

Chapter 22: Tainted Love

"Hello there, and welcome to another evening of music and entertainment in your all-time favourite station, New Pegasus Radio, the home of the classics that have outlived the Apocalypse! I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, being your faithful companion in all those lonely hours. We've been listening to another set of great pieces by the wonderful Velvet Remedy, the Songbird of the Wasteland, recorded live at Tenpony Tower, Manehattan. What a wonderful singer she is, isn't she? Even at her age, she keeps being as sweet and powerful as she was in her first hits. It's always a pleasure to put a record in the player and to listen to those soft and welcoming tunes, I tell you that!"

Now, now, news! It's time to bring you the latest stuff that has been happening in New Pegasus and the Wasteland! You know, things are beginning to stir up in town. Ever since that pegasus landed in our city, the apparent calm and stability that reigned has been substituted by a constant tension and strife. The head of the City Council, Farsight, is nowhere to be seen and some of the members of the Board have begun to question the correctness of his decisions. Even though the spokespony Desert Rose keeps trying to maintain an image of unity and cohesion, there is no doubt that things don't go so well in the local Government.

Outside, the War still rages, but with a totally new and unexpected situation that has caught us totally by surprise: many travelling Wastelanders have mentioned a massive battle in the skies above the Neighvada Desert, with airships being blown apart and falling into the red sands. The City Board has sent scouting and scavenging parties to the wreckage, with the hope of being able to hoard some of the technology that those dreadnoughts were carrying. Who was this mysterious faction? Which was the force that took them down?

My thoughts on this are that we weren't alone beneath the cloud cover. The skies have always held secrets to us bound to earth, and those mysteries have been unveiled to us with the opening of the clouds. As far as we know, there could be another war raging in the heavens, a conflict in which we could get involved if we don't act carefully. The role of the City Council should be to keep a stance of neutrality and peace in all fronts possible, although I fear that some of those fronts will be hard to maintain.

I said this, because the situation in Hoofer Dam is beginning to look grim for the Republican forces in the East bank. Reinforcements from the Tsardom have started to push the NER troops back into the Dam by means of raw ponypower, sustaining great losses in the process. Obviously, the Tsar doesn't care too much about his casualty rate, but there's no denying that it's giving him the results he wanted.

In response to such moves, the NER has doubled the rate of reinforcement in the West bank, in an attempt to choke the Tsardom troops in firepower when they set hooves in the facility. Apart from that, there are plenty of rumours of a second Army of the Republic attempting an attack from the North, which would imply crossing the river into enemy territory. It's nothing more than gossip that flows through the Wasteland, and it could perfectly be a diversion, but we must take it into account given the many times that we

have listened that very idea in the last day. We'll keep our eyes and ears open to find out more about the status of the conflict.

And once again, that is all for the hour, so let's return to some more music! In dire times like these, what we need is something to cheer us up, and I know exactly what we're looking for. Are you thinking what I am thinking? Of course, it's time for a bit more of Vinyl Scratch to light up the night! Get ready to shake those hooves to the beat, and enjoy this day just as if it were the last one! And remember, you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, speaking directly to your hearts!"

The arcano-engine of the small gunship wailed as we flew through the desert at full speed, making the little craft rattle and shake with every small turbulence we went through. The air howled through the open side gates, making it impossible to speak inside the cabin. Not that we were in a talking mood, though. Avro clutched the controls tightly and drove the ship to the very limit of its capacity to outrun the two remaining Red corvettes into their base in a place called Breakeven Point. The reflection of her beautiful face showed her utter concentration while she kept her eyes to the data screens of the D6, since there was no way anypony could see a thing outside, considering how fast we flew. Meanwhile, I felt as if my internal organs had been placed in a hydraulic press. Ponies were not meant to be subjected to such accelerations, that was for certain; and judging from Nadyr's face, I believe he thought the same.

I had a sinking feeling, though. For the first time in many years, I had the sensation that I wasn't being the one pulling the strings. Instead, I was being driven into a situation I had no control over. It felt like being dragged into the middle into the middle of a massive maelstrom, while being incapable of getting away and knowing that it could rip me apart. I knew that Avro had gotten me into that situation, but I still couldn't see why she had done it. From all the ponies I had come across, she had been the first one I hadn't been able to see through. It was frustrating, and at the same time, alluring. Everything surrounding her was shrouded in a haze of mystery; making me want to unveil it.

We had been buzzing through the Neighvada skies for almost an hour, heading towards the sunset. The name of the Communist base didn't appear in any of the maps uploaded into my PipBuck, so I had simply no idea of where we were flying to, but considering the direction we had chosen, it had to be close to the Divide. Maybe the best choice was to ask...

"Avro, darling, could you tell us where we're going?" I yelled over the noise.

"I already told you: Breakeven Point!" Avro replied without turning.

"Yes, Breakeven Point, I know. But where is this place exactly? It doesn't appear in any map!"

"It was never meant to! It's our secret base, after all!"

"Right, right... Anyway, since you're taking us there, you might want to enlighten us about its whereabouts. Is it close to the Divide?"

"Wrong. It's IN the Divide."

"In the Divide? I thought it was some sort of uncrossable barrier." Nadyr scowled.

"You don't know what the Divide is, do you?" Avro giggled.

"I thought it was some sort of steep mountain ridge that couldn't be traversed, with a hell of a lot of radiation added to the mix." I shook my head. "But judging from your words, I think that it is something completely different to all that."

Avro smiled, while keeping her eyes on the control panel.

"As always, Farsight, you always get the ideas at the first glance. Indeed, the Divide is not what you thought it is, but you're not all that far away from reality. It is a mountain ridge, but what makes it so dangerous is not the radiation or the potential fall down a cliff."

"Then what is it?" Nadyr groaned.

"All the area is constantly ravaged by massive storms. The winds would rip the flesh off your bones in a matter of seconds."

"I don't like the sound of that." Nadyr gulped.

"Me neither." I shook my head. "Let me guess, though. I believe that those storms are not natural."

"Not bad, darling, not bad!" Avro laughed. "Those storms are a magical phenomenon, but they have a very simple explanation. Before the War, the Equestrian Government built several megaspell launching facilities all along the ridge that separated Neighvada from the rest of Equestria. Since this place was a bit of a hinterland in the pony-zebra war, the High Command in Canterlot believed that those launchpads would stay hidden to enemy eyes until they fired a surprise attack against the striped ones. No offence, Nadyr."

"Never mind, carry on." Nadyr shook his head.

"As I was saying, these military emplacements had to be kept secret, but every war has its traitors, and somehow, the zebra army found out about the location of the ridge facilities. According to some intercepted transmissions, they had no intention of bombing Neighvada, since it was a worthless patch of land with little resources and no strategic interest, but as soon as they found out about what the pony army had set up in the mountains, they sent a whole barrage of balefire bombs to clean the area of threats."

"And the bombs caused the storms? It's an odd side effect."

"Not the bombs by itself, but the chain reaction of balefire magic and megaspell technology. Somehow, the resulting blast is still raging, and the two magic forces feed each other to cause a constant turmoil at high speeds. What you have is a terrible storm as a result."

"I see. Then how is it possible that you might have a base in Breakeven Point, if the magic forces in the area are so deadly?"

"You know that the name isn't coincidental, right? It's called like that because at that point, all the forces nullify each other, creating a point where it's safe to stay. Somehow, it seems like the Equestrians knew it, because they built a bunker complex in the very spot."

"I simply can't believe that they could be expecting a balefire bomb attack." I winced.

"I don't think they were, either." Avro nodded in agreement. "However, I suppose they considered the chance of a malfunction or something similar. That's the only rational explanation."

"Maybe they were lucky, that's all." Nadyr grinned.

"That's too much of a coincidence to owe it to luck only." I shook my head. "Too many variables just to roll the dice."

"I agree." Avro said coldly. "The location of Breakeven Point is too... perfect, too tailored to have been left to chance."

"Fine, fine..." Nadyr mumbled. "Just one question, Avro... how do you know all this? I had no idea about what the Divide actually was, and I would say that Farsight didn't know either."

"You do realize that we pegasi left the War after the fall of Cloudsdale, do you?"

"Yes, so what?"

"From that point on, we were observers. We lived our lives, rebuilt our homes and kept advancing; but we always had an eye looking down to the ground. One could never know when the earthlings would manage to start rebuilding the world they had burnt to ashes."

"That didn't stop you from being defeated." I smiled cunningly.

"Indeed, it didn't. Then again, there were others in charge, or so I was told. I was too young to even remember."

"Avro..." I said. "Still, that doesn't explain how you know all that information about the pre-War past."

