

CRISIS: Equestria

Chapter Thirty: Immolation

Havocwing blasted apart a mechanical pony with an explosive ball of fire, then swerved to the side to avoid being shot by its counterparts. She twirled into the cover of a burned out building, using it for cover from the flechette rounds that were being fired her way. When the sounds of spiked bullets striking the wall stopped, she chanced a peek around the wall's edge, aggravated at the sight of a dozen familiar-looking robots advancing on her position

"Pfh, this is stupid," she said. "We picked a bad time to break into the city. Of all the times for the dumb military to come flying in."

"Surely this is not mere coincidence."

Havocwing jumped in surprise as Starlight teleported in beside her. "Damnit, sis, don't do that crap!"

"Apologies, Havoc."

Starlight tilted her head around the corner towards the approaching troops, half of whom were attempting to flank their position. Her eyes narrowed when she saw the small wrecked structure behind the soldiers. It matched the description that Curaçao had given on the underground entrances: a white box with a metal door, labeled with bright, colorful orange markings. She couldn't make out any of the writing, as the damage to the building was too severe.

"So then, it is perceptible that this route has likewise been demolished. This impedes our hunt for an avenue to the underground facilities."

"No luck from the others, either?"

Starlight sighed. "Negative. Every underground entrance we have located has been sabotaged. The Hope's Point militia is thorough, if nothing else."

Havocwing slumped against the wall. "Damnit, where's Curaçao when you need her?" She peeked behind the corner and saw the Troopers taking defensive positions. "Yo sis, you wanna help me clear these out?"

"Squandering our time is unwise," Starlight noted, lighting up her horn. "Let us reunite with the others at the rendezvous point."

Havocwing groaned. "Fine, fine. You're right, blowing these stupid machines up isn't any

fun anyway.”

With a flash and a pop, the two mares warped into existence in Hope’s Point’s city square. Havocwing tilted her head back to sneer at the cruisers flying overhead. They were easy to see from any point in the city, as there were no tall buildings to obscure their view. They had ruined everything about their plan, and their slow demolition of the city was further impeding their progress.

“Where’s everypony else?” Havocwing asked, glancing around the empty square.

“Disappointing,” Starlight said, shaking her head. “They surely wandered off again. They are not as despondent as you, sister, when concerning the destruction of these mechanical collections of scrap metal. Velvet in particular seemed peculiarly enthusiastic.”

A large explosion drew their attentions east.

Havocwing sighed. “That sounds like Gray to me. Let’s go get her then look for the others.”

She took wing and raced off in the direction of the noise, with Starlight galloping at full speed behind her. They weaved their way through city streets, passing derelict buildings that had once housed all manners of businesses. They rounded another corner, and saw what was left of a squad, only half a dozen Troopers, each of them aiming skyward and firing rounds at an airborne target. Havocwing kept her focus on the squad, not bothering to look up; she knew what was coming next.

Grayscale crashed to the ground, tearing apart cement and creating a crater several yards across on impact. The troopers that were too close to her landing point were blown apart. Those that weren’t were knocked flying.

She lifted off again and charged at the nearest trooper, punching its head clean off with a heavy-weighted hoof. She swept towards another trooper, kicking it hard in the midsection and shattering it into pieces.

The last remaining soldier aimed its shoulder-mounted guns at Grayscale and fired. Grayscale flicked her wings, and the incoming rounds plinked harmlessly to the cement yards away from their target.

She lunged forward, flicked her wings again, and kicked the machine in the chest. Hard. It screeched past the alley where Havocwing and Starlight were standing and observing the battle.

Grayscale flicked her wings again, and the machine slammed into the wall of another

building and exploded.

She snorted and strode towards her sisters. A noise behind her drew her attention, and she tilted her head to look. The trooper was attempting to get back up.

With several powerful strokes, she flapped her wings, causing the trooper to collapse under its own weight. Her continued flapping forced the machine into the ground. It attempted to stand, but its leg twisted and snapped off the instant it touched the ground. Sparks flew as the pressure crushed its head before grinding its entire body into a pile of scrap.

Starlight teleported to Grayscale's side. "Sister, did you not hear your elder sister's command? We are to sojourn at the rendezvous point—"

"I heard just fine, Star." Grayscale shrugged. "Big sis's orders don't really matter. If I don't want to follow them, I'm not gonna follow them." She stretched her wings and legs, and yawned. "Besides, waiting around in one spot is dumb. Those things tried to ambush me."

"Regardless of how 'dumb' it was, that was the command issued," Starlight said, poking Grayscale in the chest. "I expected better of you, Grayscale. Insubordination is typically not your forte."

"It is when I get dumb orders."

"Hey, don't call my orders dumb!" Havocwing shouted, swooping over to Grayscale. "I didn't hear anypony else suggest any ideas."

Starlight stared at Grayscale for a moment, deep in thought. "Very well. They are obtuse, then," she said, giving Grayscale an encouraging look.

Havocwing furrowed her brow. "Well I guess that—"

"That also means 'dumb'," Grayscale said.

Starlight's eyes darted between Grayscale and the increasingly-agitated Havocwing. "Torpid."

"Torpid... hey, that word sounds pretty cool," Havocwing said. "Almost like torpedo. Yeah! I'm a torped—"

"Also, 'dumb'." Grayscale shrugged and ruffled Starlight's mane. "You're bad at this, little sis."

"Remove your hooves from my mane at once!" Starlight glared and stomped her hoof. "I

am *attempting* to conform to Havoc's command. I am not insinuating that her proposals are 'dumb', *you* are. I am merely suggesting vocabulary that may allow you to establish your intended meaning—"

"By using words that are too big for Havoc to understand," Grayscale finished. "In other words, taking advantage of her being 'dumb'."

Starlight's eyes darted back and forth between Havocwing and Grayscale before she cleared her throat. "That was... not my intention. You are purposefully misinterpreting and over-simplifying the definitions of my suggested vocabulary. 'Obtuse' means—"

Havocwing flailed her hooves in the air, sending flames dancing about. "Shut up, shut up, *shut up!*" She snapped a hoof upwards with an air of authority. "New rule! Every time somepony uses a fancy word to veil an insult, they have to put a bit in the Veiled Insult Jar."

Starlight blinked, dumbfounded. "The... Veiled Insult Jar?"

"Yeah! Also, I'm gonna need a jar. I don't know what kind of sizes they come in, but... small enough to carry around and large enough to hold a good number of bits, I guess."

"Havoc, you're an idiot," Grayscale said, blunt as ever.

"Hey! Buck you, you get to put the first bit in!"

"Technically, Havoc, that was not a 'veiled' insult," Starlight said.

"Shut up! Bucking crap, you two, just... just shut up!"

They stayed quiet, though Grayscale kept a light smirk on her face.

Havocwing took a deep breath. "Okay, now, all we need to do is find Insipid and—"

"Hee-eeey!"

Havocwing froze up in surprise and fell flat to the ground.

Velvet bounded over Havocwing, landing with her hooves on either side of the pegasus, and started bouncing excitedly. "Hey Havoc! I just got finished breaking *fifty* more of those robo-ponies! Let's see, with Grayscale's extra fifteen, and your extra... what, five? That puts me in the lee-eed," she sing-songed.

"I stopped counting a while ago," Havocwing said, snorting smoke into Velvet's face. "Stupid robots don't count towards anything anyway. All that matters are those idiots." She

grunted and poked Velvet in the nose. “And *you’re* supposed to be helping us find our way down into the underground! Breaking robots is helping *how?*”

“Uh...” Velvet tilted her head back to the tendril form on her back. “Hey Clottles, how does breaking robots help again? I forgot.”

“Well, Red, it’s merely an application of practice,” Clottles said via Velvet’s increasingly worse ventriloquism. *“Without your fear powers, you must rely entirely on your blood powers. So, it makes sense to practice using them on ponies that can’t feel fear anyway. You’re a little rusty with them, after all.”*

Velvet turned back to Havocwing. “See? Clottles is smart. I’m not as good with my blood stuff, so I’m trying to improve!”

Havocwing stared at the large tendril, and shook her head when it winked back. “Red, you... no, nevermind, no comment. Gotta try and be a good leader.” She scrambled to her hooves and straightened her mane. “Okay okay, that’s one missing pony. Now where the hell is Insipid?”

Her eyes widened as she stared at Starlight. “Wait a second, where the hell *is* Insipid? Didn’t Curaçao and I order you to keep an eye on her?!” She put her face in her hooves. “Great, now we have to hope she didn’t get distracted by anything shiny!”

Starlight frowned, brushing Havocwing’s hoof aside when the pegasus started poking her. “Cease your agitation, sister. Insipid is currently under surveillance as ordered. I possess knowledge of everypony’s whereabouts, if you recall?” She rubbed the back of her head, then shrugged. “Well, excepting Curaçao, of course. Some manner of magic is preventing me from sensing her coordinates underground.”

Havocwing rolled her eyes. “Well at least you have Insipid on a leash, then, even if it’s kind of a long one. Where is she?”

Starlight pointed west. “The rendezvous point. It is evident she has returned there, perhaps after becoming disinterested with whatever diverted her attention in the first place.”

Havocwing took to the air and headed back to the city square with the others behind her. She flew a quick lap over the meeting spot, then swooped down when she caught sight of Insipid huddled near the wrecked fountain in the center. Applejack’s stetson still rested unevenly on the unicorn’s head, and she seemed to be distracted by something in her hooves.

“Yo! Insipid!” Havocwing called. She landed next to Insipid and stomped towards her. “Where the hell have you—” Havocwing reached out to shake Insipid’s shoulder.

The unicorn snapped her hoof up and batted Havocwing away. "It's mine! Get away!" she exclaimed, tucking her hooves away to hide something.

Havocwing huffed and shook her hoof. "Geez, calm down sis. I'm not gonna take your... whatever you found." She scratched her head. "Uh... what did you find anyway? Is it cool?"

Inspid brightened and showed off her prize, a sparkling green gemstone that emitted a soft glow that highlighted her face. "Do you like him?!" she asked, lifting it up with a proud smile on her face.

"Wait... him?"

"Yeah! Oh, let me introduce you." She presented the gem to Havoc with a wide grin. "Havoc, this is Jerry. Jerry, this is Havoc."

"Jerry?" Havocwing stared at Inspid, then muttered to herself, "What the hell is wrong with everypony?"

"I found him while I was, like, looking around the fashion district for an entrance and junk? Check him out! He's so shiny! And green! I like green."

Grayscale swooped in with a heavy landing, knocking Havocwing and Inspid off-balance; the latter fumbled with her hooves to keep the gem from landing on the ground. "I thought blue was your favorite color?" Grayscale asked.

Inspid shot Grayscale a glare, then scrambled back a little as Velvet and Starlight approached as well. "Pfft, not anymore," she snorted, turning her nose up and scrunching it as if the thought of the color disgusted her. "Blue is a *totally* lame color. Only major grody losers like blue."

"Uh... you realize Gray is blue... right?" Havocwing asked.

Inspid either didn't hear the comment, or ignored it. "Green is, like, so much better? I mean, like, green is just... it's pretty! I don't know why I like it!"

Starlight laughed. "I theorize that it is because green is associated with greed and envy. A perfectly natural preference, Inspid."

"I prefer *red*," Velvet said, swinging a bloody tendril around with flair. "It's the best color there is! The color of *blood*, and *murder*, and it's even my name! How cool is that? Not like gray, which is a totally dull color, and is part of Gray's name, since she's totally dull."

"Are we done wasting time with favorite colors?" Havocwing asked, tapping her hooves

on the pavement. “We need to find an entrance underground. Star says you guys couldn’t find any either?”

“Negative.” “Nope!” “Nuh-uh.”

Havocwing groaned and slumped to the ground. “We’ve swept the whole city by now! Where the hell are we gonna find an entrance now?”

“Tell me again, like, why Star can’t just blow a hole through the ground?” Insipid asked, twirling her new gem around on the tip of her hoof. As it caught the light, the gem started spreading the green light over the others as well.

“Curaçao’s most recent report concerned some manner of framework underground that restrains the earth,” Starlight explained. “And, with the methods that they are crafted in, there exist undue risks to entering via force.”

She used her magic and her hooves to give a presentation of the idea, creating a shimmering display of magic that resembled a half-sphere.

“If I simply blasted through, the entire underground could possibly collapse,” she said, punching her hoof through the magic to demonstrate. The dome of magic she’d created collapsed under its own artificial weight.

“Curaçao expressed her certainty that there were countermeasures installed to prevent such an action, and with the barrier reactivated, I am unsure if it would be wise to force the issue.”

“Weren’t you listening to Curaçao’s reports at all, Insipid?” Havocwing asked, crossing her hooves.

“Nope,” Insipid said as she juggled her gemstone.

Havocwing hung her head. “How did I know you were gonna say that?”

“I’ve got, like, better things to do than listen to what dumb ol’ not-perfect Curaçao has to say. If she’s so smart, why aren’t we underground already?”

“Well, whatever.” Havocwing sighed and scratched her head. “Now what? We can’t just wait around here until Curaçao gets in contact with us again, can we?”

“Waiting around doing nothing sounds like a good plan to me,” Grayscale said before letting out a great yawn and flopping to the ground.

“Dammit, this is wasting time!” Havocwing shouted, stomping her hooves on the pavement.

Starlight suddenly jerked upwards and staggered back. She looked shocked, and her eyes were glowing a dim white.

“Um... you okay, sis?” Havocwing asked.

Starlight shook her head, and her eyes returned to normal. “An abundance of magic, surging forth from underneath us. The barrier—”

Velvet pointed upwards, bouncing on all four hooves to get everypony’s attention. “Hey look, check it out!”

