had to be careful where she stepped.

Still, she had recovered. Mostly. It had taken years, yes.

She smiled a little, the sort of smile you could only manage looking back on something from a great distance. Her well-intentioned friends had swiftly taken her to Spike’s cave, thinking it would help her to be with someone she knew.

Two hundred years as a tree had done nothing to dampen her phobia of dragons.

Of course, she hadn’t recognized him. He’d grown up! And, true, she’d seen him grown up once before, but that was an unnatural and temporary growth, not like the real thing. He looked completely different. He had wings, for one thing.

"I'm sorry I scared you," she remembered Spike saying one day after she'd finally been able to more than squeak and cower in response. "It was the eyepatch, wasn't it? Dammit, I was going for 'jaunty'. But I think it just makes me look like a raider."

It had not been the eyepatch. If anything, the eyepatch was... nice. Made him look dapper. She told him so.

Fluttershy lowered her nose and nudged the book fully into place.

Yes, she thought for a third time, it was a good book. Sometimes, though, she thought it had a bad title. In her mind, it was more than just the story of a single mare. It was a story of Equestria. The Equestria that had been, the Equestrian Wasteland is, and the hopes for the New Equestria that was beginning to bloom.

"Maybe the story should have Equestria in its name?" she asked herself.

More than that, it was the story of the birth of the fledgling forces of good in the Equestrian Wasteland. The New Canterlot Republic, the Applejack's Rangers, even the Followers of the Apocalypse had their origins in this story.

And she shouldn't forget the Twilight Society whose megaspell had turned them into a superpower in the Wasteland. They were good and helpful ponies too. Mostly. Usually.

Fluttershy crossed the reading room and stepped out into the pure sunlight that poured down on Junction Town. She blinked, adjusting to the brightness as she felt the warmth of the sun penetrate her feathers and coat.

Ahead and to the left, Velvet Remedy was talking to some of the medical ponies near the clinic. To her right, the laughter of the playing children tickled the air. Straight ahead, at the far wall of the mission, she spotted Palette and her apprentice Silver Bell. The older mare was guiding the adolescent unicorn as she used her magic put the finishing touches on a stained-glass window. Fluttershy guessed the window was for the New Canterlot castle.

She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath. The scents of dust and lavender trees mixed with a hint of rosewood and cinnamon from Brandy's cookhouse.

"Ohh, smell that air!" she said softly to her friends in her saddleboxes. It was the smell of everything being good in the world.

She turned to watch the children. Thunder Rush's little brother was pestering the apricot pegasus. She tilted her ears to catch the conversation.

"I can name all the presidents of the New Canted-lots Republic!" the little one boasted, so cute he made Fluttershy snicker.

"Pfft," Rush said, blowing her sibling off. "That's easy. There's only been two. Try something harder."

The tiny colt tried again, "um... I can name all the Princesses of Old Equestria!"

"Ugh. Equally easy isn't harder."

Fluttershy sighed, shaking her head, and took a step.

She eeped as a young voice cried out, "Hey, Fluttershy!"

Turning, she saw the pink alicorn filly fly up unsteadily, her face wide and smiling. "Oh, hello Surprise," Fluttershy greeted her. Surprise was the third alicorn to be successfully birthed, and the first alicorn to have a coat that wasn't blue, green or purple.

"Look what I can do!" the alicorn filly beamed happily.

Her little face scrunched in concentration. Her horn flickered and began to glow, small sparks erupting from its tip. A blob of magical energy formed above the little alicorn; it melted down around her, forming a magical shield. The fragile magical sphere lasted only a moment before popping like a soap bubble, but the alicorn's eyes looked up with glee.

"Oh that's very good, Surprise!" Fluttershy cooed. "You're getting ever so much better. Your parents must be *so* proud."

Still, she couldn't help but suppress an involuntary shudder, her eyes drifting towards the mountains... and towards Glyphmark. She knew better than to worry. Xenith, of all zebras, wouldn't allow them to be anything but extra cautious. Still, the brew they created to turn alicorns male, the potion that allowed them to breed, required extract of *killing joke* as an ingredient. And that meant the Angels were *cultivating* it over there.

No. No. No. Stop thinking about things on the list. You know it's not healthy.

Surprise squeaked in delight and fluttered away seeking another adult to show off to.