"My kin duplicated a lot of archives through the entire pegasus network. Even if our bases were destroyed, we could keep our data safe. That's how I learnt all this."

"Really..." I sighed. "Now that you mention the destruction of your bases, how is it that the cloud cover in Neighvada wasn't affected by the Light Bringer's action?"

"That is something we have never had clear enough. We believe it stayed there because the

Divide acted as a magic deflector. There was no chance to prove it, but it stays as the most accepted hypothesis."

"You have your point there." I nodded.

"Glad to hear you think that." Avro giggled. "Any more questions?"

"I do have one." I said. "Why did you have to occupy a pre-War military base, if you lived perfectly up there? I mean, you had a cloud cover protecting you, and if it hadn't been for Ilyushin, we wouldn't have been forced to blow it apart."

"It was Ilyushin's doing alright!" Avro stomped the floor. "It was his decision to make our move into the base, in order to occupy it and to use it for our military purposes. We used it as a drydock to build the largest of our ships, as well as to improve our weaponry. Have you ever witnessed the effect of an arcano-engine being tested in the Divide?"

"Let me guess... a beam of wind that cuts through all Neighvada from West to East?"

"Exactly."

"We call them Divide Storms. I never thought they could have such an origin." Nadyr whistled.

"I had the feeling that they were unnatural to a point." I nodded. "Now I have proof. Tell me one more thing, Avro. If you disagreed with Ilyushin's way of handling things, why didn't you rebel earlier? You worked in the construction of an entire fleet, on the perfectioning of your guns and armor, and you weren't able to see through his intentions? Oh, and Avro, please be honest from the very beginning."

"Are you implying I'm a liar?" Avro yelled.

"No, darling, but you haven't been telling me the whole truth; and considering we're going deep into enemy territory, I would like you to be totally sincere with me."

"Fine... I have to warn you of one thing, Farsight. Ilyushin can be really... persuasive when he wants to. He is a master of speech, and has a close to supernatural charisma. He came out of nowhere, and managed to convince us that we had to embrace his ideology and follow his lead. He promised glory and welfare, retribution and happiness, and he did it in such an enthralling way that we believed him and cheered. We turned him into our leader without asking questions, and did his bidding in the firm belief that it was the best for us. He used us for his purposes, and he keeps doing that with all the rest of my kin."

"A kin that you intend to liberate, right?" I snickered.

"Don't take it so lightly!" Avro huffed.

"I'm not taking it lightly, my dear. It's just that it sounds incoherent to act as the liberator of the pegasi when we're fresh out of a battle in which we have destroyed the vast majority of

their fleet, causing them quantious casualties.”

“Those were soldiers who devoted their lives to Ilyushin’s ideals. As much as I regret seeing them die, there’s little we can do, if they’re so convinced of what they’re fighting for. I know how I felt for him... so I can picture how the rest of the pegasi see their Commander. This will not be a matter of reasoning, I tell you. Either we take Ilyushin out or we will have to face all his army.”

“That’s a classic. Take a leader out and the followers will disband.” Nadyr cooed.

“Exactly.” Avro nodded.

I sighed. Even if my beloved one’s explanations seemed much more straightforward and clear, there was something slightly off about them. Something that still didn’t fully click, something that warned me about a possible lie... It could be me, after all. Considering how many times she had changed her story, I had grown a bit suspicious of every word she said. In the very deep, I wanted to trust her, but there was something nagging in the back of my mind, a constant warning that sunk me in a state of discomfort.

“What’s wrong, Farsight?” Avro asked. “You seem concerned about something.”

“Meh... nevermind.” I waved a hoof dismissively.

“Honey, when you’re worried about something, then it means business. Would you tell us what it is?”

“It’s a bit of a bad feeling, really. I can’t tell what it is, but my gut is warning me of something.” I was glad Avro couldn’t look at me, she would have clearly seen that I was lying. “Maybe it’s just that I don’t like going into an enemy military base without knowing what we might face.”

“Believe me, it won’t be tougher than taking out their fleet. Take it easy, Farsight, we’ve been through the hardest.”

“I guess you’re right, Avro. I’m just being a bit too dramatic...”

“Nuuuh.” Nadyr moaned. “You’re just being yourself, bro. The only difference is that after eight years of being on the top, you’ve forgotten how it feels to be in a tight spot.”

“I disagree.” I shook my head. “What about the battle we’ve just come out of? That was a really difficult one, and I didn’t feel like that.”

What do you know, lies to cover more lies. If this trip took longer than expected, I would end up telling Avro that I didn’t trust her, and that was something I didn’t want to happen.

“I wouldn’t take that one into account.” Nadyr laughed. “We were so full of adrenaline that we didn’t realize what we were doing. Come to think of it, we should have been scared as hell, but we weren’t!”

"You have a point there, Nadyr. That will probably be the reason." Thanks, my striped companion, for saving my ass there.

"No problem, bro!" Nadyr smiled. "By the way, Avro, how long until we get to the base?"

"Almost there!" Avro cheered. "Be sure to hold on to something tightly, because the last part of the ride is going to be bumpy!"

"More or less bumpy than the takeoff?" I asked, remembering how badly we had been shaken.

"It depends, really."

"On what?"

"On whether the Guise and the Starlight will have made it to Breakeven Point. In that case, they'll be waiting, and the base defence system will be fully operational. That will definitely be a shaky ride. If we get there before the two corvettes, well, I expect to be able to whizz in before they even ready the flak guns."

"I guess that by whizzing in you mean getting into the base at full speed, right?" I gulped.

"Yes, that's the point. Do you understand why I'm telling you to hold on tight?"

"I get it, I get it!" I grumbled and looked to the latches. They were all in place. "I'm locked."

"Me too!" Nadyr replied.

"Then prepare yourselves! We're about to enter the Divide!"

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We felt it before we even got to see it. The small gunship began vibrating, then it started shaking more and more violently as Avro drove it into the magical storms of the everlasting barrier. Soon, the entire craft was being hurled from one side to the other, and any sign of controlled flight was lost as the might of the wind seemed to overcome the power output of the arcano-engine. My beloved pegasus seemed to keep things under control, since she didn't even flinch when the storm engulfed us whole.

The endless blue skies of the Neighvada Desert had been covered by thick red clouds, towering masses of crimson, that shifted their shapes and dashed through the open air, moved by the magic-induced winds that rendered all the area a Wasteland within a Wasteland. There was something evil about those clouds, though. Their red tone could be produced by the sand, but their massiveness was unnatural. If I was not mistaken, clouds needed water to grow, but there was very little water in the area, almost close to none. Therefore, those blood-red hulks had to be a construct of magic.

The howling wind entered through the open side gates of the D6, pushing us to one side, then to the other, while the red sand scratched our coats and got into our nostrils. Nadyr began to cough and I was having a hard time keeping my eyes open. Avro, on the other hoof, didn't seem to be too affected by the effects of the storm.

"Avro!" I coughed. "Are you sure you're on the right path? We're about to be smothered by the sand!"

"Oh, yes, sorry about that, I had to take a little detour, just in case the corvettes had arrived!" Avro giggled. "That's why I've had to get you through the storm for a little while. Are you alright back there?"

"I've got sand in my nose, Avro!" Nadyr huffed and coughed. "You could have told us before, I would have covered my face!"

"I am going to need some serious cleaning after this, darling." I hissed. "I'm feeling sandy in places I had never imagined. Not to mention how strained I feel after all those twists and bumps!"

"We're almost out of it!" Avro smiled. "Be patient!"

"Yes, but how long will it take?" I roared over the constant rumble.

"Just a minute!"

"I don't know if we'll be able to..."

Suddenly, the rumbling stopped and we were spewed out of the maelstrom of sandstorms and eldritch forces, and the gunship flew straight over a patch of blue sky surrounded by the rest of the storm. It was a very strange sight indeed, seeing the world enclosed by a constant wall of red sand clouds that kept raging with all their might, while we were in a state of total calmness. Not even the slightest breeze blew in the area, making it feel like a singularity, something that was a bit out of the ordinary.

"This is it, folks, Breakeven Point!" Avro cheered.

"I see..." I gasped, coughing sand. "Where's the base?"

"Look down!"

I did as the pegasus told me, and while I was sticking my sand-covered head out of the gunship's gate, I couldn't help to open my muzzle in awe. Below us, the mountain ridge had been excavated to form a gigantic gaping hole, a cylinder of concrete and rock that tunneled into the bowels of the world. Judging from the size of the facility, even the largest of the Red ships could fit into it. I pictured the Victory and the Revolution coming out of that immense hole in their maiden voyages, and I felt suddenly small. What were we facing?