Everypony else looked skyward. The murky, orange sky that had been unobstructed was now obscured once again by a golden sheen. The three cruisers fired their weapons at the reactivated force field, but their attempts simply exploded against the barrier, sending out ripples of magic as the impact force scattered about. Nothing was getting through that barrier.

“The shield’s back up?” Havocwing grunted and scratched her head. “Curaçao’s supposed to be keeping it down until we meet up. What gives?”

Velvet nervously rubbed her leg. “You don’t think anything’s happened to her, do you? Curaçao’s all by herself down there, what if—”

“She’ll be fine.” Grayscale said, stretching out her legs like a cat. “She’s probably hiding somewhere and got tired of waiting for us to get down there. I know *I’m* tired of waiting for us to get down there.”

“The barrier is as resistant as ever,” Starlight observed, tapping her chin. “However, I am not detecting techno-magic signatures from the remnants of the city. They solely reactivated the shield, so as to safeguard the city from the cruisers, it seems.”

“And that means?” Havocwing asked.

“It signifies the fact that our route underground remains barred.”

“Hey look!” Velvet pointed skyward again. “The cruisers are turning around!”

The three large aircraft above them slowly rotated south, activating their powerful rear engines and racing off towards the sea. The large side hatches were already opening, waves of airborne A.M.P. Troopers streaming out like bees from a hive.

“They’re leaving?” Havocwing scratched her head. “Why would they leave? Aren’t they here to destroy the city?”

“If they were here to destroy anything, they would’ve been firing weapons before that shield went up,” Grayscale pointed out. “They’re heading south, so they’re after somepony.”

“After somepony...” Havocwing jerked her head up. “Aw crap! You don’t think—”

“It would seem our counterparts have acquired a means of transportation,” Starlight said, her mouth curling in a sneer. “Of course, that is a mere assumption. It may possibly be them, but it may possibly not be.”

“Whether it is or isn’t, we need to get a ship for ourselves, and fast! Come on, there’s gotta be some way underground that we haven’t thought of yet!” Havocwing shouted, darting her head back and forth in hopes of finding a point of entry.

“We could always dig,” Velvet said, pointing at one of her shovel-shaped tendrils.

“Dig? Like, ew, totally. Major. Grody,” Inspid said, pulling her head back and making a face of disgust. “That’ll, like, get me all dirty and junk? Daddy says that cleanliness is next to... uh... perfectness, so if I get dirty, that makes me less perfect? Right?”

“Oh, quit whining and *dig!*” Velvet shouted, jabbing her shovel into the ground and demonstrating. “*♪Heigh ho, heigh ho. It’s off to work we go.*”

“Digging’s gonna take forever!” Havocwing groaned. “C’mon, can’t you guys think of anything faster? We can’t blast our way down, and I’m not gonna sit here and dig for three days, so what else is there?”

“I suppose I could attempt a teleportation,” Starlight mused.

“Don’t you need to see where you’re going to do that?”

Starlight smiled and tapped her head. “Curaçao’s last known location was within the underground passages. In theory, a successful teleport could transport one to a location they have had described in detail to them.”

“So... you can teleport us down there?”

“Again, in theory. Reports on the success of such a feat are scarce. Hence my hesitation to suggest it earlier.”

Havocwing pumped a hoof. “Now that’s what I’m talking about! C’mon, Star, whip that

sucker up! Let's go!" She stared at Starlight a moment, noticing the unicorn not lighting up her horn at all. "Uh... that's an order?"

Starlight scuffed her hoof against the pavement. "Are you positive this is an erudite decision? There is a certain element of danger to such a feat. Accuracy is hardly guaranteed, safety even less so."

"Better than waiting around up here," Havocwing said. She pointed to her left. "Look at Grayscale, she's bored out of her mind!"

Starlight stared at Grayscale, who was staring off into space, her face the perfect display of a complete lack of interest. "Havoc, Grayscale constantly wears that expression."

"Nevermind," Havocwing dismissed. She pointed her hoof downwards. "C'mon, let's see what you've got! I bet that little wuss Twilight Sparkle couldn't do it. You're better than her, right?"

Starlight snapped to attention, her eyes flashing with anger. "I am irrefutably superior to Twilight Sparkle!"

Havocwing smirked. "Well, prove it then!"

"Very well." Starlight nodded, and turned to the rest of the group. "Everypony gather around me." As the others grouped up tightly around her, she added, "I must inform you all that this may be... *unpleasant*."

Starlight and her sisters blinked into existence underground, and landed hard on a cold steel floor.

Havocwing groaned and tried to stand upright, but was buried under a pile of mares. "Oww... why do I always end up on the bottom?" She started to furiously scrape her tongue. "Ugh! This time everything tastes green! Why does everything taste green? Blech... ech..."

"My gemstone! It melted!" Insipid wailed, trying to scoop up the remains of her gem which were now just a liquid mess all over Havocwing's face. "Nooo! Havoc! Stop, like, eating Jerry! You're not a dragon!"

Starlight leapt off the pile of mares and brushed herself off. She twirled around, examining her surroundings, quite pleased to find herself exactly where she thought she should be. "This is... yes! Brilliant! Ha ha! My theory was legitimate!"

“Starlight!” Inspid barked, leaping off the pile herself and shaking what was left of her gem in Starlight’s face. “You melted Jerry!”

“Jerry?” Starlight asked, turning to Havocwing.

“Don’t ask.”

Starlight shook her head. “Right. Yes. We will... procure a replacement for you, Inspid. Do not... grieve. For Jerry.”

“But Staaar...”

“Relax, Inspid,” Velvet chirped, bounding over and putting her hoof on Inspid’s shoulder. “Think of it this way: once we find a ship, we can find those idiots, and then we can do all sorts of unspeakable things to them!”

“Like, how will that help?”

“Well, think about it! If we didn’t need to go chasing them, then Star wouldn’t have needed to do that fancy teleport, and Jerry wouldn’t have been made into pasty goo!”

Inspid burst into tears. “Waaah! Jerry is *dea-hea-head!*”

Starlight sighed and put a hoof to her face. “Tactful as always, Velvet.”

“Well, revenge is the best medicine there is,” Velvet said, sticking out her tongue.

“Where are we, anyway?” Havocwing asked, floating into the air.

“Well, this should be within proximity of one of the traditional entrances to the underground,” Starlight mused. She hummed and pointed off towards the large red and gold structure in the distance. “That seems a good landmark to utilize for now, would you agree? I believe Curaçao made mention of it.”

“Yeah, sure, let’s go. Curaçao’s gotta be around here somewhere.”

Grayscale yawned. “I hope so.”

“Follow me,” Starlight said, lighting up her horn.

She led them through the underground city streets, which, unlike the upper levels, had minimal businesses but a large amount of residential complexes. The silence was disturbing; she could hear her own hoofsteps echoing around her. As with the surface, everything was

abandoned, including the hospital, which she'd expected would at least be treating anypony wounded in the assault. Then again, Curaçao had informed them that the city had been evacuated. It was likely the citizenry were all holed up in some bunker further underground.

The artificial sun above was dimmer than she remembered it being described. The eerie darkness of the streets made her feel as though she were back in New Pandemonium City's smog-blanketed streets, only there was no power in any of the street lights, neon signs, or windows of buildings. She could barely see more than a block ahead.

Most importantly, she took note of the myriad bullet holes and scorch marks dotting the buildings, and the wreckage of A.M.P. Troopers that lay strewn about. Curiously, the wrecked robot soldiers had all been piled neatly along the sides of the street like garbage.

She turned to Havocwing, hovering just at her side, and saw the pegasus looking at it all with just as much scrutiny. "Are you pondering what I am pondering, Havoc?"

"I think so, Star, but this really isn't the time to be thinking about getting a timeshare."

"...what?"

"What?"

"I was referring to the shattered remains of—"

"Oh! Right, I was... uh..." Havocwing nodded and crossed her legs. "I know what a fight looks like, and there was definitely some fighting going on here. Those robo-ponies might not be a match for us, but they'd make quick work of average ponies I think. I don't think this was done by those idiots either."

"Then it may be prudent for us to maintain vigilance," Starlight said, glancing about more diligently. "Whoever or whatever produced these results may still linger in our proximity."

The group rounded a corner and moved towards an intersection in the streets. The buildings on the four corners were tall, three-storied structures with few identifying features aside from signs that marked them as residential complexes. This intersection was devoid of the wrecked mechanical soldiers, and looked as though it hadn't seen much combat at all.

Velvet lagged behind, before suddenly stopping as the group approached the center. It took a moment for Havocwing and everypony else to notice.

Havocwing turned first, and gestured forward with a hoof. "Yo Red, keep those hooves steppin', we've got ground to cover. What's the holdup?"

Velvet sniffed the air. A red tint crept into her eyes, and her mouth broke into a wide, fanged smile. "I smell blood."

She crept towards one of the buildings, then lashed a tendril towards the corner, bursting through the metal and concrete wall. She cackled as her tendril squirmed about in the rubble, until at last she yanked out a pegasus clad in red and gold armor. There was a wound on his exposed front leg.

She drew him to her, her cackling growing louder. "Well hello there! Aren't you a delicious morsel?"

"One of the Hope's Point Militia?" Starlight mused. She glanced about the intersection, curious. "What is a solitary soldier loitering in this vicinity—"

"Halt! Stand down, or we will open fire!" called a voice from the second story of one of the buildings.

Starlight and her sisters backed into one another, as multiple other ponies clad in the same armor poked out from hiding spots scattered throughout the other buildings. The soldiers aimed weaponry in their direction: unicorns levitated guns with their magic, pegasi had guns mounted on their forelegs, and earth ponies had shoulder-mounted attachments. Their faces were hidden behind armored helmets.

"It would seem we have uncovered the source of the conflict," Starlight noted. "An ambush? I suspect it was not laid for us."

"Yeah well, whoever they are, they're making a mistake messing with us," Havocwing snorted. She lifted one hoof up just slightly, letting it glow white-hot. "They don't wanna mess with the best damn fighter this side of Pandemonium."

"Release your prisoner immediately! You will only be given one warning!" shouted one soldier. He was on the second floor of the building opposite Starlight and Havocwing, poking his gun out the window.

Velvet sneered and made to say something, but Starlight stopped her with a hoof to her mouth.

"Release your prey, Velvet," Starlight said, shaking her head. "We would do well to cooperate at present."

"Hell no!" Velvet hissed. "We can handle—"

"Regardless of that, I recognize an opportunity in our present situation. Do not

jeopardize that.”

Velvet snorted. “Whatever. Sure.” She chuckled and bopped the soldier’s nose. “You’re lucky my little sister wants me to spare you... for now. See you soon though, cutie.”

She dropped the pony, and he hastily limped back to his original hiding spot before grabbing his weapon and pointing it back at her, his aim pathetically shaky.

“State your names and business!” called the soldier from before.

Starlight turned back to face the soldier in question, guessing him to be the leader of the squad. “Our identities and affairs are our own. We have no desire to share them with you or with anypony.”

“I didn’t ask, miss! That’s a command! Identify yourselves, or we will open fire!”

Havocwing groaned. “Let’s just take care of this and get back to looking for Curaçao,” she said, aiming her hoof at the soldier and sparking up a flame.

Starlight set a hoof on Havocwing’s shoulder. “Hold, sister.”

Havocwing raised an eyebrow. “Star?”

“Fighting expends time, something which we possess little of currently. Let us make an attempt at cooperation.”

Havocwing stared. “You’re kidding.”

Starlight shook her head. “I do not make this suggestion in jest. As I asserted to Velvet, I recognize an opportunity in our present situation. Allow me.”

She stepped forward towards the building, just once, as it was clear to see that all twenty soldiers in the intersection had their weapons trained on her. She heard some of them cock their weapons, and she caught sight of a tiny, red dot of light just in front of her on the ground. If not for how dark the rest of the area was, she’d have thought it part of the pavement. She noticed that the dot did not seem to be coming from any of their weapons, but it wavered just slightly around her hooves. *Curious.*

“Very well, if it will hasten us along, my name is Starlight Shadow,” she announced, her tone as cordial as she could manage. “My sisters and myself are seeking passage across the sea, and we arrived in the city amidst the assault. We wish to cooperate, if that will allow us to be sped on our way.”

The soldier put his hoof to his ear for a brief moment, pausing briefly and lowering his weapon. After a few seconds, he nodded and leveled his gun again. "No pony's leaving the city right now!" he shouted. "If you're looking for passage, then you will be placed under custody until such time as we can look into granting your request!"

Starlight took a deep breath. "I shall repeat myself. My sisters and myself are seeking passage across the sea. We wish to cooperate in any fashion that will allow us to depart before the day is done. However, I am afraid that 'custody' is not something my sisters and I can consent to submitting ourselves to, sir."

The soldier placed his hoof to his ear again, nodded, and turned back to Starlight. "Then, you are refusing to cooperate! As you are not cooperating with our requests, we will take you into custody by force!"

Havocwing snorted and stepped up to Starlight's side. "Your negotiations need some work, Star."

Starlight shrugged. "Well, I did attempt mediation to the best of my ability, so you cannot fault me for their stubbornness. Perhaps intimidation would be a more preferred alternative. Shall I?"

Havocwing gave a jovial laugh and pat Starlight on the back. "Whoa, you kidding? No way! I'm the boss now, Star, let *me* do the intimidating. Ain't any pony here better at it!"

She stepped forward and shouted towards the soldier that Starlight had been negotiating with. "Hey you, pinhead! Listen up!"

The soldier, again, placed a hoof to his ear. Starlight was growing curious with the gesture, as she recognized its similarity to the late Commander Jetstream and how he issued orders to his A.M.P. Troopers during their test. The other soldiers did not appear to do the same, and were not adjusting themselves to anything. Perhaps this soldier was the one taking orders?