Fluttershy slowly walked down the cobblestone street that wove through the mission. She passed Brandy trotting the other way, pulling a cart of vegetables from the gardens. She exchanged greetings with the young cook, feeling fleetingly disappointed that she wouldn't get to taste the soup and salad being planned for tonight. But she wasn't going to be here.

The Equestrian Wasteland was producing enough food now for its population to begin to prosper, ponies and non-ponies alike. Three years ago, Littlepip had cleared the last of the cloud curtain. Her continued habitation in the Celestia Hub being as much out of dedication to a promise as it was for psychological and physiological concerns. (The former she empathized with all too well; the latter regarded the small mare's development of a constitutional weakness, her multiple exposures to Pink Cloud and broadcasters having taken their toll.) Plus, while not constantly minded, the weather still needed to be regulated so that the farms could run at maximum production. And sadly, it would probably be generations before the rest of Equestria was willing to trust the weather to the pegasi again.

Yes, food was no longer a necessity that ponies needed to struggle or bleed for. The New Canterlot Republic ensured that the bounty was distributed generously to all, and the Talons kept the farms and

caravans safe from gangs and other marauders who would attempt to seize control.

Rather, the national concern had turned once again to power. The Gardens of Equestria had given back their farmlands, but had stripped them of the radioactive materials necessary to run Red Eye's engines. For now, most of the energy used by the NCR was generated from devices drawing on star batteries (a donation from Calamity, she had been told). But these resources were finite and heavily strained; the needs of the nation would soon far exceed the limited power they could produce.

Fluttershy cringed at the notion that Equestria's power might soon become dependant on irradiated rocks and other materials that could only be found in foreign lands. She'd seen the land she loved go down that road before. It did not end well.

Getting *Aqua Cura* was bad enough.

Several field mice scampered across the street. Fluttershy flapped her wings, lifting her hooves off the cobblestones, giving them space to pass. An iridescent bird of golden and emerald plumage shot down out of the sky, snatching one of them up. The balefire phoenix shot into the air, lifting up ten yards, and dropped her prey onto the stones below, the fall breaking the little mouse's back.

"oh... h-hello, Ph... Pyrelight," Fluttershy squeaked as Pyrelight dropped onto her prey and started to eat.

For a moment, she had almost called the balefire phoenix Philomena. But Pyrelight wasn't the same bird as the one that had been Princess Celestia's pet. At least, she was pretty sure they weren't the same bird. But the similarities were striking enough that Fluttershy was sure they were from a common family. Cousins. Maybe even sisters.

Pyrelight looked up at Fluttershy, mouse intestines dangling from her beak, and squawked pleasantly. Fluttershy bit back the urge to grimace, smiling approvingly at the predator instead. She had been with Velvet Remedy through Pyrelight's last two natural renewal cycles, the first

time helping the unicorn accept the seemingly horrible decline of her pet's health.

Fluttershy flew past, landing a few yards ahead and continuing on her way.

Ahead, she noticed that Palette and Silver Bell had paused in their work to watch Surprise show them her shield bubble.

A chime sounded, crystalline and clear, ringing across the mission. She perked up, looking to the sky above the gate. Other ponies trotted about her, headed to see. Silver Bell galloped past her, her mentor trotting more leisurely behind; Velvet Remedy joined her side. Surprise followed the promise that there were more adults to show off to. One of the caravans was home.

Even before she recognized the silhouette, the glints of metal under his wing and on his foreleg told Fluttershy that it was Calamity who had come home. It was good to see him again, and not just because he was going to be her ride this afternoon.

She'd always been a weak flyer, even in her youth. And she wasn't young anymore. The only pink in her mane now was from the streaks Silver Bell had put in it while practicing cosmetic spells.

Fluttershy felt confident in flying across Junction Town, maybe even to where they were building the new castle. But not all the way to Bucklyn Cross.

The heavy gate doors squealed, pulled open by ponies on pedal-machines made from old Griffinchasers. As Calamity landed inside, the caravan he guarded began through the doors. She trotted forward, her eyes moving to each pony, counting manes. She breathed a sigh of relief she didn't realize she was holding in as everypony was accounted for. She supposed she'd been a little worried. The trip to Thunderfall City and back wasn't as dangerous as it used to be, but it was good to see them back and in one piece.

"Aww," Silver Bell pouted. "I was hoping it would be mom and dad."