"Holy Celestia..." I groaned. "That place is immense!"

"It is big, that's for sure!" Avro laughed. "But most of it is just an empty drydock. Skyhaven was our main base."

"Which we blew up." Nadyr smiled.

"Precisely."

"Then what's the plan?" I asked. "You're the one that knows the place, after all."

"The plan is to find Ilyushin and kill him. You can't get simpler than that."

"Should we expect resistance?"

"I don't think so... I believe the corvettes are still en route. If that's so, all that will be left in the base are workers and technicians. They can handle a gun, but I don't think they'll give us much of a fight. I wouldn't in their place, really."

"It depends... how devoted are they to Ilyushin's cause? You said that he's very persuasive."

"He is, but trust me, I know those techies quite well. They are ponies of reason. Prove them that you're more valuable for them than their leader, and they will follow you."

"Won't your friend do anything about it?" Nadyr asked.

"First, he's not my friend." Avro growled. "Second, if the Guise and the Starlight haven't made it to the base, he will only have a hoofful of personal guards at his disposal. It would be fairly unwise to send them against us."

"I agree." I nodded and scratched my muzzle. "I think I have a plan."

"Really? Enlighten us!" Avro cheered.

"To begin with, I am assuming that the remnants of the Communist Fleet haven't made it into the base. If that happens to be the case, we should try to get to the outer defence control center, in order to give the corvettes a proper welcome."

"I see where you're going." Avro giggled.

"Of course you are." I sneered. "It's not like it's a very convoluted idea. Once the last forces have been taken out, we should try to convince the non-combatants to join our side; or if we can't achieve that, at least avoid them from teaming up with Ilyushin."

"Believe me, if everything goes as planned, they'll love to work for you."

"I prefer to see that with my own eyes." I shook my head. "Anyway, the last step should be to take Ilyushin down once and for all."

"I can't wait for that to happen." Avro smiled.

"Me neither." Nadyr huffed. "I want to get back to good old New Pegasus in one piece. I've had enough adventures for now."

"Just wait a little longer, Nadyr." I said calmly. "This war is about to end."

"Damn sure it is!" Avro stomped the gunship floor. "We're ready to enter, so get ready. This might be a bit harsh if the turrets are functional!"

The pegasus handled the controls and began a descending spiral into the entrance of Breakeven Point base. The three of us held our breath as the gaping hole drew closer, fearing a possible attack by the pegasi in the facility. Nadyr and I held our miniguns tightly, ready to open fire; but considering what Avro had said, there would be little to be done in case the turrets began firing. My heart pounded stronger and stronger as the distance between us and our destination diminished, up to the point that I felt it wanting to rip off my chest.

"Can't you get in a bit faster?" Nadyr screamed. "We're playing sitting ducks here!"

"I have to get in like this! If I try to plummet in, I will have no time to brake!" Avro replied.

"What about the larger ships?" I asked.

"Those have vertical takeoff systems built into them. It's the only way they can get out of this base. The gunships, on the other hoof, being so small and nimble, don't require such mechanisms."

"I understand." I nodded.

"It's strange that they haven't fired yet." Avro wondered. "Maybe the corvettes are still away."

"Maybe Lady Luck is on our side for once." I smiled. "We should get in as fast as possible."

"Almost there..." Avro grinned. "Don't start gunning us down now..."

The gunship whizzed past the entrance of the base, and we sunk into the neonlit depths of the mountains, spiralling down a silo of concrete and steel, profusely decorated with the red stars of the Communist Front. The turrets hadn't fired a single round at us, so the place was either empty or they hadn't noticed us getting in. Frankly, I didn't believe that we had been able to fly unnoticed; and there were clear signs that the place was inhabited. The radio hummed with military anthems and I could hear the hissing of a hydraulic door opening somewhere in the facility. Avro landed on the bottom end of the silo, close to some other gunships, and we hopped out of the craft. Personally, I felt happy to be back on the ground.

"I can't believe that we haven't sparked any alert." I grumbled.

"It wouldn't surprise me too much." Avro replied. "If Fleet Command is in constant communication with the two corvettes, it could be possible that a single gunship would have flown past their detection systems."

"That, or they are waiting for us." I mumbled.

"I don't think so." Avro smiled. "I think I've sneaked through their radars."

"No you haven't."

I summoned my rifle as I turned, getting ready to face a myriad of armored enemies. The voice of a confident, young stallion had surprised us; and I feared that all our plan could have gone awry from the very first step. Taking a deep breath, I looked up from the ground, and instead of seeing dozens of armored troopers, I found myself facing a lone pegasus dressed in a dirty jumpsuit, with his turquoise mane and olive fur making a harsh contrast with the smeared orange fabric. Our new acquaintance wore round glasses and a utility belt around his waist, which brought back memories of my first days in Freedom Field.

"Petlyakov, you sneaky bastard!" Avro grinned.

"Avro DeHavilland in the flesh!" The pegasus named Petlyakov smiled as well. "It's so good to see you in one piece."

"Your brother wouldn't make it easy, you know."

"Yes, my brother can be a very nasty pony." Petlyakov sighed. "Still, Avro, you know that we were always on your side."

"Thanks, Pet."

"You're welcome, Av."

"Excuse me, Av." I mimicked ironically. "Would you introduce us, please? I've already assumed that he's friendly, but I'm feeling a bit sidestepped here."

"Of course, where are my manners. My name is Petlyakov, chief researcher here at Breakeven Point, and incidentally, brother of Ilyushin. Everypony calls me Pet, though. Avro and I have worked side by side for a long time, before all of this happened."

"Nice to meet you." I shook his hoof. "I am Farsight, leader of New Pegasus and Avro's..."

"...special friend." Avro giggled.

"That's it. Special friend." I smirked. "I heard you say you were on Avro's side?"

"Yes, me and my crew share Avro's views about our future." Pet nodded.

"Then why was she the only one flagged as a traitor?"

"Well, she happened to be there... she was convenient." Pet shook his head. "Let's not talk about this, though. I don't feel too comfortable, and I guess you're here for something apart than for a chit-chat." Pet walked to Nadyr and shook his hoof. "Pet, nice to meet you."

"Nadyr. My pleasure." The half-zebra replied smoothly.

"As usual, you are right. We're not here to chat, we're here to defeat Ilyushin!" Avro roared.

"I guessed as much." Pet smiled. "Well, for your information, he's entrenched himself in the main control room with his Guard and is waiting for the Guise and the Starlight to arrive with the remaining loyal forces."

"Loyal forces?" I asked.

"After you took out most of our fleet, we decided it was time to consider other ways of managing the Front. We staged a little coup and left Ilyushin covering behind his desk, praying for his last hopes to come back home in one piece."

"You really did that?" Avro opened her eyes wide in surprise. "Doesn't Ilyushin control the Guard?"

"He does, but never underestimate an engineer, Av." Pet winked. "We used all the automated defences of the base to convince him that taking us on was not a good idea. After all, with only four soldiers to defend him, even a simple turret can become a troublesome foe."

"My, my, Pet." Avro smiled. "I always thought you were the one prepared to become a leader."

"Nuh, I'm not prepared for that kind of jobs. I lack the militaristic attitude to keep all those trigger-happy foals at bay." Pet waved a hoof. "I prefer to make myself useful by building these toys." Pet put his hoof on the hull of the D6.

"This isn't over yet, though." I warned. "If Ilyushin manages to land the corvettes in the base, you will be in number disadvantage, won't you?"

"Certainly." Pet nodded. "We're working hard on that right now. Still, we are facing some technical problems to seize control of the outer defences."

"What sort of problems?"

"Come, I'll explain it to you on the way there."

Pet turned around and began walking up a spiralling slope around the main silo shaft, with the three of us following him closely. As we advanced through the innards of the facility, I noticed how many of the red stars had been freshly painted over old and almost colorless suns of pre-War Equestria, revealing that this facility had been built before the War, right as

Avro had told me. Several corridors that led out of the main shaft seemed to be unused, for the place appeared to have been designed to withhold a far larger population than the one inside at the moment.

Apart from sightseeing, I thought about Pet's words when I asked him about his crew being on Avro's side. The haste with which he had disregarded that idea made me suspicious once again. It could mean that they supported Avro's way of thinking, as he had said, but it could also mean Avro and Ilyushin having fought each other in the past, in which case my beloved marefriend would have another, even bigger skeleton hiding in her closet. I was trying hard to keep those thoughts off my head, since I wanted my relationship with her to carry on, but the amount of unclear edges in her story was beginning to become a bit too large to swallow.