"Your attempts at negotiation have failed, miss!" the soldier shouted. "We are taking you into custody until further notice, so stand down, or we will be forced to open fire!"

Havocwing chuckled. "Look, buddy, we're not scared of a little action, okay? Do you have any idea who we are?" she asked, gesturing to her sisters. "We're not some punk mares here, bucko. Whatever you're thinking, you'd better think again!" She snapped one hoof into the air, igniting it with a billowing flame. "Otherwise, I'm gonna have to come up there, and I will rain down a bucking firestorm on you! I will massacre you! *I will buck you up!*"

"Miss, I will give you one last warning! Stand down, or we will open fire!" The soldier cocked his gun, then perked up and put his hoof to his ear. He nodded once, but kept his gun

trained on the group, specifically Red Velvet.

Then, the tiny red dot swept up Havocwing's leg. Starlight's eyes widened as it placed itself squarely between Havocwing's eyes; her horn began to glow, starting up a threat detection spell. *Is that a-*

Havocwing spat on the ground and reared her flame-armed hoof back. "Kiss my *bucking—*"

There was a distant boom, and Starlight's blood went cold.

Almost simultaneously, a blinding flash illuminated the city for a mile around.

Havocwing flinched to the side. Her eyes crossed to look at her forehead, where a bullet was still rapidly spinning, just an inch from her face, held in place by a bright, silver glow. She managed a tiny chuckle before passing out.

"Open fire! Open fire!"

Starlight, her horn aglow and her eyes flaring a bright white, snapped her head up towards the voice from before. Her horn erupted with all the brightness of a small star, sending a ripple of magical power bursting outwards, shaking the ground and causing tiny pieces of rubble to float into the air.

A volley of bullets sprayed at the collected mares; every single one was caught in a tiny pocket of silver light in her otherwise-invisible force field. Starlight's aura expanded further and further, gathering the bullets in a ball that she collected in front of her.

"You... have committed a *grave error!*"

With a snort, she sucked in her aura and unleashed the ball of bullets out towards the buildings, forcing the soldiers to take cover; some of them were clipped, but there were no direct hits.

It only took seconds to charge another spell, and with it she fired a fearsome blast of energy at the building directly in front of her. The blast tore into the building's second floor, vaporizing it and the two soldiers that taken cover there and leaving a smooth, smoldering hole in its wake.

The soldiers peeked out of cover and let loose another barrage, but she managed again to catch every single one and fire them right back.

She turned back to face her sisters, her eyes still burning white. "Annihilate them!"

Grayscale chuckled and kicked some small rocks up off the ground, then spun around and kicked them towards one of the buildings. As they flew, she flicked her wings, causing the small pebbles to rip through the wall better than the soldiers' bullets. The soldiers in her target building took cover inside.

She did the same with another set of tiny rocks, and another. Each tiny speck of rock snapped chunks of concrete off and dented metal.

Satisfied that the soldiers had taken adequate cover and would not be poking out to fire at her yet, she soared into the air with a fierce gust of wind, gliding over the building.

There was a soft crack in the distance, and she snapped her head to glance at the bullet that Starlight had caught inches from her nose.

She snorted, then dove at the building, crashed through the roof, and landed on the floor of the third story. Her impact cracked the floor beneath her, the force of which slammed one of the soldiers against the wall.

To his surprise, he did not react in time.

She bucked him in the face, slamming his helmet into the wall and shattering it open. The sound of the skull crunching against concrete was incredibly satisfying.

She reached down, bit down on his tail, and swung him around towards the other soldier in the room, a unicorn, who was taking aim at her. While he was airborne, she flicked her wings again.

The unicorn hesitated to fire at his flying squadmate, and was crushed by the other soldier's boulder-like weight. He wailed in pain as the impact demolished his armor and shattered his bones.

Grayscale reared up and slammed her hooves down on the pair of ponies, crushing them through the floor and down to the second story. She glanced down and saw the unicorn shakily attempting to aim his weapon up at her.

She looped up and dove at them, crushing them through the second story and down to the ground level. Then, she looped around once more and slammed into them again.

Grayscale stood atop the broken and twisted bodies of the soldiers in the midst of a newly formed impact crater at the ground floor. She waited a second before leaping off the heap

of crushed armor. She gazed down at the pile, and shrugged.

“Eh. Lightweights.”

She gave herself a good once-over. Blood had splattered on her jumpsuit and coated her boots. She couldn't feel any injuries; this wasn't her blood. “So... this is what killing feels like?” she said as she looked over the crater. “Interest—”

She snapped around and flicked her wings, causing a bullet to careen into the floor in front of her.

A pegasus soldier, who had been taking cover in the corner, was peeking out after taking the shot. He leapt out of his hiding spot to try and get away.

She grunted and flicked her wings again.

There was a sickening snap, and the soldier crumbled to the floor, legs broken. His gun tumbled off his hoof and slid into the opposite corner.

Grayscale cantered over to him, then circled around his fallen body. He was attempting to crawl to where his gun had fallen. She pressed a hoof against one of his wings, then lifted her hoof and stomped down, crushing it.

He screamed, but did not stop crawling towards his gun.

“Why do you try?” she asked.

Grayscale circled around in front of him and kneeled down so that they were face to face. His visor kept his face hidden, but she knew he was scared. His hooves were trembling.

“In the end, nothing matters, you know? You defend your life, but someday, it will end. You defend your home, but someday, it will collapse. So why do you try?”

He didn't answer, but instead kept moving.

She grunted and pressed her hoof against the top of his head. “Even against insurmountable odds, you still try. Some ponies would find you brave, others would find you stupid. Me?”

Grayscale lifted her hoof. “What does it matter what I think?”

She stomped down, crushing his skull.

Velvet let loose a plethora of bloodied tendrils, literally skipping into the oncoming fire from one of the buildings. Starlight's protective shield was weakest around her, as Velvet had strayed out of its effective range. Probably more, though, that she willed herself not to take advantage of it. A bullet grazed her, and the pain felt so much different than any other pain she'd felt in a long, long time.

Adrenaline tasted good. This was a *good* pain.

She could smell their blood, and drooled at the thought of bathing in it, feasting upon it. She lashed her visceral appendages towards the wall, tearing through cement and metal in an attempt to reach the prizes that lay inside.

The snake-like tendril flowing from her spine sidled up to her ear. "*Here is our chance, Red!*" Clottles said. "*The slaughter! A massacre, like your dear sister said! Let the blood flow!*"

"Yeah! Yeah!" Red cheered.

She managed to grab one of the soldiers in a lash, and tore him from his hiding place and threw him into the nearest wall. As she stepped towards him to finish the job, a barrage of bullets from her other side drew her attention away.

She clicked her tongue. "Man, can't a girl murder somepony around here without getting distracted?"

She swung a tendril around in a long arc, slicing through the soldier's cover and just narrowly missed his head.

"*See how they gather before you, Red?*" Clottles said. "*They know not what danger you present. They come at you, like lambs to the slaughter!*"

The soldier she'd tossed out earlier took fire, again drawing away her attention.

She snorted. "What does that even mean, anyway? 'Lambs to the slaughter'? That doesn't make any sense."

She lashed out another tendril, boring into the rubble the soldier was using as cover; he narrowly scrambled out of the way.

"I mean, slaughter I get, lambs I get, but who would slaughter lambs? Besides me, of course."

A third soldier, on the upper floor of the building, fired a rocket straight at her. She caught it and flung it over her shoulder, where it exploded well out of range.

"It's just a figure of speech, Red," Clottles said, impatient.

Velvet lashed out another tendril, catching one of the soldiers by the throat and drawing him to her.

"Tch, whatever," she said with a shrug. "Where would you even hear a figure of speech like that anyway? Who says that?"

She tossed the soldier, a unicorn, into the air. As he came tumbling down, she jabbed several spikes upwards to meet him.

Clottles shrugged. *"I don't know, but I did hear it somewhere before. It cannot be just coincidence. Besides, doesn't it sound appropriately bloody and violent?"*

Impact.

The soldier wasn't dead, but he writhed in pain. The spike had pierced his chest, and his blood splattered on the pavement below.

Velvet's expression remained mostly unchanged, minus one raised eyebrow. "Huh... I thought that would've felt better. It's been a long time since I've actually killed anypony. It felt good killing Mister Jetstream! Why doesn't it feel good hurting this guy?"

She lazily discarded the soldier, tossing him against another nearby wall, then blocked another spread of bullets blazing at her.

Clottles hummed loudly, and snapped a tiny appendage like a finger and thumb. *"Ah, maybe it's because Commander Jetstream was an evil pony? These ponies are just defending their home."*

Velvet jabbed out a tendril and grabbed another soldier, a pegasus, by the throat, jerking him over to her.

He aimed his gun at her face, but she knocked it off of his hoof.

She huffed, and used her tendril to slowly crush the soldier's helmet. "Well... that's no fair."

"Ah, but there's the rub," Clottles said, giving a dark chuckle. *"These horrible ponies are trying to hurt you and your sisters, Red. You did nothing to them. They shot first. They're very*

bad ponies, Red. Very bad ponies."

Velvet scratched her head. "Hey... hmm. But what—"

There was another shot, and Velvet shifted her head just to the side, in the direction of the noise. She jerked her head back at the sudden pain of a bullet tearing through her ear.

"Hey!" she yelled, reaching a hoof up to fondle the new hole. "Daddy doesn't want me to pierce my ears!"

"See?!" Clottles exclaimed. "*Vicious brutes!*"

Velvet sneered in the direction of the shot, staring directly at the soldier, pointing his smoking gun in her direction.

She smashed the soldier she was holding into the ground, then lashed out and snagged the other soldier in her tendril, drawing him to her with a snap. She licked her lips and placed one tendril squarely on top of his head, the other gripping tightly around his torso.

With a twist and a tug, she wrenched his head off.

Velvet shuddered in delight as the blood splattered down on her. "Ohh ho ho... that felt *awesome!*" She turned to her tendril companion, licking her lips clean of red liquid. "Clottles! You're right, this *does* feel good! It *does* taste good! It's been so long, I forgot what it felt like!"

The tendril chortled and adjusted its monocle. "*I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, dear! But you're not done yet. More! More to the slaughter! Bathe in their blood! Feast on their remains!*"

"A feast! A buffet!" Velvet cheered, clapping her hooves. She grinned wide and turned to her side, towards the pegasus pony that was scrambling for his gun. "Look at all the items on the menu!"

*♪Food, glorious food!
I'm anxious to try it.
Three banquets a day
—My favorite diet!*

Another tendril lashed out and impaled the fleeing pony through the chest before yanking him over to her.

*♪Just picture a great big steak
Fried, roasted or stewed.*

*Oh, food,
Wonderful food,
Marvellous food,
Glorious food!"*

She licked her lips and turned to the beheaded pony in her tendrils. She brightened with an idea, and skewered a tendril through the head and body, connecting them back together.

"Ha ha! A shish-kabob!" She hummed and tapped her chin. "No no, that's not right. Shish-kabobs need more meat than this." She gasped excitedly. "That means... I need. More. *Meat!*"

She lashed out another tendril up towards the top floor of the building, crashing through metal and concrete in search of the third soldier. A sharp scream made her brighten, and she yanked out the final pony. He'd been impaled through the side, rather than the head, so was very much alive and squirming. An earth pony. She drew him close.

"Hi! What's your name?"

He didn't answer.

She shrugged. "Fine, be rude. I was gonna call you *lunch* anyway!"

Inspid scrambled towards one of the buildings, rushing through the line of fire as quickly as her legs could carry her. She clumsily dodged what bullets she could, not that she needed to; none of the bullets came anywhere near her, caught instead in Starlight's ever-growing shield of silver magic. With every roll, twirl, and leap, she had to hang on desperately to *her* stetson.

She leapt and landed right in front of the side of building, then yelped and ducked inside when one of the soldiers peaked out and took another shot at her.

"Okay, like, this is so *totally* lame!" she said with a pout, glancing up out of the doorway. "Like, those jerks will so totally see me coming? How am I gonna... sneak..."

Her frown flipped around into a cheeky grin. This seemed like the perfect opportunity to test out the power she'd acquired from Shadowstep. But how did they work? She focused her mind on it, trying to remember what the smelly assassin looked like when he came and went.

Her body melted into the shadows of the room, and she gave a triumphant whoop.

"Aw yeah, here we go! Like, here I—" Inspid grunted as, instead of melting up along the

shadows on the wall, she ran right into solid concrete. “Like, hey! What gives?! How does, like, this stupid power work and junk?”

She grumbled and poked her hoof—rather, the edge of her blot—against the wall, again and again until instead of bumping it, it went straight up, successfully sliding into the darkness on the wall. She felt like she was still walking around, but was able to move freely along the vertical surface. Scaling the wall proved easy enough after that, as did slinking along the ceiling and up towards the next floor.

She popped out of the shadows into the room above her, right behind one of the soldiers. He was leaning out the window to try and find where his target had gone.

She tapped the soldier on the shoulder. “Hello!”

The soldier turned, and Inspid punched him in the face with all her might.

“Owww!” she wailed, jerking her hoof away. “Like, oh. My. Stars. That armor’s tough! The hay’s that junk made out of, huh? Like, Obiminimum? Or whatever that metal is. How do you, like, pronounce... oh, you’re probably mad. Are you mad? Yeah you’re mad.”

His partner in the opposite corner, an earth pony, kept his own weapons leveled at them as well.

Inspid gulped. “Uh-oh... uh... my hoof slipped?” She threw her hooves in front of her face. “Don’t hurt meee!”

Then, the soldier’s head and neck violently snapped to the side. A split second passed, and his weapon floated off his hoof into the air, pointed towards the corner, and fired a single shot into the other pony’s visor, knocking him off his hooves.