Ditzy Doo's caravan was due back today as well, she realized, and from a much more treacherous journey. It was for the ghouls of Equestria. Their bodies could not heal without radiation, and after the Gardens of Equestria had been activated, there was no radiation in Equestria anymore. Every week, brave caravans like Ditzy Doo's were making the trek beyond Equestria's borders to the rad-pits in the blighted neighboring lands, filling barrels with the irradiated water that the ghouls at home needed to survive.

(Ditzy Doo was, however, the only one to have decided to brand her water deliveries. *Absolutely Everything* was Equestria's source for *Aqua Cura*. Free on request with any size of purchase, no matter how small.)

"Dirty water" caravans were all too often targets of bandits and other awful ponies. She understood Silver Bell's anxiety.

The caravan was already crowded by ponies when she reached it. Some were helping unload. Most were just eager to hear about the trip.

"...on our way there, we ran into raiders out near Hope," Calamity was telling Velvet Remedy, shaking his head sadly. "They hit the outpost there. Weren't much left o' it when we reached it."

"Raiders?" Velvet gasped. "But... we haven't seen those in years! Are you sure it wasn't one of the gangs?"

"Gangs don't do t' ponies what these monsters did," Calamity snorted, drawing down his silver cowpony hat. "But don't worry. They won't be doin' nothin' t' anypony ever again."

Fluttershy watched as the two married ponies began to sketch out plans to send a group out to properly tend to the dead at the Hope Outpost.

"Ah'm off wi' 'Shy t' Bucklyn Cross this evenin'. Might want t' get some o' the Talon boys t' provide cover," Calamity suggested finally. "Ah got 'em all, Ah'm sure of it. But better play it safe. Jus' in case."

The rust-coated cyberpony turned to her, "Ah'll be ready t' go in an hour, iffin y'all are ready."

“Oh! Yes, thank you. If that’s okay with you.” She paused, then asked, “Do you think it will be dangerous?”

“Shucks, no,” Calamity smiled. “We’ll likely get a few rogue winds, but the Junction Town to Bucklyn Cross is one o’ the safest routes in all Equestria.” Well, now that bloodwing mating season had passed, at least.

“Rogue winds?”

“It’s Homage’s birthday, so sh’e up in the Celestia Hub with Li’lpip,” Calamity informed her. “Ah hear they’re spendin’ the whole day in the Autumn Vestibule.”

“Ohh,” Fluttershy squeaked. “How romantic.”

Calamity turned to his wife with a smirk. “Homage wanted me t’ remind ya that this is the last birthday she’s got before she’s officially old an’ decrepit.” He playfully poked Velvet Remedy with a hoof as she scowled and pouted. Fluttershy’s eyes were drawn to the golden PipBuck on his foreleg, the two jewels embedded in it taking the shapes of a hammer and a screwdriver.

“What’s decrepit?” Surprise piped up, looking to the adults curiously.

“In this case?” Palette answered, lowering her head to mock-whisper to the little pink alicorn, “It means the same age Velvet was when she left her Stable.”

Velvet Remedy tossed her mane back and nickered indignantly.



Dusk was settling over Equestria. The dipping sun glowed between the skeletal monuments of Manehattan’s ruined skyscrapers. Dingy light and fading shadows stretched across Fetlock. The wind sent ripples across the lake and through the lush hills of grass.

She stood in the back of the sky chariot, staring down as Fetlock passed below. She could see the lights of the settlement built around the Applejack’s Rangers’ stronghold, a bastion of life in a sea of wreckage.

“Did you see Ponyville?” she asked suddenly.

“Ayep,” Calamity answered as he flew, pulling the chariot behind him. “They seem t’ be doin’ alright. Fer hellhounds. Not even raiders are stupid enough t’ wander near Ponyville.”

Ten years ago, a megaspell destroyed the hellhound’s home in Splendid Valley. A few dozen of the survivors had surfaced in the ruins of the town that had once been her home. The home of her friends. Now, it was home to maybe a score of hellhound families.

As Calamity guided the sky chariot towards those hills, Fluttershy knew where they were going. Part of her mind insisted on envisioning this place as it once was. She and her friends had once gone golfing on these very hills, back before the war was even a whisper. She remembered Angel had gotten bored and started gnawing on the canopy of their golf cart until she cajoled him to stop.

But this place wasn’t a golf course anymore.