"The main problem," Pet said "is that the control system for the outer turrets is in Ilyushin's office. Our first idea was to hack the system to gain access to the firing core, but it appears that there is a total override in the main control terminal, so whatever we do can be nullified by my brother."

"Then what have you done about it?" Avro asked.

"We severed his connection to the turret system, but it seems that there was some sort of protection against such actions. Now we can't raise the turrets..."

"Have you tried patching up the backup lines?"

"We've made several attempts to get things back on the run, but we've had little luck."

"Hmmm..." Avro frowned. "Let me see what I can do with it."

"Of course." Pet smiled. "That's why I am glad to have you here."

Pet entered a large room labeled as "Engineering", where a bunch of ponies in lab coats and jumpsuits worked in several different spots. At a glance, I was able to see various types of armor, guns and aircraft pieces. Undoubtedly, that area was the very core of Breakeven Point's activity. As soon as we walked into the department, many ponies turned and began cheering at Avro, as if they were welcoming a long lost leader. She quickly disregarded those welcomings and followed Pet.

"Where are you working on the turret system?" Avro asked Pet.

"Over there." Pet pointed to a terminal close to an open circuit box, where cables and connectors were hanging. "But first, I would like to show you something, Av."

"Do we have time?" I asked.

"Good question." Pet nodded. "Junkers! Oi, Junkers! What is the ETA of the corvettes?"

"Twenty minutes at full speed, Pet!" A pegasus replied, without even lifting his face from the

screen. "I doubt they'll make it any quicker."

"Thanks, Junkers!" Pet nodded. "Twenty minutes, more or less. Do you think you'll be able to make it?"

Avro laughed.

"You know that I can, Pet. Don't even doubt it."

"Then follow me."

Pet guided us to a nearby room, in which a shiny metal cylinder was on display, as if it were an idol in some sort of pagan temple. A greenish light shone in the penumbra of the small department, coming from a tiny window of thick crystal in the unknown object. Our host stood close to the uncanny cylinder, looking at it with pride.

"Is it what I think it is?" Avro gasped.

"It is indeed. Project Enola was a total success." Pet nodded.

"I told you it would!" Avro boasted. "We needed time and patience."

"What is Project Enola exactly?" I asked out of curiosity.

"It's an attempt to replicate balefire energy using gemstones." Pet explained. "When we pegasi arrived at Breakeven Point, we found an unexploded balefire bomb on the bottom of the silo. For years, we left it standing, just to avoid it from going off. One day, Avro suggested that we should try to disarm it in order to study what technology the zebras had used in their weapons. We called the investigation Project Enola, in honor of the pegasus mare who found this facility, and started working on it day and night."

"What did you find out?"

"Well, zebras used some sort of chemical brew that released a massive blast of magical energy when detonated, but the idea of the balefire bomb was that the energy of the explosion would cause a further reaction in the remaining brew, causing it to release more and more energy. It was a sort of chain reaction. The interesting discovery came when we disarmed the bomb, though. We found out that the potion was already reacting, although at a residual level."

"In a word, the brew is unstable, and the detonator would only push the reaction downhill?" I asked.

"Exactly! We moved on to replicate that by using an enchanted gemstone, and after months of hard work, we have mastered the unstable incantation and built it into this container."

"So, you're telling me you've built a balefire bomb?"

"Not necessarily." Pet shook his head. "Right now, the gemstone is releasing energy, but at a low level. We can use that energy by means of a circuit system that is already enclosed on the cylinder. However, if a surge of power is sent to the gemstone..."

"Balefire explosion." I nodded.

"That's right." Pet nodded.

"Um..." Junkers was waiting outside the room. "Excuse me, Pet, but the corvettes will be here in around fifteen minutes. Shouldn't we do something about it?"

"Of course." Pet smiled calmly. He seemed to have a great trust in Avro. "Av, can you handle it?"

"Just give me a toolbox!" Avro pranced. "I'll get that problem fixed in no time!"

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Tension grew in the room as the minutes went by. Avro was kneeling close to the circuit box, trying out different combinations of wiring, while I stood by the terminal and tried constantly to reach the turret control system, but there was no response. Breakeven Point was defenceless, and the enemy forces were closer as the minutes went by. I could see from the corner of my eye how all the technicians had left their duties and were standing by Junkers' terminal, keeping an eye on the time for Ilyushin's forces to arrive. If it hadn't been for Petlyakov and Avro's excessive confidence, we would have had five more minutes to handle the situation.

Pet walked up and down the room, apparently calm, but I had the feeling that he was shivering in the inside. If his coup failed, being Ilyushin's brother wouldn't save him from being shot... at least, that was the most reasonable outcome to me. The pegasi around Junkers mumbled something that I couldn't get to understand, but judging from their somber tone, they were on the brink of giving up hopes.

"Pet..." Junkers mumbled. "Ten minutes for the arrival. Should we get ready for combat?"

"Avro, how's it going?" Pet asked, visibly altered.

"Nothing, no luck." Avro groaned. "There is no response coming from the turrets. The outbound messages are working properly, but the inbound ones don't arrive."

"Have you checked the cross-shunt?"

"Twice, Pet." Avro mumbled. "It's fine, it's perfectly fine."

"What about the upstream derivation?"

"That's bollocks, Pet. You can't bypass a main circuit via an upstream derivation. You know that, I know that, everypony in this room knows that."

"I didn't." Nadyr laughed.

"Not the time, nor the place." I said coldly.

"I don't know, Avro..." Pet shrugged. "I'm trying to think of other possible ways to recover the inbound messages, but frankly, I can't find the good one."

"Maybe the secondary control loop?" Junkers suggested.

"That would be a good idea, but I have already tried it."

"Tertiary loops?" Junkers tried. "Some of the systems in the base have them."

"The turrets work on a duplicated network." Avro shook her head. "Apparently, whoever built this base thought that the defences couldn't spare a third line."

"Crap." Junkers fumed. "I thought that was the solution. It worked for the air recirculators."

"I know..." Pet groaned. "What's the ETA?"

"Five minutes."

"Five already? We need a solution now!" Pet stomped the floor. "Avro..."

"Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Avro yelled. "I'm totally lost here. It could be a loose breaker anywhere in the facility, as much as I know!"

"Keep calm, Avro." I mumbled. "If it worked before, it must work now."

"But I don't know if it worked before!"

Suddenly, an incoming radio call beeped on all terminals. Our time was starting to run out, as the corvettes were already out of the storm and within range. We had to act quick or our battle would be lost.

"Everypony silence!" Pet ordered. "I'll handle this."

"This is corvette Guise approaching base. Repeat, corvette Guise approaching base. Respond, please."

"We copy you, Guise." Pet replied calmly. "Welcome home. What's your status?"

"All systems running, although we had to sacrifice some shields to enhance the driveforce. Same happens to the Starlight, we've been pushing ourselves to the very limit to get here quickly. By the way, any signs of the D6?"

"No news here, Guise." Pet lied blatantly. "We're beginning landing procedures. Radio back

when in position. Base out."

The communication ended, and Pet let go a long sigh of stress. Some of the technician ponies had left the room and were returning with guns and even armor, ready to entrench themselves and resist. It was a do-or-die situation, and I lacked the knowledge needed to pull us out of it. We were relying on Avro, but she didn't know what to do either.

"Avro, we're running out of time!" Pet yelled.

"I KNOW!!" Avro replied, almost crying.

"Eh, you two..." Nadyr mumbled.

"Not now, Nadyr." Avro interrupted. "Any suggestions, Pet? You're the one that has been tampering with the system!"

"Well, you're supposed to be the master engineer!" Pet shrugged.

"And even I can't find the solution to our problem!" Avro replied.

"Aw, fuck it." Nadyr grabbed a screwdriver and pushed Avro aside from the circuit box.

"What are you doing, Nadyr?" Avro roared.

"Solving the problem!" The half-zebra roared and tightened two screws, locking a wire in place. "Try it now, Farsight."

"Let's see..." I activated the terminal. "Yes... YES! We have reply! The flak system is under our control, mares and gentlecolts."

"Finally!" Pet sighed while the rest of the engineers cheered. "What was going on?"

"A loose wire. I saw it long ago, but I thought you had it covered." Nadyr shrugged. "Seems like I outsmarted you!"

"Don't get cocky." I groaned.

"Come on, Farsight." Nadyr smiled. "I just saved your asses. Cut me some slack!"

"Sure, I'll buy you a beer." I laughed. "Let's not lose focus, though. The corvettes will be above us in a minute, and we need to sort them out."

"We should wait until they've begun with the landing procedure. If their main boosters are online, they'll be able to fly away." Pet warned.

"Then we must keep this little charade running until they can't escape our trap." I nodded. "Will you be able to handle it, Pet?"