Inspid stumbled back in surprise. “Like, what the—”

“Ma chérie, are you un’armed?”

Inspid blinked and tilted her head. “Curie?”

Curaçao melted into view, holding the pegasus soldier’s weapon on her own hoof for a brief second before discarding it. “Oui, ma chérie. I am sorry I am late. Are you un’armed zough? Zat ruffian did not ‘urt you, did ‘e?”

Inspid brightened for all of an instant, leaping to her hooves before quickly changing her mind. She snorted, crossed her hooves over her chest, and stuck her nose in the air.

“Like, I didn’t need *your* help, Curaçao,” she said, over-emphasizing the last syllable. “You are so *totally* in my way. I like, had everything and covered and junk? And I’m, like, *not* your cherry, remember? Loser? So why don’t you, like, do what you’re good at or whatever? Disappear.”

Curaçao sighed and nodded, but for a brief moment, said nothing. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet and controlled. “Oui... Insipid. You ‘ad zee ‘ole zing under control.”

“*Cha*. I did. I did, didn’t I? So you, like, want to disappear now? You’re, like, in my eye-space? Buzz *off*?”

“Oui, I vill just ‘buzz off’ zen.” Curaçao shook her head and stepped towards the window. A sharp crack in the air caused the earth pony’s ears to flitter. “So, excuse-moi, I ‘ave somezing to take care of. Au revoir.”

Curaçao leapt out the window, melting back into invisibility mid-jump.

Insipid snorted, looking out the window to watch Curaçao leave despite not being able to see her. “Like, where’s *she* off to in such a hurry?”

She slapped her hooves together. “Oh! I *totally* need to tattle to the Boss! I mean, to Havoc! To Star?” She scratched her head, and shrugged. “Well, to whoever I should tattle to. That dummy is *late*, and I know everypony’s gonna be, like, so totally mad and junk?”

Befuddling. Infuriating. Alarming.

Starlight kept her eyes on the tiny red dot that swept along the floor, then snorted, blocking another single bullet that had come from some unseen sharpshooter, just inches from her ear. Even here in the wreckage of one of the buildings, their mystery opponent was still able to keep them effectively pinned down. This was mostly due to Starlight’s waning patience, and because attempts to leave the building had been met with more aggressive tactics.

Her earlier attempt to mass-teleport had been met with a quick, tracer-less shot, and only Grayscale’s quick actions had kept Starlight from taking a bullet to the throat. Unfortunately, this left their minor semblance of cover horribly mangled, leaving Starlight with more angles to watch for incoming fire. With that knowledge, Starlight certainly wasn’t going to attempt individual teleports and risk her sisters getting shot while she was away.

Her only boon seemed to be the sniper’s tracer, only visible by the tiny red dot that very occasionally blinked upon either her or one of her sisters for just a brief second before a shot was fired. She knew, however, that without it, she’d be hard-pressed to stop any projectiles. She

could do it, certainly, but there was more risk to it. Her threat detection spell allowed her to sense the bullets as they were fired, but without the tracer she had no sense of where to direct her protection. Why was the sniper continuing to use it then?

She twisted the bullet in front of her and examined it carefully, noting that it was a different shape than the ones the other soldiers were using. It was longer and thicker, with a distinct coloration of gold and black. This one had been accompanied by a loud, echoing boom, and was the same type as the one that had been fired at Havocwing earlier.

Speaking of which.

“Has she awoken yet?” Starlight asked behind her, not turning her head.

Grayscale snorted and slumped down on the floor next to Havocwing, prodding the other pegasus in an attempt to roll her. “Nope. That sniper spooked her good, she’s out like a light.”

Starlight glared upwards and to the left, in the direction her current bullet had come from, before tossing the projectile behind her to Insipid. “Here, Insipid. Another gift.”

“Sweet!”

The other unicorn caught the bullet in her own magic field, and added it to her growing collection. She was keeping them separated between these large rounds and some smaller ones the other soldiers had been using. The latter had been fired with a softer crack, rather than the loud bang.

“Mmff mmnn?” Velvet mumbled.

“Don’t attempt conversation while your mouth is stuffed, Velvet,” Starlight tutted.

There was a crack, and she snapped her head to the side to direct her magic again, catching a bullet heading straight for the earth pony. Starlight glared in the direction the sound had come from, still not quite sure from where exactly it had been fired. Every time she caught one, the incoming trajectory had been slightly different. Was the sniper moving?

Velvet swallowed nervously and she shied away from the bullet. “Okay, this is getting annoying. I’m trying to *eat* here!” She let out a deep breath. “What I said was, ‘is something wrong?’ You look testy, Star. You don’t usually look testy.”

Starlight hesitated, and then swallowed. “Testy... perhaps. I admit I am mostly curious.” She gestured out into the open cavern. “The projectiles are being discharged from unique, arbitrary locations, and from an elevated position. Our enigmatic sniper is a pegasus; I have yet to detect the magical signatures of a teleport spell, hence I cannot suspect a unicorn.”

“What’s it matter *what* he—”

“Or she,” Insipid corrected.

Velvet rolled her eyes. “What’s it matter *what* this jerk is, anyhow?”

Starlight grabbed another bullet out of the air. She was glad that by shrinking their exposure, catching the projectiles was significantly easier than it had been out in the open.

“It’s imperative to possess knowledge of a foe’s biology, as that determines various possibilities in their combat prowess,” Starlight explained. “Were this sharpshooter a unicorn, I could effortlessly expose his or her location. A most troubling disadvantage.”

“You could always just use that big shield like you did earlier,” Velvet said.

Starlight shook her head. “That expends too much energy to maintain indefinitely simultaneously with my threat detection magic. It was suitable for a more abundant volume of incoming projectiles, but not here. Curiously, no additional soldiers seem to be patrolling the streets.”

“Pfh, of course there aren’t any more. There was just that one squad to begin with anyway,” Grayscale said. “You said you figured this dope was their commander or something? He’s probably trying to keep anymore soldiers from getting slaughtered.”

“Perceptive enough.”

Insipid snorted. “Hmph, and dumb ol’ Curaçao just gets a free pass to, like, roam around and junk, just because *she* can turn indivisible.”

“Invisible,” Starlight corrected.

“That’s what I said, ‘invincible’. I wish *I* could turn invincible.”

Starlight pursed her lips, but let it go as she went on. “You would possess such an ability had you not discarded Curaçao’s powers. A misguided decision.”

Insipid snorted and stuck her nose in the air. “Like, pshaw, I’m not keeping that kind of junk on me? I mean, totally. Major. Lame-o. Once I suck up Rarity, then I’ll be perfect and pretty like her. I don’t need Curaçao’s dumb ol’ powers.”

Starlight grit her teeth. She hated admitting it, but she liked it better when Insipid was annoying because she couldn’t shut up about how great their eldest sister was, rather than how

great she wasn't. Then, she remembered:

"Ah, but you do still possess the umbrage abilities of father's assassin, do you not? Those would prove quite a pragmatic substitute."

Inspid scratched her head. "Huh. Oh yeah, like, totally good point? Like, um... here, let's see..."

She squeezed her eyes shut and melted into the shadows beneath her. Unfortunately, it seemed that there weren't enough shadows to meld through, and while almost all of Inspid's body was safely hidden in a murky pile on the floor, her rear still stuck out, high in the air, completely exposed.

Starlight hissed as the tracer appeared and slid onto what remained, catching another bullet that streaked right at the center of Inspid's cutie mark.

Inspid jerked out of her illusion and landed a few inches back. "Uh... I don't think I've, like, got the hang of it and junk? Daddy's murder-guy is, like, so much better at this sneaky stuff? He, like, melted into Gray's shadow, y'know? Or whatever."

Starlight groaned. "Well, it would appear that that particular theory was all for naught. Curaçao remains our most effective means of—"

Inspid spat on the floor. "Curaçao, Curaçao, *Curaçao!* Geez! If she's just, like, so freaky-good *useful* or *whatever*, why were we, like, stuck here?!" She huffed and crossed her hooves. "Stupid Curaçao..."

"I am positive that Curaçao's strategy will prove a benefit to our cause. She is seeking out our assailant's roost, that we may flush them into the open."

"Yeah! And then we can rip that little scumbag limb from limb!" Velvet cheered, waving around the amputated leg of one of her victims.

"I am displeased with her tardiness, but I haven't the authority to be cross with her. That would be Havocwing's job," Starlight added, giving another sympathetic glance back at the still-unconscious pegasus.

"This stinks. Why'd Havocwing go and pass out, huh? *Totally*. Not. Fair." Inspid said, stomping a hoof and scattering her bullets. "She'd totally, like, give Curaçao a talking to, or whatever."

"Hey, you're not the only one suffering because Havoc went all scared stiff," Velvet said. She pointed her meal at Inspid as though it were a stick. "I mean, raw meat is great and all, but

all the armor these guys were wearing would make them perfect for making steamed pony legs! I'm getting bored of raw. I need some variety in my diet!"

"Blech! Gag me with a *spoon!*" Insipid gagged, jerking her face away from the bloody appendage. "Like, oh my *stars*, Red, didn't daddy, like, tell you *not* to play with your food? Gross!"

Velvet stared at her food, using it to scratch her head. "Uh... is that a trick question?"

Grayscale yawned, stretching her hooves out. "This is boring. Can't you just vaporize the jerk, Star?"

"If I am unaware of their precise location, I may inflict damage upon the cavern superstructure," Starlight explained. She stared off in the direction of the last bullet fired. "I do, however, agree with each of you. That they continue these attempts grates upon my nerves."

The little red dot swept into the room, followed by another loud boom. Starlight snagged another bullet out of the air, this one a few inches away from the unconscious Havocwing. She snorted in disgust as she discarded it.

"This is infuriating. How can a solitary pony, one grievously lacking our capabilities, prove to be such an exigent threat?"

<Per'aps it would be best to cease wiz speaking out loud, Starlight?> Curaçao suggested, her voice speaking directly into Starlight's mind.

Starlight's mouth curled in a scowl, and she replied via the telepathic connection. <A perspicacious conclusion, Curaçao. I imagine you have conjured a strategy for dispensing with this plebeian individual?>

<Oui,> Curaçao confirmed. <Luckily, zey 'ave been focused on zee rest of you so far, so zey 'ave not noticed me. Quel soulagement!>

<Well, I should assume he has yet to descry you, sister. You are imperceptible, are you not?>

<Maybe so, but zis tireur isolé is quite skilled. I will need some assistance to discover 'im. Une distraction, vois-tu? You and Grayscale are zee best for zis, I zink.>

Starlight turned to Grayscale subtly, sneering as the tiny laser dot followed her vision straight to the pegasus. She flared her horn to catch yet another bullet, gritting her teeth as she tossed the bullet at the nearest wall.

<Grayscale, are you in agreement with this plan?>

Grayscale rubbed her chin where the tracer remained, then shrugged. <Yeah, I guess. Better than just sitting around and waiting. Killing this twerp faster means getting a real nap sooner.>

Another bullet screeched at the exact same spot. Starlight, again, caught it and tossed it aside, watching the dot leave Grayscale's chin and return to herself. She took a deep breath, glad that she was the target again: it was easier to defend herself than her sisters.

"Why does—" Inspid started to say. Audibly.

A loud crack fired again, but the bullet was still safely caught by Starlight, who shot Inspid a glare.

<Inspid!> Starlight shouted through her mind. <If you insist on vocalizing, utilize our telepathy!>

Inspid blinked. "But I—"

Starlight rolled her eyes. A silver glow grabbed one corner of Inspid's mouth and zipped across to the other side, complete with an audible zipper sound, replacing Inspid's lips with a metal zipper.

<Inspid?> Starlight asked, her eyes narrowed.

Inspid returned the glare, then snorted and stuck her nose in the air.

Starlight glowered, and snagged Inspid up in her magic. This happened to yank her out of the path of another bullet.

Inspid stared at the spot she'd just been standing in, then glanced back to Starlight. "Mmmf mfmf..."

<What was that? You were saying something? Maybe that this is a spectacular improvement, *wouldn't you agree?*>

Inspid nodded rapidly, eyes wide. "Mmmf! Mmnm mnmf mmm!"

<It took you that long to figure out how to shut her up?> Grayscale gave a great laugh through the connection, surprising Starlight, who did not expect Grayscale to put the effort in to laugh telepathically.

<Magnifique,> Curaçao said. <Before we begin, per'aps you should get zee ozers to better cover, non? Less worry of injury to distract us wiz. Zere is a building down zee street, to zee west, zat is more suitable, n'est-ce pas?>

Starlight nodded and tilted her head to the others, grunting as she caught another bullet.

<Your sister's command has been issued. Grayscale, assist me by transferring Havocwing to our new location. Working together should prove more successful than my earlier attempt.>

Grayscale snorted and cantered over to Havocwing, then hoisted the lighter pegasus onto her back. <I feel like I've just put a big target on my back. Two-for-one special: shoot one pegasus, get another one free.>

The four mares scampered towards their destination, a large, gray building down the block. Starlight took the lead, catching the bullets that were fired at them as they moved for cover. She became increasingly frustrated with the difficulty in deflecting the projectiles, as while moving it was extremely complicated to figure out their impact trajectory, what with the dot itself moving awkwardly as it traced along her or her sisters. Worse, the sniper's aim seemed completely unhampered by their being moving targets.

Her only solace was that, after catching five bullets en route, she'd discovered that the sniper had been remaining in the same location to fire every shot. Curaçao would easily be able to find where he was now.

Grayscale barreled into the entryway first, slamming her great weight into the large, metal double doors and crashing through them with ease. Inspid followed next, her panicked screaming muffled by her zipper-mouth, leaping for cover and gripping her stetson tight.