Calamity brought the sky chariot down on the wind-stroked grass and unhitched himself. Fluttershy spread her wings, dipping her head to pick up the bundles of flowers that had accompanied her for this much of the journey.

The two pegasi approached the five tombstones. Fluttershy dropped the flowers at her hooves, letting Calamity pick up several of them to place at the gravestone of Elder “SteelHooves” Applesnack. She scooped up the others, and began reverently placing them at each of the other four graves which fanned out behind that first one as Calamity took a few minutes of quiet with his departed friend.

A soft pang filled her heart as Fluttershy wished she had found the time to know Applesnack better. She stopped at the gravestone nearest to Applesnack’s, reading the inscription:

Here Rests

PALADIN STRAWBERRY LEMONADE

Brave, Loyal, True

She gave her life that Equestria may blossom once again.

The other three markers had similar epitaphs.

The wind began to pick up, tugging at her silvered mane with its streaks of pink. She planted the last of the flowers and turned back to Calamity.

The stallion was staring upwards and towards the east. She followed his gaze, spotting the gaunt, flying forms of two ghoul pegasi pulling a water-cart, leading the other water wagons as the caravan flew towards Junction Town.

She knew one of those lead ghouls would have a golden PipBuck on her foreleg with seven diamonds arranged like bubbles. Ditzzy Doo, the Bearer of Laughter. Who ever could have imagined?

It warmed her heart that her old friend had found love in the Equestrian Wasteland. If anypony in Equestria deserved happiness, Fluttershy thought, it was her. As she watched them pass, she believed she saw the pale stallion beside Ditzzy Doo glance at his love, the Canterlot ghoul's normal grimace fading into a look of silent adoration.

He caught her. His little falling star.

A strange thought crossed her mind as she mused that Ditzzy Doo and Lionheart reminded her, just a little, of Applejack and Applesnack.

As if reading her thoughts (a very disturbing notion!), Calamity stepped next to her, expressing, "Ah ain't normally the religious type, but Ah've seen 'nuff t' know souls exist. So part o' me likes t' imagine that somewhere up there, SteelHooves an' his gal are smilin' down on those two."

Fluttershy nodded quietly.

The winds continued to blow, making the trees creak and the water of the lake lap at the shore.



Sunset poured out its beautiful palette across Equestria, painting the sky in oranges and purples, blues and golds. Sunlight glinted off the broken windows of the dead Manehattan skyscrapers, looking like a scattering of jewels, and shimmered on the river that flowed around Bucklyn Cross.

The butter-yellow pegasus stretched her wings, standing on the edge of the fortress, her eyes looking out over the river, watching the slowly gliding boats, then lifting beyond. She could see Gummy's home from here. Like Ditzzy Doo, another strand of the past that persisted in the present, tugging at her heart. Painful, but still precious. Like anchors that kept her from blowing away in the wind.

She glanced downward, seeing the black scar of the Arbu prison. Calamity was down there somewhere, visiting a pony he had described as "an old friend who looks a lot like me". It saddened her that there was still a need for such places in Equestria. But not all ponies in the Wasteland were willing embrace their better virtues, to be good ponies.

Every pony, she still believed, had goodness inside them. But she had learned the hardest possible way that you couldn't assume ponies would do the right thing. Which made those who did all the more wonderful and precious.

She felt the presence of the hellhound as he came up behind her. The old cyberhound crouched down next to her, his cyberleg giving a metallic whine. At last, the aging albino spoke, "You ready fer this?"

Fluttershy nodded.

She would not allow the new age of Equestria to be born out of genocide. The hellhounds were on the precipice of extinction, and it was (largely) the fault of ponies.

Wanted or not, warranted or not, she had been once again put in a position where her words carried weight. And as much as she hated being looked to as a leader, she wasn't going to shy away. Not after everything. This is something she must do. She must.

She must.

The Applejack's Rangers weren't going to be happy about it, but she would convince them. The Hellhound Sanctuary was the right thing to do.

The elderly albino hellhound got back up as she turned around, and followed her as she marched toward the council hall.

A stiff wind cut through her feathers, chilling her. The sun began to sink beneath the waves.

Fluttershy took a deep breath. The day was almost over. And it had been a day without gunshots. A peaceful day. A better day.

"In a world filled with misery and uncertainty, it is a great comfort to know that, in the end, there is a light in darkness."

FALLOUT: EQUESTRIA