"I probably will." Pet shrugged. "You worry about handling the turrets, understood?"

"Count on it."

The room became silent once again, but instead of a general feeling of fear, there was expectation in the air. We had the upper hoof now, and we were ready to exploit it. Everypony was in its place, Pet on the radio, the technicians in their workbenches, Avro and Nadyr guarding the door, and I was standing before the flak control terminal, waiting for the proper moment to open fire. Once again, our silence was broken by the incoming call of the radio.

"Base, this is corvette Starlight calling. We are ready to dock. Repeat, corvettes Starlight and Guise ready to dock."

"We copy, Starlight." Pet replied calmly. "Everything is ready. You have permission to begin descent. Repeat, you have permission to begin descent."

"Orders received, base. Beginning landing. Starlight out."

The rumbling of the massive arcano-engines filled the air of the engineering area, as the two hulking airships lost altitude to get into the silo of Breakeven Point. I kept constant eye contact with Pet and Avro, waiting for them to signal the optimal moment to open fire. I could feel the tension in their eyes, and I was excited as well, although I had no doubt that we would win that gambit.

"Get ready, Farsight." Pet nodded. "Fire in three... two... one... NOW!"

I pressed the button on the terminal, and another noise filled the air: it was the constant tableting and rumbling of dozens of flak turrets sending a firestorm to the incoming vessels. All the cards were on the table, and it was time to see which player had the winning hoof. The communications channel flooded with incoming messages from the two attacked airships, letting us know that they were being hit hard.

"What are you doing? You're firing at us!"

"Are you crazy or what?"

"TREASON! We have been betrayed!!"

"We are taking heavy damage! The ammo cache has just exploded!"

"Sir, should we evacuate?"

"Losing power fast! Repeat, we're losing power fast! Is there anypony out there?"

"Fleet Command, what the hell is going on?"

"The flotation engine is about to break down! We're going to... AAAAARGH!"

BOOOOOOM!!!

A massive explosion rocked the entire base, and the radio went dead. The engines of the corvettes had blown apart, causing a chain reaction that had turned the once mighty airships into burning smithereens, scattered inside and outside the silo. The last remnants of the mighty Red Fleet were no more, and Ilyushin was alone and cornered in his own lair. Petlyakov's crew cheered and pranced, as they had brought their coup to fruition. It was time to bring them to my side.

"Congratulations!" I cheered. "We did it!"

"Yeah!" Nadyr cheered. "Nice work everypony."

"We couldn't have done it without your help." Pet smiled.

"No, no, we just arrived to make the final adjustments, but you began the coup all along." I patted the pegasus. "You did a very nice job using the turrets against Ilyushin."

"Meh, we're engineers." Pet shrugged. "We like to use our brains more than our muscles."

"That is something I totally agree with." I smiled. "So, what now, Pet?"

"What do you mean by 'now'?" Pet looked puzzled. "Weren't you supposed to take my brother out?"

"Of course, but that was not what I was asking you. What do you intend to do once this is over? After all, the Communist Pegasi Front will be no more."

"That is true. Actually, I hadn't thought of it."

"Would you be interested in hearing my proposal?" I asked.

"Please go on." Pet frowned.

"As you might have heard, I am in charge of the City of New Pegasus. I would like you to join my ranks, helping me develop the needs of the city and its inhabitants. I can pay you handsomely, and believe me, I think that my demands will not be as outrageous as those of the NER. I've been forced to deal with the leaders of the Republic, and they're a bunch of nutters."

"Are they?" Pet smirked. "Which would be your ideas for us to work in?"

"I was thinking in adapting Project Enola to the requirements of New Pegasus. You know that the city takes the power it needs from Hooper Dam, don't you?"

"Yes, I know that."

"Well, the Dam is under NER control right now. Let's imagine that the Republic decides to disconnect us from the grid, or may Celestia not desire that, let's suppose that the Dam is taken over by the Tsar. We would be left in the dark, and frankly, I don't want that to happen. You did say that the energy produced by Project Enola could be harnessed, didn't you?"

"I certainly did, and I see where you're going." Pet nodded. "I like your line of thought, Farsight. Simple and accurate. If you pay us properly, we will have no problems working for you. What do you say, folks?"

"I agree with you, Pet." Junkers smiled. "And I think everypony does the same."

"In that case, you have got yourself a deal!" Pet shook my hoof in agreement. "One last question, though... where will we work?"

"Hmmm... I guess some of you could stay here, but I would need others at Neighliss base and some others by my side in New Pegasus. Can you sort it out?"

"Certainly. It was just a mere doubt that had sprung to mind, nothing major." Pet turned around to address his crew. "All right, everypony, this is how we'll do it. Aichi, I want you to handle the airbase. I assume that Farsight will want to use its automated defences, and you're the one more qualified to do that. Bleriot, you keep in charge of Breakeven Point. I want the base cleaned as soon as possible, understood? I'll go to New Pegasus with Junkers, and if we need more of you to join us, we'll let you know."

"Got it!" The crew replied.

"Now that this is sorted out, let's finish what we came here for!" I stomped the floor.

*** **

"Keep your heads down!" Avro roared. "These ponies have massive firepower!"

A hailstorm of minigun bullets whizzed above our manes while we tried to keep as stuck to the ground as possible. The small antechamber that led to Ilyushin's office and sanctuary had turned into a smoking battlefield, with explosions and gunfire tearing the concrete walls and pillars apart. The Guard of the Communist Front had entrenched itself in an attempt to pull off one last glorious feat, but they had to know that they had absolutely nothing to do. Only their fanatic devotion to their leader kept them resisting.

"This is crazy!" Nadyr whined. "How are we supposed to deal with these bastards? I can't even look out of cover without being blown to pieces!"

"Farsight, didn't you have a targeting system of some kind?" Avro asked.

"You mean S.A.T.S.?"

"That one precisely, yes."

"It won't work, darling. I need to be looking at them to take aim... and frankly, I don't want to risk my hide."

"Then what?" Nadyr whined. "Do we wait until they run out of ammo?"

"That could be a possibility..." Avro mumbled.

"I don't think our cover will last much longer." I groaned. Chips of concrete were coming out of every possible hiding spot, forcing us to squeeze against anything that could hinder the enemies' aim. "We need to think of something."

"Good, because you are the thinky pony!" Avro exclaimed. "Do something!"

"Okay, here goes nothing." I sighed. "HOLD YOUR FIRE!"

"What? You want us to stop firing?" Nadyr exclaimed.

"Shut up and do it!"

Our guns went mute and soon enough, our enemies stopped firing too. They were probably confused because of our unexpected reaction, and I could bet my gold that they were also thinking what to do next. Now that they were distracted, it was time for me to take the initiative.

"Oi, you brave Communist soldiers!" I roared. "I'd like to speak with you!"

"Who the fuck are you, you runt?" a soldier replied.

"My name is Farsight, you might have heard of me. Who am I speaking to?"

"Comrade Sergeant Fairey, of the Red Guard. Yes, I have heard of you and of your attachment to the traitor DeHavilland. What do you want?"

"I want to reason with you, Sergeant. There is no need for us to fight."

"That's where you're wrong, Farsight. The Red Front is on the verge of victory, and that is the reason why we must resist. With our might and our sacrifice, we pegasi will reach a status of power and dominance over the Wasteland!"

"Are you sure about that?" I asked, laughing dimly. "Tell me, Fairey, what is the status of your fleet?"

"Our airships soar the skies!" Fairey replied.

"Really? What about the explosion you just heard? You had to hear the turrets and the detonation."

"Yes, we did hear it."

"Then tell me, Fairey, what do you think your turrets blew up?"

"Ilyushin told us that the traitor DeHavilland hijacked one of our gunships and took out Comrade Grumman. We knew that her wishes of vengeance would drive her here. I still don't know how you managed to survive the crash, though."

"Simple. There was no crash." I chuckled. "Do you know what happened after Neighliss, Sergeant?"

"Our last update has been your arrival at Breakeven Point." Fairey grumbled.

"Who's in charge of keeping you patched up to the news, Fairey?"

"Comrade Commander Ilyushin has been doing that, ever since his despicable brother Petlyakov tried to seize power."

"Ah, of course." I nodded, although Fairey couldn't see me. "It had to be Ilyushin. Then, I assume that he didn't tell you of what happened to the Victory or the Revolution."

"Nothing happened to them, as far as I'm concerned."

"Would you bet your life?" I said coldly. "What if I told you that the two Carriers are nothing more than heaps of burning metal somewhere in the northern desert of Neighvada?"

"I would say you're speaking bullshit."