Starlight stopped in the doorway and turned to let Velvet in after her, as the earth pony had lagged behind just slightly.

<Hasten your pace, Velvet!> Starlight snapped, awaiting another bullet to catch. There was another crack, and she caught a bullet inches from her sister's face, still casually munching a leg.

<I'm coming, I'm coming!> Velvet shouted back, out of breath. <You're not supposed to go for a jog after lunch, okay?!>

Without warning, the red dot disappeared entirely. Starlight's eyes widened as she searched around frantically for it, her eyes darting every direction.

Everything after that, every movement, felt like it was coming through in slow-motion and

all at once.

Her head turned as her threat detection spell began to flare wildly in her mind, her horn aglow.

Slowly. Too slowly.

Velvet's frontmost hoof touched the ground, and she continued her gait, moving the next hoof inch by inch forward, every inch appearing like a mile for long it took.

Starlight's protection field missed. It was like watching a bubble being popped in reverse, pierced by a projectile so fast that it was inside before the bubble was even broken. She could feel the bullet move past her aura before it was in position, feel her magic only just tagging at the bullet as it slipped past her grip and diverting its course.

But not enough.

<No!>

Velvet was abruptly flipped forward as the bullet entered her through her abdomen; her body appeared to be picked up all at once, her limbs swinging as she flew. She slammed hard into the ground before rolling and crashing into the side of a building.

A deafening blast rang out. The booms had been bad previously, but endurable, providing Starlight direction from where to block the shots. This was nothing like the previous shots. It stopped thought. Her heart leapt in horror, for an instant thinking from the noise alone that she, herself, must have been hit in addition to Velvet.

Time began to speed back up.

"Sister!" Starlight screamed.

One second. Two seconds. Three.

She wasn't moving.

Starlight grit her teeth and lit her horn to prepare a teleport, another shot cracked against the wall just inches away from her, breaking her focus just a split second before the spell completed.

<Attends!>

A loud noise, sounding something like large pieces of metal clanging together, came

from somewhere off to the east. The red dot suddenly reappeared then instantly jerked out of sight, and a familiar, distinctively quieter blast echoed through the cavern again. Not the deafening boom, but one of the earlier sharp cracks.

<Vas-y! Go!>

Starlight flared her horn again, hastily teleporting to Velvet, grabbing hold of her, and teleporting back into the doorway in the space of a few seconds. She dragged Velvet into the cover of the building with some help from Grayscale, then into the nearest corner and out of sight from their assailant. The two of them, with Insipid between them, gathered around their fallen sibling.

Red Velvet remained motionless, bleeding out all over the floor. The shot had pierced straight into her stomach, leaving a clean hole that leaked visceral fluids like water. Strange enough, there was not a matching exit wound on the other side of her midsection.

Starlight held her head in her hooves. “Unacceptable. Unacceptable... this is absolutely unacceptable!”

“This... can’t be happening...” Grayscale took a step back, shaking her head and falling back on her hindquarters. Havocwing slipped off her back and rolled into the nearby corner.

Insipid sniffed loudly, wiping her wet nose with the back of her leg. “Mmph mmph mpph?”

Red Velvet jerked upright, taking in a sharp breath of air and causing all three of the other mares to leap back in shock. She hocked loudly, then opened her mouth and spat out a dented, slightly corroded bullet, very thick with a silver tip; when it hit the floor it sounded heavy.

“Ow.”

“Velvet!” Starlight shouted, stepped forward and wrapping the pink pony in a hug. “Oh... praise the stars...”

Velvet hesitated. “Hey, whoa, Star what—”

“*Oh my, how unprofessional!*” Clottles said, though his mouth movements were horribly, horribly inaccurate. “*Miss Red, this is—*”

Grayscale stared right at the monocled tendril and snorted. “Can it.”

Velvet glanced back at Clottles, then back to Starlight. She broke out of the hug and stormed towards the doorway. “I’m gonna murder that little twerp!”

Grayscale flicked her wing up to bar Velvet's path.

"Hey!" Velvet shouted, forcing herself against Grayscale's wing. "What gives, Gray? Lemme at 'em! Lemme at 'em!"

"You're still bleeding," Grayscale said simply, pointing her hoof towards Velvet's back.

Velvet glanced back at herself, where the bleeding was spreading visceral fluid all over the floor. Velvet loudly breathed in through her nose and some of the blood started to properly congregate towards her, but none of it was moving quite as quickly as everypony was used to seeing it move. Clottles was also dripping away into a messy pile.

"Well how 'bout that?" Velvet said, her voice slurred and her eyes beginning to glaze over. "Hey, anypony know why I have a tummy ache?"

"*Oh dear, Miss Red,*" Clottles said, his voice barely different from Velvet's at all and his mouth remaining mostly motionless. "*It seems that that actually caused some damage.*"

Starlight gulped. "Oh dear. Will she recover?"

Grayscale stared at Starlight, then to Clottles, and shook her head. "Geez, Havoc's right, this is bucking weird."

Clottles waved a little tendril around, though as he did so it accidentally flew off and splattered on the floor. "*Oh, she just needs time for her powers to reassert themselves. I say, wouldn't this may be a good time for a nap, Miss Red?*"

Velvet giggled. "Clottles, you sound funny. Like a girl. You're not a girl, you're a boy." She swaggered to the side. "I feel dizzy. Nap time."

She slumped forward and remained still on the floor.

Inspid blinked. "Mmm...?"

Velvet started snoring immediately. Very loudly, in fact.

Another ear-piercing bang cracked through the air and ripped a large tear into the side of the building. Starlight jerked back and clung to the wall when the bullet impacted just a few inches from her head. It was the same kind as the one that had rolled into the corner after Velvet spit it out.

Starlight sneered in the bullet's direction, taking heavy, baited breaths. <Some manner of anti-material projectile, capable of shattering walls. A miracle that Velvet...> She trailed off and

glanced back at her snoring sister before sighing and placing a bubble of magic around the earth pony's head, shutting all of the sound out.

<That was close,> Grayscale said, wiping her brow. She snorted and glared towards the doorway, careful not to peek out of it whatsoever. <You've got my support, Star. What're Curaçao's next orders?>

<Grayscale?> Starlight tilted her head. <You seem... impassioned.>

Grayscale stayed silent a moment, then sniffed. <Just wanna show this idiot that their skill doesn't mean a damn thing. They think they're something special, but they're not.>

Starlight smiled, and nodded in understanding. <Curaçao? Are you there?>

<Zut alors...> Curaçao hissed. <Zis tireur isolé 'as more skill zan I zought. Zee shots are getting too close to moi.>

Grayscale barked. <He's tracking you while you're *invisible*?>

<Not perfectly, non, but zey are not far off. I zink zey are watching my 'oof movements. C'est incroyable. Heureusement, I am able to judge where zeir shots are coming from due to zeir less-zan-perfect précision.>

<Then, you have ascertained his position?> Starlight asked. She turned to Grayscale, a wicked grin spreading across her face. <Excellent. I postulate that our opportunity for retribution has arrived.>

Curaçao sighed. <Well, zat is to say, I know where 'e is, but not son emplacement exact, vois-tu? I 'ave narrowed it down to zee catwalks above zee underground, but zat is all I can tell. It will be 'ard to destroy zem wizout damaging zee superstructure. Merde alors, 'ow are we going to take zem out?>

A sudden noise drew Starlight and Grayscale's attention, and they spun their heads over glare at the sound, assuming it to be Insipid.

Instead, it was Havocwing, who'd just jolted awake. "Holy crap that's a bucking... bullet...?" Her eyes darted around the little room. "Uh... where am I? Aw man, don't tell me I got hit. Dad's gonna be pissed."

<*Havocwing!*> Starlight rushed to assist Havocwing in getting upright, giving her elder sister a very brief hug. <Praise the stars. I was overwrought that you would reside in that state for quite some time.>

“Yo Star, hey, hey get off!” Havocwing sputtered. “Geez, enough with the hugging already! Why am I so damn huggable?!”

Grayscale held a hoof to her lips. <Havoc, keep it down.>

Havocwing blinked. <Uh, why are we talking all telepathic-style?>

<The sniper that nearly dispatched you,> Starlight explained, pointing her hoof towards the hole in the ceiling. <He or she is quite masterful with their armament, and can shadow our sounds. Hence the silence.>

Havocwing huffed. <Well, buck this punk, let’s take ‘em out! I’ve got a couple of ideas for places I’d love to shove a fireball. *Unpleasant* places.>

<Zat is what we were trying to discuss, ‘avoc.>

<Curaçao? Awesome! When did you get here? We were looking all over for you!>

<I followed zee sounds of bataille, bien sûr.>

“Mmmf mmph... mmnn... *mmmm!*” Insipid rolled her eyes and jabbed her hoof at her zipper-mouth.

Havocwing stared at Insipid for a moment, then turned and gave Starlight an approving nod. <That your doing, Star? Good move.>

<Curaçao tracked them to the catwalks,> Grayscale interjected. <But, I guess we can’t do anything to them from here. That’s what Curaçao keeps saying, anyway, that we might bring the whole place down.>

<An unfortunate conundrum,> Starlight said.

Havocwing scratched her head. <Well, we could always lure them out of hiding somehow.>

<Their vantage point confers perfect vision of any possible attack trajectories,> Starlight said, sighing and glancing out the doorway. <They retreat too hastily for us to accurately assault them.>

<What if we smoke ‘em out?>

Starlight hummed and tapped her chin. <Render their present location and any adjacent locations inoperable. Hmm...> Her wicked grin returned and she pat Havocwing on the shoulder.

<Ingenuity of the highest caliber!>

<That means, 'Smart move', Havoc,> Grayscale said, patting Havocwing on the back. <Didn't think you had any good ideas in your head at all.>

<Eat a dick, Gray,> Havocwing said, shooting the other pegasus a glare. She ducked towards the doorway and took a nervous half-glance outwards. <Hey Curaçao, is this jerk still tracking you?>

<Oui, I am staring at zee traceur maintenant.>

<Then this is our chance. Let's do it quick and brutal, business as usual, right Star?>

Starlight nodded and stepped over beside Havocwing. <What manner of assault do you propose?>

Havocwing smirked. <Oh, that's easy. This dude almost shot me, so I've got a bone to pick. I'm angry. I'm *pissed*. I'm gonna burn their bucking house down!> She stepped back and ignited a hoof, the flame bright and white enough that Starlight had to step back. <Star, give me some cover.>

Starlight nodded again and sidled up to the doorway to have a better post, hoping to catch any bullets that happened to come their way. <Proceed, Havoc.>

Havocwing's brightening, flaming hoof drew the sniper's attention, and the little red dot swept through the doorway. It didn't land on anypony since no pony was in view of the doorway, so it disappeared. Starlight gulped and wiped her brow of sweat, then let her eyes wander in anticipation.

Another loud bang, and another blast ripped a hole through the wall, inches above Havocwing's head.

Both Starlight and Havocwing jerked away in surprise. Starlight again clung to the wall closest to her, visibly shaking, while the latter simply snorted and steeled herself. Havocwing ducked just under the hole, hiding the light in one hoof with another hoof. She nodded at Starlight, who gulped and nodded back, then sprinted out of the doorway.

The little red dot reappeared and zipped towards Havocwing just as the pegasus was lobbing her fireball straight up into the air.

There was a loud crack.

Starlight flared her horn and caught the bullet inches away from Havocwing's head.

Havocwing bolted back into the relative safety of the building, breathing heavily and trying to keep an eye on her fireball as it sailed upward. <Ha, look at it go. Yeah! Burn in Hell, stupid!>

She stomped her hoof, and the tiny fireball exploded, sending out a blazing wave that spread outwards and within seconds, became billowing flames that lit up the cavern and began coating the ceiling with smoke. Some sprinkler systems activated, but the fires simply fled from the spraying waters.

<Booyah!> Havocwing cheered, keeping her hoof steady to direct the flames. <Check it, who's the pyro master? I'm the pyro master.>

Starlight laughed and pat Havocwing on the back, proud of her sister's ingenuity. <All that remains is to bide our time and await his descent.>

Moments passed, and Havocwing's continued efforts spurred the fires into raging infernos, creating a cloud of smoke that spread across the cavern ceiling. It wasn't long before the entire upper end of the cavern was totally covered with smoke and ash that began to sink down towards the city.

In that entire time, not a single shot had been fired. Exactly as planned.

But then, Starlight realized, there came a problem. Where was he now, if not in the catwalks? She hesitated, then stepped out of the doorway.

Nothing.

"The sniper has assuredly lost their elevation advantage!" she shouted, loudly enough to carry through a reasonable portion of the cavern.

Still nothing.

She hummed and turned to the doorway, where Havocwing and Grayscale were peeking their heads out. "I am unsure if this is a promising development, or if we should be... concerned."

"Which means they're down here in the city, and could be hiding anywhere," Grayscale said.

Havocwing swooped over and swung her hoof around in the air. "Hey, that's what we wanted though, right? At least this means they can't use that big rifle so well anymore."

“Havocwing, can you attend to Velvet and Insipid, and ensure they do not become imperiled?” Starlight asked.

Havocwing scoffed and poked Starlight’s nose. “Excuse me? I want a piece of this guy! Who said you guys get the honor of savaging this chump?”

“We all desire his demise, Havoc.” Starlight brushed Havocwing’s hoof aside and started walking towards the street. “If you will forgive me for my assertion, Grayscale and myself are more appropriate for this task.”

“To Hell with that!”

<‘avocwing, Starlight is right,> Curaçao said. <We will need ‘er magic to protect from zee sniper’s bullets, oui? As for Grayscale, I ‘ave anozer plan zat involves ‘er. Somepony needs to stay wiz Insipid and Velvet, to make sure zat zey are safe. You ‘ave done good, ‘avoc. Keep nos søeurs safe.>

Havocwing snorted and slumped back against the doorway. “Fine, fine. Whatever. Just... like, let me get a piece of them somehow. I dunno, warp them over to me when you guys got them all subdued and stuff?”

“That can be arranged,” Starlight said, giving Havocwing a nod and a dark smile.

“You say you’ve got a plan for me, Curaçao?” Grayscale asked, trotting up to Starlight’s side.

<Oui, zat I do. See all zat smoke in zee air? I need you to bring it down to zee ground levels.>

Grayscale stared upwards at the clouds of smoke for a moment, then nodded in understanding. “Okay, I get what you’re doing. Smart thinking, big sis.” She gave Starlight a sidelong glance “Star, cover me. I’m going up.”

“Up?!” Starlight blurted, rushing forward as Grayscale took flight. “Grayscale, why—”

There was yet another distant crack, and Starlight stopped talking to focus her horn on deflecting a bullet directed at Grayscale’s rising form. She noticed that the trajectory definitely originated from a much, much lower height. Not quite street level, but certainly on the ground somewhere. Perhaps he was taking cover in a building somewhere, seemingly to the northeast.

Still, Grayscale climbed, despite the bullets racing at her barely being deflected away by Starlight’s magic and the tracer not once leaving her darting form.

Starlight stomped her hooves, finding it difficult to keep up with the bullets now. The softer sounds from the sniper's gun, likely caused by the smoke distorting the air, were harder to judge accurately.

"Grayscale! You can accomplish that from a significantly lower altitude!"

"Sure, I can do it from down there, but where's the challenge in that?" Grayscale asked, giving a great laugh. "If it's not a challenge, it's not worth doing!" She flicked her wings, and the cloud of smoke started sinking towards the ground.

Starlight panicked as the little red dot disappeared. She knew what was coming. "Grayscale!"

Grayscale remained still in the air, her only movements coming from her great, flapping wings.

Another loud boom echoed through the cavern, creating a great path through the cloud of smoke.

Grayscale flicked her wings and jabbed her hoof outward in the direction of the pierced smoke. The bullet impacted against her boot, reflecting sharply to the side and knocking Grayscale way off-balance.

Grayscale, however, was unharmed, and swerved to the side to regain control in time to punch another bullet that flew her way, followed by another, and another. A loud clang followed each sharp crack.

Starlight raised an eyebrow, but kept her focus ready in case something went wrong. "Impressive, Grayscale. How are *you* capable of foreseeing the impact trajectory? I am unable to perceive much through the abundance of smoke."

Curaçao snickered. <Ooh là là, don't you see, Starlight? Zee sniper's trail 'as been exposed!>

Starlight glanced upwards again, and then she saw it. The little red dot still traced on Grayscale as the pegasus dove towards the ground. There was a beam of red light connected to it, revealed by the smoke. It was only there for a few brief seconds before it disappeared long before Grayscale reached street level.

The sniper knew they'd been spotted.

"Found 'em," Grayscale said, giving Starlight a pat on the back. "See, Star? It's all in the hooves."

Starlight nodded. <Seek them out, Curaçao. We shall annihilate them with all due prejudice.>

<D'accord, zis will not take long at all.>

Curaçao darted behind the corner of an alleyway.

A bullet whizzed above her head, cracking into the wall behind her.

She swore silently to herself, and only herself. That one was closer than the last one.

She took a deep breath and examined the impact point, being very careful not to touch anything. As long as she did not move her hooves, the sniper could not see her, as there was nothing to see. When she ran, they could see her distortion in the smoke, and see her hooves shift the dirt and dust along the street. Now, he or she lacked the advantage of the tracer. It was how they'd tracked her before: the little red dot would appear on Curaçao's cloaked body rather than the terrain behind, making her stick out like a sore hoof.

She did the math in her head, and glanced back towards the buildings opposite her. The tall, white building with a sign reading *Law Offices of Swift Stroke & Infallible* caught her eye. *That* was where they were hiding, apparently on the third floor, though they seemed to be shifting between the three windows there.

One thing stood out: the sniper's shots did not sound the same as Curaçao was used to. The distant cracks and loud, ear-shattering bangs had been replaced by almost-silent pops. If not for Curaçao herself being incredibly quiet, she'd have never heard them. These pops came more rapidly and seemed to do less damage to the structures they struck.

They'd clearly switched out their rifles for a sidearm, and was just as deadly-accurate with it. There was no muzzle flash as there had been with the soldiers earlier, and with the veil of smoke wafting about, she found this unfortunate. At least there was sound; it was getting closer.

She took another sharp breath and rushed out across the street again, leaping forward into the cover of another alleyway as a string of bullets cracked against the ground behind her. Three alleys down, five to go. She was almost there.

Another mad dash across the street, and another, and another; each time, the bullets got closer to hitting her.

She darted across to another alley, the last one along this street before she reached the intersection.

She dove to cover, and felt a bullet slice just past her ear.

She waited a few seconds, then peeked around the corner of her hiding space again. It was faint, but she could just barely see movement in the office building's window.

<I 'ave found zee tireur isolé,> she said.

<Excellent,> came Starlight's voice. <Do you require assistance?>

Curaçao considered this for a few moments, then shook her head. <Non, I 'ave zis under control. If you were to come and assist, you may give away my position wiz all zee éclairs, non?>

<The... éclairs?> Starlight asked. <Sister, this is hardly the time to be fantasizing about obtaining nourishment.>

<Quoi? Nourish- oh! Non non non, éclair means 'flash', Starlight.>

Starlight paused. <I despise Romantique at times.>

Curaçao chortled over the connection. <Oui, peu importe. I will not kill zis garrish brute. I know zat you all 'want a piece', n'est-ce pas?>

<You're sure you're good, sis?" Grayscale asked.

<I zink I will be fine. Remain nearby zough, just in case.>

<Affirmative, we have already established a perimeter around your location,> Starlight replied. <Still no indications of reinforcements, so our attention upon you shall be undivided.>

<Stay safe, sis,> Havocwing said. <And you'd better save me a piece, I swear. No pony spooks me and gets away with it, you hear me? No pony!>

Curaçao grunted and took another deep breath, then galloped as fast as her hooves could carry her towards the white building.

A bullet whizzed by her flank. She leapt to her side to avoid the next bullet, which impacted precisely where her head would have been had she kept on that path.

Crossing the street became a matter of life or death, where a single misstep could cost

her everything. She kept her route erratic, and took advantage every time the sniper needed to reload to move in closer. Despite her efforts, the shots were getting closer; they were predicting her pattern, no matter how random it must have seemed.

At last, she made it to cover in the building's doorway. She did not waste time sticking her head out of the door to glance upwards towards the windows. She waited. And waited. The sniper, a pegasus if Starlight's guess was accurate, did not flee to a new vantage point. They did not even make an attempt.

No, he or she was waiting for her, thinking they would take her out in close quarters where they'd failed at range.

Curaçao snorted and headed into the building proper. She knew what was happening here, and credited the sniper with their tactical soundness: if he or she fled to a new position, they might be spotted in the open by one of the others. They did not know where exactly Curaçao's sisters were anymore, not since they'd forced him or her to retreat to this new location, but must have guessed they were watching.

She entered slowly, checking her surroundings for any sort of defenses the sniper might have set up. The ground floor was barren apart from dusty office furniture. Desks, chairs, filing cabinets, some potted plants, a reception counter - nothing useful. No signs of movement. Still, she kept low to the ground, careful to stay near the cubicles and workstations as she stalked towards the stairs.

She rounded the stairwell corners at a guarded pace, cautious of giving away her position. The stairs, floors, and walls were covered with a thin coat of dust, enough that she could see, even in the dark, that she was leaving a trail visible enough to somepony observant. 'Somepony observant' happened to be looking for her, so she kept a vigilant watch of her surroundings.

The sniper had been on the fifth floor when she'd entered.

They weren't when she reached the third.

The moment she set her hoof on the floor itself from the stairs, a shot rang out and clipped her leg.

She audibly swore, staggering back to avoid the next shot and slinking into the corner of the stairwell.

Her eyes darted to her leg. The bullet had grazed her, drawing blood. Her eyes narrowed, because she couldn't just feel the blood trickle down her coat.

She could see it.

Merde. I did not zink zat would 'appen...

She removed her headband and used it to clean off the blood, wrapping it around the wound to hide it from sight. If there were ever a time she was glad her powers applied to her clothing, now was that time, though she cursed that they didn't apply to other items she picked up: she could really use a gun right about now.

She swore silently and crept back up to the top of the stairwell. She could see where the bullet had struck the floor, and used that the judge where they had fired from. They had likely moved by now, but could not have moved far without making noise, of which there'd been none.

She carefully set her hoof down in the exact spot she had done before without disturbing any more dust in the room. No shot was fired. She leaned her head out into the room and examined everything she could see. Dust-covered floors, walls, desks, chairs; was anything in this building not covered in dust?

Dust dust dust. So much dust. Foul, danger-'iding dust.

A spot of dustless floor to her right drew her attention, and her eyes narrowed when she glanced in the corner near it.

Well well well... what 'ave we 'ere?

She followed the clean trail that snaked along the wall. There, behind the desk. Crouched down and almost completely out of sight. She could see him, if only just.

A male pegasus, clad in a black latex suit with various belts holding what she could only assume were tools of his trade. A mask hid his face—he was definitely a stallion, if her expertise with pony physique was anything to go by. His wings were covered in the same latex, so she could not see his coat color.

His rifles weren't present, but she could see another, smaller firearm attached to his hoof, aiming directly at her. The lack of a tracer on the pistol was fortunate, as with it, it would be distorted against her invisibility.

Ah, zere 'e is. Et maintenant, voilà ma vengeance.

She steeled herself, taking a deep, silent breath. Then, she darted out directly to the side closest to him.

A shot rang out.

She hit the floor and rolled into the safety of a cubicle, but did not have time to make sure she hadn't been hit. She knew she'd felt something, but could only hope that that had just been the bullet whizzing by, not actually striking.

Another shot.

She ducked her head as it pierced through the wall of her hiding place, just inches above her nose. The next shot skimmed her ear. Had she been standing, both shots would have likely been fatal; one to the heart, the other to a lung.

She scrambled backwards, and the next two shots cracked into the floor where she'd been laying.

Her ears perked when she heard the sound of his gun jettisoning its spent magazine.

She darted out of the cubicle and around the corner towards him. She pounced hooves outstretched.

Every second after that, to her, felt like forever.

He loaded another magazine into his gun, quickly enough that he was able to take aim midway through.

She was mere inches away.

A shot rang out.

She felt the bullet pierce her shoulder.

Curaçao crashed into the sniper, knocking his gun off his hoof and into the corner, then rolling with him into the nearest wall. She bounded off of him and landed nimbly nearby, ready to react to his next move.

He was on his hooves in seconds, and swiveled around to face her sounds of movement.

She was already striking at him with a hoof. The blow knocked him off-balance, and she lunged at him again; without thinking, she attacked with her injured leg.

He blocked her attack this time and struck at her with his own, impacting her injured shoulder.

She staggered back; he pressed his offensive. She ducked down under his hoof and lifted his weight over her head, using his momentum to slam him into a desk and break it apart. She immediately regretted it, darting a hoof to her injury and wincing loudly.

He was back up more quickly than she expected, and looked directly at her again, eyes drifting to the patch of blood she was cradling.

She glanced at her wounded shoulder and realized she was expending unnecessary effort, then released her invisibility and leapt forward at him again.

He blocked, and countered. She blocked, and retreated.

He pressed his offensive, forcing her back.

She defended herself as best she could, but he was moving fast enough to keep up with her.

Zis stallion est un expert in zee mêlée? Intéressant... et inquiétant.

Rarity had been a simple encounter; despite her abilities as a unicorn, she was no expert in combat and had been easy to subdue and distract. Pinkie Pie had been complicated, but she'd also been severely exhausted; her strange power could have turned the tide, had Curaçao not figured out the trick.

This soldier, on the other hoof, was fully-rested and exceedingly competent. His offensive was swift and brutal, and left no room for error.

Curaçao tripped on a strip of debris from a broken desk, falling on her back. She expected her opponent to leap upon her and press his advantage.

Instead, he seemed to have leapt to the side.

Her eyes widened. He'd reached his gun.

Merde!

He rolled on the floor as she scrambled up to try and stop him. He aimed, and fired.

Curaçao closed her eyes, expecting pain, or worse.

She hit the floor. She'd heard the shot. So, where was the pain?

Her eyes fluttered open, and gazed upwards at the familiar violet legs belonging to

Starlight Shadow.

Her youngest sister's horn shined like a star: the bullet was nowhere to be seen, but the sniper had been snagged by the throat and now dangled in front of the unicorn. His facemask had been shattered.

"Curaçao... sister, are you unharmed?" Starlight asked, turning her head just slightly so that Curaçao could see the bright white luster in her eyes.

Curaçao groaned; she'd fallen on her shoulder. "I 'ave been better, ma sœur. But it is nozing serious at zee moment."

Starlight turned her gaze back to the sniper, glaring at him with such fiery intensity that Curaçao was amazed the hapless stallion didn't burst into flames. "You, my good stallion, have endangered the lives of my sisters and I for far too long. What say I deliver you to the others and set them loose upon you, hmm?"

The sniper did not panic, did not retort, nor did he plead for his life. His blue eyes, which were now clear to see, simply stared straight ahead, almost completely emotionless. His only reaction was to shrug and point at his own throat. Was he mute? Or perhaps he just chose not to talk.

"Nothing then?" Starlight turned back to Curaçao. "Sister, what is your command? Would you gain enjoyment from punishing him yourself?"