"Am I? How was I supposed to know that the Victory and the Revolution were flying together in close formation en route to New Pegasus when we intercepted them?"

"You could have guessed that." Fairey grumbled. There was a soft change of tone in his voice, though. "After all, you only needed to know the names of the ships, something that DeHavilland could have told you."

"You're right, I'll give you that. However, would you change your mind if I told you something that Avro couldn't have told me, because she was with me at that time?"

"Good luck finding that out." Fairey laughed in disdain.

"Simple enough. The frigate doing scouting work was the Horizons."

"That's where you're wrong, you stupid cunt!" Fairey laughed. "It was the New Roam!"

"Uh... sir, he's right." One of the soldiers interrupted. "The New Roam was switched to escort duties because of a small engine malfunction. Frigate Horizons was appointed for the spearhead, just prior to the departure."

"What?" Fairey mumbled. "How do you know that?"

"I was in the canteen and I heard the news. It seems that Commander Ilyushin has been keeping us deliberately off the loop."

"Then the Fleet..."

"Fairey, I welcome you to come out to the main shaft and see the wreckage. You'll recognize the corvettes Guise and Starlight there." I was grinning smugly.

"But why would the Commander lie to us?"

"That's easy. Your Fleet has been destroyed, the majority of the remaining pegasi has staged a coup... your only chance to survive is to hide yourself behind a wall of fanatic soldiers who are prepared to give their lives for you. The only way to achieve that is by lying, because nopony would stay by your side in your situation." I sighed. "Fairey, your battle is already lost, so put down your guns. I will welcome you in my ranks, as I reckon you are fine soldiers; but taking Ilyushin out of the picture is a must here."

"Sergeant Fairey..." one of the Guards mumbled. "Farsight is right, we don't owe Ilyushin nothing more. If he has been lying to us all this time, there is no reason for us to stay by his side."

"Be reasonable, Fairey." I said calmly. "There will be no hard feelings towards you, since you were fulfilling your duty."

"But our loyalties..." Fairey grumbled.

"Loyalty is a two-way trade. Where's your Commander's loyalty now, Sergeant?" I roared. "Snap out of it!"

"All right..." Fairey sighed. "Everypony stand down. We're surrendering."

"Good." I popped out of cover and saw four Red troopers walking our way, their helmets still on. "Welcome to New Pegasus... so to speak."

"Thank you, sir." Fairey shook my hoof. "Your orders?"

"Meet up with Petlyakov at the shaft. He'll tell you what we'll do."

"Understood. Move out!"

Fairey roared his orders and the other Guards marched out of the antechamber, leaving us alone to face the reason that we were there for: Ilyushin. When we opened the door to his office, he was waiting for us behind a large wooden desk full of maps and papers, with a gun ready to fire. He was dressed in his parade uniform, gleaming with medals; and desperation shone in his face as he realized that he was alone against the three of us.

"Well, well, well, look at who we have here." Ilyushin growled, displeased. "My dear Avro, it took you long enough... and it seems like you have brought your knight in shining armor as well!"

"To be about to die, you spew a lot of insults, you know." Nadyr grinned.

"Who invited you to this party, stripes?" Ilyushin winced.

"I just happened to crash in. Problem?"

"You're just stupid, Ilyushin." Avro cooed and strutted up and down the room. "Instead of gambling for your life, which is the only thing you have left, you act like a complete prick."

"Ah, Avro, but that's where you're mistaken." Ilyushin sighed. "I can't gamble for something that I have already lost. I know for certain that your lover here is the one who is going to pull the trigger, because you simply can't. Not after all we've been through."

"What?" I asked. "Speak up, Ilyushin."

"He wants to mess with your head, Farsight." Avro warned.

"Really?" Ilyushin laughed. "Then why don't you kill me and end this farce? DO IT!"

Avro gazed at the fallen Commander with hate in her eyes, but didn't pull the trigger. Something was stopping her from taking the final step.

"You see? You simply can't." Ilyushin hissed. "I guess you'll want to know why, don't you, Farsight?"

"Don't listen to him!" Avro screamed. "Please..."

"Well, she can't kill me because she and I have a long story behind us. She used me, plain and simply, to get to a position of power in the Front." Ilyushin grinned mischievously. "Tell me, Farsight, have you witnessed what she's capable of doing in bed? That body is a brainwashing machine... it took me several years to find out, and quite a lot of nights of passion."

"Avro... is that true?" I winced.

"So she has done it to you too!" Ilyushin laughed.

"He's lying!" Avro cried. "He and I have never slept together."

"Really." Ilyushin sneered. "Tell me, Farsight... did she ask you to rub her wings, when she was in the thick of it?"

"Yes..." I felt a shiver of delight when I remembered that moment, just to quickly shake it off. "She did."

"If she and I had never been together, how would I know that?"

"I can't think of a way." I groaned, feeling emptier inside.

"You see, Avro is a professional stallion-eater." Ilyushin sighed. "When I first met her, she was just a low-grade repairpony. She just took care of the everyday appliances, such as toasters or coffee-grinders. She had talent, no doubt, but she needed a little push to climb the ranks... and she clung to me, exchanging sex and pretended love for favors. Then, once she got so close to me that I couldn't think straight, she began to control the politics of the Front. It was her who convinced me of building a large combat Fleet instead of our transport vessels. I have to admit that the designs that she and my brother Petlyakov conceived are very good, but we didn't need to fight as long as we could keep hidden."

"But she told me that..." I babbled. The strength of the revelations were making me shake, and I couldn't even speak straight.

"Lies, lies, lies." Ilyushin mumbled. "All lies. She wanted to play Queen of the Wasteland, she wanted all of the world for her to keep. Then, once our Fleet was ready, she tricked me to start with Project Enola. I thought she had steered away from her domination ideals, but then Pet told me that it could be used as a balefire bomb. I realized that her intentions were to use it to start a war, and that's when I confronted her and took over. However, I didn't have the guts to kill her and it has cost me everything... I've lost everything. So, Farsight, this is what will happen to you too. Once you kill me, it will all be over. She'll dump you for the next passer-by."

I felt as if I had been hit by lightning. All the lies, all the half-baked stories that Avro had been feeding me added up. Everything was clear as daylight: Avro had climbed the ladder using Ilyushin as his stepping stone, and once beside him, she had tried to undermine his status by using others like Pet to support her ideas. Then, Ilyushin had managed to see through her and had tried to stop her machinations, but she had managed to escape and had landed close to me. From there on, it was the same story over and over again. There was so much irony in the situation, come to think of it. The master schemer had been out-schemed himself.

BA-BA-BANG!!

Avro's miniguns ripped Ilyushin's body apart, thrusting him to the back of the room like a broken rag doll. We had won, but at what cost? I couldn't trust Avro anymore, not after what she had done to me. She had used me, she had betrayed me in a way so harmful that it made me want to walk away from everypony in the world. All that we had lived, all the passion and tenderness... all those moments that had made me feel loved... were those all fake? Had she been employing me as a puppet for her own devices?

"Farsight, Ilyushin was a dirty liar." Avro said, trying to keep calm. "He was trying to make us fight each other... please, don't believe any of his words."

"Should I believe yours instead?" I grunted.

"Why do you say that? Don't you trust me?"

"I want to... but now I can't. Not after all the changes in your story, all the ups and downs. I can't discern truth from lie in your words."

"You're assuming that he was telling the truth."

"At least he sounded coherent."

"I told you that Ilyushin was very persuasive... Darling, please, forget about his words. He was desperate."

"What about the wings?"

"The wings?"

"Yes! The part with the wing-rubbing! I assume you don't tell everypony your fetishes!" I roared.

"He... he must have overheard it somewhere. I never... I never told him what turned me on." Avro muttered. "Farsight, my dear... let's return home."

"Avro, I don't know what to say." I held back the tears of anger. "I've been very patient with you, tolerating each and every odd change in your story. I've followed you deep into action, and I've done all this because I love you. I thought you felt the same for me."

"But I do!" Avro galloped close to me and embraced me with her wings. "I love you like I have never loved any other pony. Look in my eyes, Farsight, and tell me if I'm lying to you now. I. Love. You."

I stood gazing at her ambarine eyes while she spoke those words, but I simply couldn't disregard the fact that Ilyushin's words had sown mistrust in my heart. I had no proof, but my gut was telling me that the deceased Commander was right, and that Avro had used him like she had used me. Maybe she felt something for me, but there was no telling if those feelings were sincere or fabricated.

"Farsight, please..." she whispered in my ear, "let's fly back home. I understand that we need to set things straight, and there is something I need to tell you. Come, let's go."