"Non, I 'ave a better idea. As you said, ma sœur, ve vill take 'im to zee ozers for 'is punishment. Anyzing ve can do, I assure you, I know somepony 'oo can do better."

Starlight laughed, and her horn flared again.

Havocwing grumbled and slumped against a wall of the ruined building where she was keeping an eye on Insipid and Red Velvet. Insipid's zipper-mouth was gone, and she was in the corner adjusting her stetson when the teleport went through. Red Velvet was slumped against a wall, her body still caked with blood, but her eyes half-open; she was awake, but still reeling from her injury.

She jumped to attention at the intrusion of two mares and one stallion, who teleported into their midst with a pop and a flash.

"Oh snap! You got the sniper!" she exclaimed, her smile so wide it threatened to split her face in half. She cantered up to him and circled around, getting a good look at the pony that had

caused everypony so much trouble. “Oh man... this is gonna be good.”

She turned to Curaçao, and her smile instantly faded. Her elder sister was nursing her shoulder, another leg was bleeding, and the pony’s normally flawless blue coat was caked with blood, dirt, and sweat.

“Curaçao! The hell happened to you?!” she said, darting over and looking the earth pony up and down. “Oh man, you look like you’ve been through Hell, sis. Are you alright? Did this punk do this to you?”

Curaçao shrugged and wiped the caked blood off her shoulder. “It is nozing zat Starlight’s Restomancy cannot fix, ‘avoc. Don’t worry about moi.”

“My... Restomancy?” Starlight asked, tilting her head.

Curaçao blinked. “Oui, ta Restomancy. Is... zere un problème?”

“I am unversed in the ways of Restomancy, sister,” Starlight said, shaking her head. “What provided you the hypothesis that I possessed such an ability?”

Curaçao glanced over at Insipid. “When you were injured zee ozer day, Insipid borrowed your powers, oui? She used Restomancy to ‘eal you.”

Starlight stared at Insipid, who gave her a little wave. “That is preposterous. I do not possess such capabilities. Restomancy’s nuances are unsuited to my tastes.”

Havocwing gave Curaçao a nervous look, then turned back to Starlight. “So... you can’t do anything for her?”

Starlight shook her head. “I regretfully must confirm your worry.”

Velvet snorted from over by the wall. “Oh what’s everypony getting all sad sack about? So Curaçao’s got a boo-boo, what’s the big deal? Just walk it off, like I do.”

Havocwing shot Velvet a glare. “What’s the big deal? Red, check it, in case you forgot, Curaçao doesn’t have your bucking wierdo healing power crap!”

Velvet rolled her eyes. “Oh stars, you guys are such *babies*.” She got up and trotted over to Curaçao, though it was more of a swagger, then pushed Curaçao’s hoof out of the way. “Ha! Is that it? You should check the crap I put up with.”

“Red, you’ve got a hole in your stomach the size of my hoof,” Havocwing said, glancing at Velvet’s still-open wound and contorting her face in disgust.

“Yeah yeah, shut up a sec. I’m gonna fix this all up.” Velvet looked up at Curaçao and gave her a wide smile. “You trust me, right, big sis? With your blood I mean?”

Curaçao blinked, glanced down at her wound, then back to Velvet. “Euh... oui?”

Velvet’s smile widened, and without warning she locked her lips around Curaçao’s shoulder. Curaçao yelped.

“Hey whoa!” Havocwing exclaimed, reaching a hoof out to stop Velvet. “What the buck are you—”

Velvet drew her mouth away and inhaled a great breath. “Hoo! Wow, big sis, you know you kinda taste like oranges?”

Curaçao stepped back and glanced down at her shoulder; Havocwing’s own gaze shifted to the wound as well. Only, the wound wasn’t there anymore. Not even a scar or anything, just perfectly clean coat, no blood, nothing.

“Ouah! Incroyable!” Curaçao said, brushing her hoof across the former injury. “Zee blessure est absente!”

Velvet gave a great, booming laugh. “Told you guys I’m the total master of blood. How d’ya like *them* oranges? Huh?”

Havocwing shook her head. “This is too bucking weird. I’m... just gonna go back to... stuff. You fix up her other wound, okay Red?”

Velvet saluted, tongue hanging out of her mouth. “Roger that, sis. If I’d known fixing you guys up tasted so good, man, I’d have been doing this from day one!”

Havocwing snorted and turned back to the floating stallion. She gestured for Starlight to let him out of her magic field, and after doing so, lurched forward and punched him in the stomach, causing him to double over.

“You bastard!” she shouted, punching him again. “You bucking bastard! You tried to kill me!” She ignited a hoof and punched him once more, knocking him into the wall with an explosion. “You got anything to say, punk?!”

The sniper stumbled to his hooves, glanced at Havocwing, then stood tall again. His eyes remained emotionless, unchanging. He simply pointed once at his neck, then shrugged.

“Oh buck you!” Havocwing snarled, igniting another hoof.

“Havocwing, do not monopolize the punishment,” Starlight said, jerking the stallion out of Havocwing’s way. “He may have nearly executed you, and Curaçao may have relinquished her opportunity, but there is somepony present that deserves this more.”

“Buck that! I want to—”

“‘avocving, Starlight is right,” Curaçao interrupted, stepping over to Havocwing’s side, her leg completely healed. “Velvet was injured by zis garish individual. I zink ve should let ‘er ‘ave ‘er fun. After all, she ‘as done much pour moi, non? Quelle surprise, zat she should be une toubib!”

Havocwing sunk onto her backside and crossed her hooves over her chest. “Right, right. Man... why don’t / ever get to have any fun?”

Curaçao smiled and patted Havocwing on the shoulder. “Do not worry, ‘avoc. When we get down to zee ‘angar, we will give you a ship to pilot. Zat will be fun, non? I ‘ave ‘eard zat zee piloting mécanisme is suited only for zee meilleurs pilotes.”

Havocwing scratched her chin in thought. It was certainly true, she *was* the best flier in her group, bar none. She nodded. “Yeah, okay... I guess I do get to do that and nopony else here is as good as I am. Best damn fighter this side of Pandemonium... hmm. Best damn *pilot* this side of Pandemonium too.”

She turned behind her. “Yo Red! You heard Curaçao, front and center!”

Red Velvet squealed and bounced forward, pushing Havocwing and Curaçao out of her way. “Oh boy oh boy oh boy! *Dessert!*”

Starlight let Velvet’s tendrils take the sniper from her magical grip, and stepped back towards the wall. “Ah, this should prove an interesting display.”

Velvet giggled and rubbed her hooves together. “I’ve been looking to try something new, y’know? I wanted to use it earlier, but it takes a bit of time to do. If I tried to do it in *real* combat and stuff, I’d get creamed.” She slid a tendril along his cheek. “Wanna know what it is, stud?”

The sniper did not respond, merely kept looking at her with those same cold, emotionless eyes, pointed a hoof at his throat, and shrugged.

Velvet snorted and stuck her nose in the air. “Man, you’re a drag-and-a-half! I guess this is one of those times I’m kinda glad I don’t get my kicks from fear anymore, right girls? This silent treatment is totally lame!” She sighed and gave an exaggerated shrug. “What a disappointment. Welp, okay then! Probably for the best anyway.”

One of her tendrils, a very thick one lurched forward and gripped around his helmet. "Open wiiiide!"

Havocwing couldn't exactly see what Velvet was doing, but all of a sudden, the other pony's body shuddered and shook, jerking and spasming about like he was being given electric shocks. The tendril pulsed, sending great globs of blood through it that leaked out the sides of his cracked helmet.

She stepped back towards the walls when she saw the sniper's body start bulging outwards. "Uh... Red? What are you—"

Velvet's tongue lolled out of the side of her mouth, and she began panting sporadically, a deep red blush rising to her cheeks. "Oh stars... here we go... this is gonna be *good*."

Curaçao started backing up as well. "Euh... Velvet...?"

Inspid gulped and tugged her hat over her eyes. "Guys, Velvet's scaring me again!"

A large sphere of blood seeped out of her back along the tendril and forced itself through the opening in his helmet.

"Come on baby!" Velvet cried, her rear leg kicking as though she were a happy dog. "Come on!"

Havocwing felt her rear hoof hit the wall. "I don't like the look of—"

The sniper's body burst apart, splattering the room, and everypony in it, with remains. Only Starlight's quick reflexes spared her the same fate; visceral fluids splashed against her shield.

"Awww, *buck me!*" Havocwing wailed as she glanced all over herself. "Bucking *dammit* Red! Dammit! Buck!"

Curaçao wiped a hoof along her mouth and flung a great glob of gooey red matter to the floor. "Zere should be warnings against zat sort of zing! Ouah... c'est dégueulasse!"

"Oh. My. Stars!" Inspid stumbled backwards, gripping her hat and shaking it wildly to get all to goop off. "Red! You, like, got guts all over my new hat! Gross gross gross! Totally! Major! *BARF!*"

Velvet giggled and put her hoof over her mouth, giving everypony a sheepish grin. "Oops. Sorry everypony, got carried away."

She trotted over to Havocwing, licking her lips. “Lemme just get that for ya. You’ve got something on your face.”

Havocwing stumbled against the wall. “Ahh! Get away! Don’t you dare—”

Velvet opened her mouth wide, and then, though Havocwing wasn’t sure how it was possible, used her tongue quite literally slurp up every last drop of visceral remains in one go. This also somehow left Havocwing a dripping wet drooly mess.

“Mmm! Now that’s a spicy meat-a-ball!” she said, kissing her hoof and waving it out into the air.

Havocwing shuddered and looked down at her soaked hooves. “I feel... oh stars... I feel violated. No amount of therapy... will ever make this moment okay.”

Velvet snickered and gave Curaçao a sidelong glance. “Next!”

Curaçao sighed and slumped back on her backside. “Just get it over wiz...”

Another tongue bath later, and two of the four messy ponies were clean, though soaking wet.

Velvet whooped and spun around to face Insipid. “Next!”

“Oh no...” Insipid gulped and backed into the corner. “No no no! Like, get away! Totally nasty! Ew! Ew-ew-ew-ew-ew!”

Velvet pounced at Insipid, but the unicorn yelped and sunk into the shadows on the floor, leaving Velvet to crash into the opposing wall and land in a new pile of goop. She stumbled upright and rubbed her nose. “Hey! Insipid? Insipid!”

“Get awaaaay!” Insipid wailed, her black blot slinking into the opposite corner, where there wasn’t any light at all. She ended up popping back into pony form, completely clean. “Uh...? Ooh! Clean as, like, a whistle? Why are whistles, like, so clean and junk?”

Velvet grumbled and slurped up all the visceral matter that was still coating herself. “Tch, you’re no fun...” she said before moving on to start cleaning up the rest of the room.

“Dammit! Red, this is easily the stupidest thing you’ve ever done!” Havocwing shouted, using a flaming hoof as if it were a blowdryer. “Covered in pony guts then Velvet spit. Bucking nasty.”

Starlight sighed and dropped her shield. "If all of these shenanigans are finished?" She snapped to attention and stared at Curaçao, who gave her a brief glance. "Curaçao! You are—"

"Late, oui, I know," Curaçao said, running a hoof through her now miraculously-dry mane. "Papa's assassin delayed me more zan I would 'ave liked."

"Shadowstep? You engaged him?" Starlight asked, eyebrow raised.

Curaçao shook her head. "Avoided 'im, more like. 'e was spying on me. 'e did not know zat I knew, so I 'ad to make my actions obvious in order to keep 'is attention on moi. I could not risk 'im growing impatient wiz me, and going after *our* targets."

She cleared her throat. "Euh, zough zat means zat zee escape of zose cretins est ma faute. Monsieur Shadowstep used zee military to frighten zem and zeir contacts into moving before I could get zee shield down. Zey got too much of a lead."

Starlight stomped her hoof. "That insufferable little—" She took a deep breath. "Then all the more importance in speeding along our own departure."

Curaçao turned back to Starlight. "Oui, zat would be zee best course of action. Now zen, where is—"

A great crash from above caused everypony to leap out of the way.

Grayscale brushed herself off. "Hey. What'd I miss?"

Havocwing stared at Grayscale, then shook her head in disappointment. "Let me guess, nap time?"

Grayscale yawned and stretched her hooves. "Eh. Lucky guess."

Curaçao coughed into her hoof. "Well... zen zat takes care of zat. Hmm! I know where zee 'angar bay is, but I do not know exactly 'ow to get down zere. All of zee entrances are sealed shut because of zee evacuation. C'est malheureux..."

Starlight smirked. "Permit me to assist with that."

She strut over to the sniper's fallen helmet, snapped his comlink out, and placed it in her ear. She tapped it until it gave a loud crackle, and a voice on the other end came loud enough that everypony could hear it.

"-spond. Repeat: Commander Pinpoint, report. Your gunfire has ceased for quite some time. Has your target been neutralized, or do you require assistance? If you are injured and

unable to signal normally, fire a single shot beneath the central illumination fixture. If you cannot fire, any suitable surface to signal clearly will suffice. Rigid, flat surfaces carry well. Please respond. Over.

Starlight laughed, and spoke through the comlink. "Greetings. To whom am I speaking?"

"What the- uh... who is this?"

"I initiated inquiry for information from yourself, sir," Starlight said. "I shall relinquish my information if you relinquish yours."

"Miss, you are communicating over a closed channel, and your transmission is coming from the last known whereabouts of Commander Pinpoint and his patrol unit. Explain yourself."

"I continue to wait for your response, sir. I expected a stallion of military training to display more professional decorum."

"...this is General Aftershock, of the Hope's Point Militia. Now, to whom am I speaking?"

"Attention, General Aftershock, and whoever else may be listening. My name is Starlight Shadow. My sisters and myself are seeking passage across the sea, and we would be most appreciative if any assistance were presented to us."