For a moment I considered the possibility of forgetting about all this episode and walking away, but I knew in the very deep that it would only make the problem bigger. I needed to think coldly, and I couldn't do that with Avro around.

"No." I gently freed myself of her embrace. "I... I can't, Avro. Not now. I still love you, at least, I think I do, but I am too confused at the moment. I need some time alone to think and to decide what to do. I've done things that I wouldn't have done if it wasn't for love, but I can't rely on that reason... Go with Nadyr. I'll return with Pet and the Enola."

"Farsight..."

"Go."

"But I..."

"Don't make this harder! GO!"

"My love..."

"GO AWAY!!! NOW!!!" I roared, crying.

"Let's go, Avro." Nadyr grabbed the pegasus mare and walked away. "He'll get over it, but he needs time."

Both my companions exited the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. When nopony could see or hear me, I sat on my flanks and began to cry. A wound in the heart may be invisible, but it's the one that hurts the most.

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For over an hour, I stood in Ilyushin's office, browsing through papers and looking at the entries in the terminal, trying to find solace in the retrieval and analysis of data, but there was little that could make my mind drift away of the pain and sorrow that filled my body. I had been lied to and used like a puppet. I took pride on being the master puppeteer, the one pulling the strings... just to end up like that. I let go a long sigh and wiped the tears off my eyes.

What would I do with her? I felt angry and wanted to have some sort of retribution, but in the very deep, I still loved her. Something in me wanted to believe that there was a connection between the two of us, something genuine and undeniable. Still, if everything between us was fake, why did I cling to her so much? Why couldn't I take a step back and think rationally, as I had done before?

Deep as I was in my thoughts and troubles, I hadn't noticed a small symbol in the terminal screen that revealed an incoming communication. Who could be wanting to contact me? Or was the message meant to be for Ilyushin? Maybe the Red Front had others backing them up, and we had just awoken a sleeping giant... All those questions acted like a breeze of fresh air in my mind, putting me back in gear and ready to face whoever the caller was.

I pressed the button to accept the transmission, and the screen showed the face of a unicorn mare with clear fur and mane, although I couldn't tell which colors she sported, due to the screen being in black and glowy green. My mystery caller wasn't young anymore, although she wasn't too old either. My guess was that she could be around twenty years older than me, but her face showed that she had been through quite a lot of good and bad moments. Her expression was kind, but showed traces of hardness and unwavering resolve, as her eyes met mine in the screen.

"Finally." She spoke with a mixture of sadness and relief.

"Who are you?" I asked. "Why finally?"

"I've been trying to contact you for a long time, Farsight, but I couldn't get past the bloody Divide."

"How do you know my name?" I grunted.

"I have been hearing it for a long time, Farsight. Even if I couldn't see you like I can see the rest of Equestria, I've known of your existence and your feats. Many ponies in the Republic speak about you with fear and admiration."

"You won't be implying that you... you're the Light Bringer?"

"My name is Littlepip, Farsight." She shook her head in dismay. "All the nicknames have been perverted by the NER... they don't fit me no more. Stable Dweller, Light Bringer... all of them used by Praline to enforce her rule over Equestria."

"I thought you were the Supreme Leader."

"Supreme Leader?" Littlepip let go a disgruntled sigh. "Sit on my horn and spin. I am just a mythic figure for almost all of the Wasteland, as I was for you until a minute ago, Farsight. Very few ponies can reach me, which gives the Republic the chance to use and abuse my figure as a reason to carry forth any of their policies, even if I disagree with most of them."

"Can't you try and reach out to the population?"

"The Republic watches me very closely, Farsight. They have me on a leash, trapped in my ivory tower, with no chance whatsoever to change the world. I may have brought the light, but they have grabbed it for their own profit."

"If you're so tightly controlled, how have you managed to contact me?"

"I suppose they didn't expect anypony to respond in this frequency. However, I'm sure that this will be our last chance to speak."

"Why?"

"Let me ask you a question, Farsight. Do you really think that the Republic didn't know about the existence of the Red Front?"

"It sounds hard to believe, but I've seen stranger things happening."

"Believe me, they did know very well about Ilyushin's group of rogue pegasi. However, they let it be, because they thought that a closed air space would help them conquer Neighvada and the lands beyond. In fact, I know that Praline and Ilyushin signed an alliance to help

each other in case of need."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"I am not." Littlepip frowned. "The NER denied your petition of help, didn't it?"

"Yes. Harpsong said that they didn't deserve the Republic's attention, though."

"Did you believe that?"

"It wasn't about believing or not believing. We had to do something, and if we couldn't count with the Republic, we would have to act on our own."

"And so you did." Littlepip sighed. "Have you thought on the consequences?"

"I..."

"No, you have not." Littlepip smiled. "Of course you haven't. You're in love. I see it in your eyes, you can't hide it. I've been through the same, believe me."

"I know you have. I read the book."

"Ah, yes, the book." She sneered. "No other pony in the world has more coverage than me, I guess. Anyway, I know you're in love, and I know that love drives us to do things without thinking on what they'll bring."

"For me, they've brought sorrow. All lies... but it's no use to speak about it anymore. What do you want from me? You said you've been trying to reach me for a long time."

"I have." Littlepip nodded. "I am worried about the future of the Wasteland, Farsight. All the good things that we fought for, all the noble ponies that sacrificed themselves to turn this world into a better place... everything is falling apart once again. It seems like we haven't learnt the lesson that the War taught us, and we keep being selfish and twisted. There is no development in the Republic, only bloated expansionism and the same raiderish behaviour of earlier days, only disguised under the banner of a new regime."

"I have seen them work, Littlepip. I understand your point."

"The problem is that there are no leaders, there are no ponies capable of seeing the bigger picture. I thought there was no hope, but then I began to hear the stories about New Pegasus, about how something was changing in there... the news about the gangs allying and cooperating, the downfall of the old mobsters who had kept the city in a state of lethargy for decades, all of it driven by a young and ambitious pony. That's when I started believing that there was a chance for a better future, for somepony to step up and follow what me and my friends began twenty years ago."

"You don't really know me, Littlepip. I am as selfish as you can get out here."

"Are you?"

"Certainly."

"Still, being so selfish, under your command New Pegasus has flourished. Others would have pillaged the city and would have let it rot, but you have put your efforts in making those under your rule live in prosperity. That is something that all of us could profit from, if you decided to take the risk."

"I think you're trying to convince the wrong pony, Littlepip." I shrugged. "I don't believe in ponykind. All that it's showed me is cruelty and vileness. This is a pony-eat-pony world, and the only reason why I work for the welfare of New Pegasus is to ensure that I don't get toppled by any revolution of unhappy citizens."

"Is that a reason to turn your back on the world and leave everything aside?" Littlepip frowned. "If I had done the same, I would have found a place to hide and would have lived as a hermit... and then ponies like Red Eye or the Goddess would have had nothing in their way to stop them. You have the power to turn this world into a better place... why don't you do it?"

"You're not the first one that tells me the same story." I grunted.

"Because I'm not the only one that sees your true potential. You're smart, cunning and brave. You have overcome dangers that many other ponies wouldn't even have dared to face. You know how to make ponies tick, and you know how to handle things... There hasn't been anypony more prepared than you to reunite Equestria."

"Oh, please." I laughed. "Cut it out. Reuniting Equestria is an impossible ordeal."

"Not for you, Farsight. I believe in you, and I have the feeling that you know what the right decision is. You could be a chosen one, even if you don't believe in such things."

"Littlepip, you're right. I don't believe in such things, and I think that you shouldn't try to waste your time trying to convince me to start changing my way of thinking." I shook my head sternly. "I understand that you must feel very frustrated because they are using you for their purposes... I know the sensation."

"It's not that, Farsight... After all these years, I've realized that there are things that need to be done in the Wasteland. Ponykind needs individuals capable of devoting themselves to greater purposes, for the greater good. The Wasteland needs heroes, Farsight, and you qualify to be one."

"I am no hero, Littlepip. I don't know about you, but I never wanted to be a hero. I have fought to survive, and then I've played with everypony to climb the ladder. That's not very heroic... Sorry, but I am not the pony you are looking for."

Littlepip let go a long and mournful sigh.

"Oh well... I don't give up hope yet, though. Don't forget about my words, Farsight. If one day you change your mind, you'll have me backing you up. Littlepip out."

*** **

Petlyakov was waiting for me at the shaft, close to a gunship with the engine already buzzing and ready to go. He had taken off the dirty orange jumpsuit and had switched it for a sharp-looking blue and silver flightsuit, similar to the one Avro used to wear. His calm smile and peaceful attitude turned worried when he saw my face.

"Ah, Farsight, there you are." He shook my hoof. "Is something wrong? You look... sad."

"I've had some issues in there... but you don't need to worry about them, Pet. They are mine to solve."

"Are they?" Pet snickered. "You and I are on the same team now, and whatever worries the leader of my team is something I should at least know about. Maybe I can provide a solution."

"I thank you for your disposition, Pet, but I don't think you can help me with this."

"It's about Av, right?" Pet asked. "I was surprised when I saw her and the zebra leave the base without you."

"Yes, it's about Avro..." I sighed. "She and I have had a bit of a clash."

"I see. Well, she can be a bit difficult sometimes." Pet shrugged. "Everypony in Breakeven Point knows that. After all, Av is a bit... peculiar. Anyway, what's the problem?"

"I don't know if I want to talk about it." I grunted.

"Have it your way, Farsight." Pet shook his head. "Should we be leaving, or do you have something else to do here?"

"Is the Enola device ready?"

"Yes, I loaded it myself into this little baby." Pet patted the hull of the gunship, which made a soft clunking sound.

"Isn't the device heavy?"

"Not really. It's made out of light materials, and besides, I was lucky enough to find some pre-War anti-gravity suspension devices that were still working. They help to ease the load."

"Fair enough." I nodded. "Let's go then."

Pet leapt into the gunship cockpit, while I climbed into the back. The menacing metal cylinder of the Enola device was sitting there, tightly strapped to the walls and the floor of

the small aircraft. I latched myself to the Mystral while Pet fiddled with the controls, getting the engine into optimal levels of output and working an ascending trajectory out of the base.

"Are you ready?" Pet asked.

"As ready as I can be." I sighed.

"Then hold on tight! This ascent is going to be tough!"

Easier said than done. The gunship darted upward at full speed, as if it had been released from a gigantic rubber band; and I felt all my body being pressed against the floor. The pain coming from my legs was close to making me black out, but Pet didn't seem to be too affected by the crushing downforce. He just whistled a tune and handled the controls of the aircraft with patience and proficiency. I saw the concrete walls end, and we whizzed into the open skies above the sandy storms of the Divide. Once high enough, Pet stabilized the gunship and began flying at a fixed altitude.

"Well, we're out!" He stretched. "How was it?"

"Frankly, I wouldn't like to do that again." I groaned.

"You earthlings are not used to moving in the vertical axis, that's all." Pet grinned. "A dozen flights more, and you'll be good to go."

"Still, I don't want to do a dozen flights. Not even a half dozen."

"Oh well..." Pet shrugged.

Silence fell between us, as I didn't feel like replying to Pet's wisecracking remarks. He was a nice fellow, odd to the bone, and he had a tendency to want to have the last word in every discussion. Then again, it was good to have his intelligence in our side.

"Pet..." I said. "I need to ask you something, and I need you to be honest with me. Really honest."

"Go ahead."

"What happened between Avro and Ilyushin?" I asked. "Is she the kind of mare that plays with stallions?"

"Ilyushin told you the same old tale, didn't he?" Pet smiled. "Well, they did have a relationship together... and I'll admit that Avro can be a bit mischievous sometimes, but they broke up because Ilyushin was a total dick."

"Really? Then what about building the Fleet?"

"Avro was a counsellor, Farsight. Both shared the idea of a powerful fleet soaring the skies,

but my brother had no idea about what we needed. Avro, on the other hoof, did; and being Ilyushin's most trusted pony, she was the one he asked for help."

"But..." I mumbled. "She lied to me, Pet. All the time, she told me stories about how noble she was and how evil the Front had been to her."

"There is something I can't deny... Avro loved to be treated as somepony important, so it's understandable that she does anything to cling to that relevance." Pet shrugged. "She's like that, and there's not much you can do about her."

"I trusted her, Pet." I groaned. "I did all she asked me to do, and then I find out that she did it not because she loved me, but because I was somepony important. What do you expect me to do?"

"I'm nopony to tell you what you have to do... I only say that you shouldn't rush to judge her. Avro seemed very worried and sad when she left Breakeven Point."

"Really?" I blinked.

"I swear to Celestia." Pet raised his hoof. "Besides, she told me that..."

BOOOM! BOOM! BOOOOM!

A series of explosions rocked the gunship, making us flail around. What could have caused them? Was it a malfunction in one of the systems? Or were we being attacked by somepony? If that was the case, who could it be?

"What is going on?" I yelled.

"We're under attack!" Pet groaned, while switching through different control panels.

"By whom? Is it another gunship?"

"No... the radars show no activity. It must come from the ground!"

"Flak gunners?" I mumbled. "But we're flying over Republic territory! I thought you were allied with them!"

"You said it right, we WERE allied with them." Pet stomped the metal floor. "But it seems that some ponies don't stand much for their word. Let's hope it was all a..."

BOOOM!! BOOM! BOOOOM!!

"You were saying?" I growled.

"Damn!" Pet yelled, as the control panels turned red. "We've lost the air brakes and our engine has been hit!"

"What does it mean?"

"Well, we can't land without brakes and we'll plummet down if the engine fails." Pet whined.
"And with that on board..."

"Oh crap." I realized that a crash landing could fire the Enola. "Let me think... this is what we'll do. You take the Enola with you and fly back home."

"But..." Pet stuttered.

"You said it's easy to handle, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yes, the antigrav systems make it very light."

"Then pick it up and return to New Pegasus with it."

"What about you, Farsight?"

"I'll try to land this thing as softly as possible." I answered, trying to appear calm. "I've seen you and Avro pilot these tin cans... I'll manage to lay it on the ground."

"Are you sure?"

"No, I'm not, but what else can we do? You can't sustain both me and the Enola, can you?"

"I don't think so..."

"In that case, get flying already!" I ordered.

Pet walked to the back of the gunship while I unlatched myself and advanced clumsily towards the cockpit. The controls were simple, a rod to guide the aircraft, a power lever and a lot of buttons and control panels. Anyway, I just needed to get down without crashing. Nothing too complicated... ha ha.

"OK, Farsight." Pet had already detached the Enola from the hull and was ready to fly away. "I would advise you to lower the power output to a 30%. That way, you'll gradually lose altitude and maybe even some speed due to friction. Then try to land somewhere flat and open, just to have time to stop."

"Got it." I nodded.

"Don't forget about bailing out if necessary. It's better to get a bit whacked by a roll on the ground than to die in a mash of burning metal."

"Will you fly away, dammit?" I grunted.

Pet grabbed the metal cylinder of the Enola and opened his wings wide.

"Good luck, Farsight." He nodded. "Let's hope we meet again soon."

The pegasus jumped out of the gunship, leaving me alone with the task of landing it in the least traumatic way possible. I should have been scared, even terrified, for the prospect of dying was very close, but I guess that my mind was too busy processing all the data from the control panels to even think about fear. Following Pet's orders, I moved the power lever down to 30 percent, and the engine responded by moaning sadly as the energy demanded out of the gemstone became dimmer. The gunship rattled and shook, and without notice, began to lose altitude at a worrisome rate. Pet hadn't warned me that the descent would be so steep, and I was forced to look for a proper place to land. There was no wide flat area to be seen, as that zone of the Neighvada Wasteland was craggy and irregular.

"Shit..." I mumbled. "I don't have too much time."

Suddenly, I saw my salvation before me. The crags and hills were descending into a vast open extension of water: Lake Honeymead. I just needed to use the water surface to brake the gunship until it came to a halt, and it would all be over. I smiled out of pure satisfaction, and pushed the rod to get close to the lake.

"Easy now... easy now..." I grumbled.

The small aircraft vibrated when the lower end touched the water, and I pushed it a bit more downward to cause a greater drag resistance, as the far end of the lake was getting closer and it didn't seem that the gunship was going to stop anytime soon. I certainly didn't want to get to the other shore, as it was territory of the Tsardom, but if I pushed the rod further down I would end up sinking in the lake.

"No... no... stop... stop!" I punched the control panel. "Stop, NOW!"

Despite all my cries and whines, the gunship reached the eastern shore of Lake Honeymead, crashing harshly against the rocky ground. The violent deceleration sent me headfirst against the control panels, and the impact left me dizzy and disoriented. Bleeding from the forehead, I stumbled out of the downed aircraft and began to walk along the lakeshore. If I had been in a better condition, I would have paid attention to my E.F.S. If I hadn't been knocked so hard, I would have seen the hostiles getting close. Then again, I wasn't.

"Freeze." Somepony cocked a gun, and before I could do anything, something hit me in the back of my head, and the world turned black.

#

Note: Reputation Change

Communist Pegasi Front: Obedient. The remnants of the rogue pegasi group have decided to join your ranks.