"Miss, I will remind again that this is a closed channel. We are sending two more units your way to intercept. Please see to it that you cooperate with them."

"Are you then? I do hope it's to be of some assistance," Starlight said with a laugh. "You see, this 'Pinpoint' and his unit were most *uncooperative*. We were forced to annihilate them all. My dear sister Red Velvet enjoyed feasting on their remains."

Velvet bounded over and started talking in Starlight's ear. "Hey yeah! Bring some dang hot sauce too! You guys don't have much flavor! Not that you're awful, I've just tasted better, is all I'm saying. Definitely two-star material. Hey! Generals have stars like restaurants, right? Is that why your troops taste so bad? Are you only two stars?"

"Red, keep your trap shut," Havocwing said, shoving Velvet aside to try and listen in better.

"I will repeat myself, though I am loathe to do so," Starlight continued. "You will relay this broadcast to any and all soldiers in this city: Starlight Shadow and her sisters are seeking passage across the sea. Any assistance offered will be appreciated; a lack of cooperation will be met with open hostility. If no pony will collaborate with us, then we will massacre the lot of you until our message is unambiguous. We shall not be held accountable for any additional deaths if

you are unwilling to cooperate.”

“Yeah! You got your chance, moron!” Havocwing added, wrapping a leg around Starlight in a sort of hug and giving her youngest sibling a big, proud grin. “Me and my sisters are gonna wipe the floor with you!”

“Yeah! We just got done putting up a nice coat of Pinpoint Pink all over the floors here!” Velvet shouted, joining in the hug. “Think you guys can help us paint some more rooms?”

Havocwing gave a toothy grin and pat Velvet on the back. “Ooh, that’s brutal, Red. I like it.”

“Miss, if that’s your message, then you’ve opened up a world of hurt on yourself, and your sisters. General Aftershock out.”

Starlight laughed, turning to her sisters with a smile. “Oh, I assure you, General Aftershock, you are sorely mistaken. What is it you’d say in this situation, Havoc?”

Havocwing gave a dark chuckle. “You’d better bring the heat, ‘*General Aftershock*’, ‘cause I’m bringing the inferno! I’m- no, *we’re* the best damn fighters this side of Pandemonium!”

Only a series of flashing emergency lights kept the Thunder’s tiny cockpit from being in total darkness, painting the walls with a dim red glow. Queen Blackburn slumped against the side of her piloting compartment, her breaths coming in short bursts. Her wings twitched as a stinging sensation slid through her. She glanced up at the whirling alarm signal on the ceiling; it clicked over from red to orange. She stood up straight, smoothed out her jacket, skirt, and scarf, then breathed a sigh of relief.

Somehow, the ship had held together. Barely, of course, but the Diffusion shield had been as efficient as Blackburn had hoped.

She rubbed her eyes, still trying to adjust to the lighting of the cockpit. “Gadget. Report.”

Gadget groaned, and with shaking hooves pulled herself up off the cockpit floor into her chair. “Right away, Your Highness. Golly... just... just give me a second, please? I think I’m seeing double here.”

Her horn glowed and she attempted flipping some large switches strewn about the console. She rapidly flicked the large, ridged one in the center of the console, seemingly with no effect. She trotted out of her chair and over to another panel on the side of the cockpit, flicking a few more switches there, again with no effect.

She sighed and returned to her seat, then flicked her small visor over her eyes and tapped its side in quick succession. "Engine power reduced to bare minimum, dynamic thrusters are down completely, and the majority of minor systems are in safety shut-off mode. Emergency measures have been deployed and air sacs are holding steady. Diffusion shield at five percent strength and climbing, but slowly. A solid strike from anything out here could break the shield."

"Projection for repairs?"

"Well I think the technical term here would be 'bucked up'. With both the engines *and* the Diffusion system operating at minimal capacity, we're in quite a pickle."

Gadget sighed and kept trying to flick the same switch she'd tried originally. Still no effect. "I'm gonna need to stick up here, Your Highness. I can fiddle around with Diffusion system to keep its regeneration steady enough to get us back online. But, I can't repair the engines from here, and only one other pony onboard has that know-how."

Blackburn grunted, placing a hoof to her temple. "So be it. Any sign of Admiral Hotstreak?"

"Negative on that one, at least. Massive energy signatures behind us indicate that his ship's energy core went critical."

"At least one boon comes from this, then."

Blackburn reached out a hoof and tugged a small handle inside her compartment, activating the shut-down and cleansing process. A small nozzle deployed from the ceiling, and sprayed a cloud of blue mist throughout the compartment. The black mesh along her wings hardened for a few short seconds, then melted off like water, flooding the compartment floor before being sucked down a drain that opened. A moment later, the sliding glass door gave a loud hiss and opened, and Blackburn stepped out, heading for the cockpit exit.

"Continue your work, Gadget. Until we land, not out of trouble. Need to see to Briar, get the engines repaired."

"Roger that, Your Highness," Gadget said, giving a half-hearted salute as she was too focused on her repair work. "Oh, if somepony could bring up a glass of hard lemonade, I'd appreciate it."

"You don't usually drink, Gadget."

"Yes, well... I think I'm gonna make an exception tonight, Your Highness..." Gadget sighed and wiped her eyes. "I've got a lot on my mind."

“Will see to it that you get something decent, then. Unsure of Briar’s selection.”

Blackburn exited the cockpit and strolled down the topside hallway, past the airlock, to the ship’s tiny kitchen. Crossfire would have carried Briarthorn in here, as it was the closest room to the airlock; and, unsurprisingly, there they were. Crossfire stood firm and tall just beside the doorway, and Briarthorn was resting on his stomach on the dining table, still unconscious. Twilight’s horn glowed a bright green, tracing a light around Briarthorn’s midsection. Rarity paced over by a row of cabinets, her face whiter than normal.

Blackburn stepped into the room without a word.

Crossfire immediately snapped to attention, shooting his hoof to his forehead in a brisk salute. “Yer Highness! The situation is under control, awaitin’ further orders!”

“At ease, Crossfire,” Blackburn said, giving him a small nod and gesturing for him to lower his hoof. “Head to the cargo hold, see that everypony is unharmed. Will be down after finished here, wish to speak with Lockwood. See to it he knows.”

“Yes, Yer Highness!” He cantered out of the room, head held high.

Blackburn turned to Twilight, then stepped forward, shaking her head. “A diagnostics spell. You are examining Briar. Worried about his condition, curious why he is in such a state.”

Twilight jerked her head up, apparently not expecting the conversation. “Oh... well, yes, Your Majesty,” she said, darting her eyes back to her spellwork. “You’re right, I’m performing a diagnostics spell. I’m not as proficient with it as your official doctors, but—”

“It will suffice,” Blackburn completed. She gave Twilight an approving nod. “List off your diagnosis.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow, then nodded in return. “Well, like I said, I’m not sure I’m reading all this right. But assuming I am, I guess I’ll start with what are the most serious health issues I can find. Simply put, he has severe liver damage, which I suspect is from all the alcohol he drinks? I suppose that’s—”

“Obvious.” Blackburn gestured for Twilight to continue.

Twilight coughed into her hoof. “Well, then there’s his heartbeat, which is... irregular, not anything like what I was expecting. Even while unconscious, it’s beating as fast as it should be when he’s awake. Unless he’s having a very active dream, that shouldn’t be the case.”

She shrugged. “So, well, that might just be what he’s doing, because then there’s his

brain. Luckily, I have some knowledge of neuroscience thanks to my experiments on Pinkie Pie's Pinkie Sense."

"Keep it short, Twilight Sparkle."

"Well, his brainwaves are all over the place. The quickest thing I can say is, now I understand what makes Briarthorn act like... well, Briarthorn."

Her expression turned sour, and she placed a hoof on Briarthorn's midsection. "None of that's really affecting him right now, though. I'm more worried about the rest of it. He's suffering from internal injuries across almost all of his minor and major organs, and none of them look like they were originally inflicted recently."

"To be honest, Your Highness, I'm surprised he's even alive, let alone able to walk and talk. How he can fly in this condition is beyond me."

"Is there anything you can do, Twilight?" Rarity asked, stepping over and putting a hoof on Twilight's shoulder. "Perhaps some sort of Restomancy? Please, he deserves whatever help you can give him."

Twilight sighed. "The damage is well past my understanding of proper Restomancy. I can accelerate the healing process for things like bones and surface tissue, but organs?" She turned back to Blackburn. "I have no idea what's even—"

"Wrong with him? Aside from bizarre personality, of course," Blackburn said, her mouth curling in a small, brief smile. She shook her head. "Not something you would know. Diffusion feedback."

Rarity blinked. "Beg pardon? Diffusion... feedback?"

Blackburn stepped forward and put her hoof on Briarthorn's head. He didn't react at all, his breathing remaining labored. "Yes. Diffusion feedback. Unique symptom of utilizing Diffusion system. System imperfect, not completely safe: powerful magicks stream through energy field, back through device into pegasus creating shield. Severe negative effects on internal systems."

"What sorts of 'negative effects'?" Twilight asked, giving Briarthorn another panicked look. "I mean, I can see what sorts of damage it can do and to what organs, but how much are we talking about in one go?"

Blackburn tapped her chin and thought for a moment. "On average, without precautions or treatment? One dozen uses, maybe less, considered lethal. Typical average determined by pilot's physiology."

Twilight balked, taking a step back and shaking her head. “And all your pilots use this system regularly? How do you even have any pilots left? Why would any of them volunteer?!”

“As said, precautions and treatment. Precautions simple enough: apparatus Briar provided Rainbow Dash is a Diffusion diffusor; did not name it, can’t be faulted for awful convention. It dilutes feedback by seventy-five percent, give or take. Rainbow Dash could have completed remaining cycle with minimal effect on her well-being.”

Blackburn turned to Rarity and pointed behind the unicorn at the line of cabinets. “Bottom cabinet behind you. Briar should keep private stash there. Fetch a bottle; any will do.”

“A bottle? Private stash?” Rarity asked, eyebrow raised. She shot Twilight a nervous glance. “You mean, alcohol? I’m fetching alcohol?”

“Correct. One bottle, if you please.”

“Right... yes, of course.” Rarity turned and opened the cabinet mentioned, then pulled out a large black bottle with gold labeling. She gave it a brisk shake, jostling the liquids inside, then passed it over to Blackburn.

Blackburn did not take it, and gestured towards Briarthorn instead. “Give it to him,” she said.

Rarity nodded and, with her magic, yanked the top off the bottle with a sharp pop. She then opened Briarthorn’s mouth and placed the lip of the bottle inside, then tilted his head back. A single swish of liquid went down his throat, then she went to tilt him forward, obviously thinking she was done.

Blackburn shook her head and pushed Briarthorn’s head back again, giving Rarity a quick glance and causing the unicorn to shy away slightly. “Didn’t say to stop. By ‘it’, meant ‘whole bottle’. Should have been more clear. Apologies, not your fault.”

Twilight bit her bottom lip as she watched the bottle’s contents pour into Briarthorn’s gullet. “Isn’t that a little much? I did mention his liver trouble, didn’t I?”

Blackburn shook her head. “Proper dosage of treatment.”

“‘Treatment’?” Rarity blurted, jerking her hoof away in surprise. “*This is treatment?*”

Blackburn chuckled, giving Rarity a sympathetic look. “Don’t worry. Briar’s great-grandfather invented Diffusion system. Discovered severe pain and internal trauma it causes. Barely lived through testing phases. Briar’s grandfather discovered treatment method: alcohol dulls Diffusion effects. Stronger alcohol content increases potency.”

Twilight frowned and shook her head, putting her hoof on Briarthorn's side. "So that's why he drinks so much."

Blackburn grunted in acknowledgement. She pulled the bottle away as soon as it had emptied, then placed it on the counter next to her. "Briarthorn is top-tier smuggler, and only single-pony team, mostly at his own insistence. Has no backup pilot to spread Diffusion feedback around. 'I work better alone', he says. Trusted with many important missions recently. Compounds effect."

She sighed and smoothed Briarthorn's sweaty mane back out of his face. "Overcompensates at times; drinks too much. Constantly undergoes liver treatments, often on monthly basis. At this rate, may die of liver poisoning before Diffusion feedback destroys rest of him. Ironic, really."

"*Ironic?!*" Twilight stomped a hoof. "Is that all this is to you?! Your 'missions' are killing him! With the internal injuries he has, he'll be lucky to live another—"

"Five years," Blackburn completed. She glanced at the dumbfounded Twilight, her mouth curled in a solemn frown. "Already heard diagnostics from *proper* medical staff. Doctor Sugarcane trustworthy enough to keep it from him."

Twilight narrowed her eyes, darting them back and forth between Blackburn and Briarthorn. "Keep it from him?"

"You mean... he doesn't know?" Rarity asked. "Why?"

Blackburn frowned and turned away from them. "Not proud of it. If he knew, would change, alter lifestyle. Do things to extend life, but rob himself of pleasures. Might buy another year. Maybe two. Would be a miserable extension. Doctor Sugarcane does what she can, but effects are miniscule."

She turned slightly to face them again, giving them a small smile. "His own philosophy: 'live life to its fullest, or it's not worth living'. Would not deprive him of that."

"I don't know if that's the most *deplorable* thing I've ever heard... or the most noble," Rarity said, shaking her head.

"Noble? How could you even think that, Rarity?" Twilight asked, glaring at Rarity. She pointed at Blackburn. "She knows he's dying, and she's hiding it from him!"

Rarity sighed. "That might well be, Twilight, but—"

Twilight glanced down at Briarthorn, and snorted through her nose. "It's not fair to him. He should—"

She was interrupted when Briarthorn gave a loud grumble and rolled over onto his back, kicking his leg as a dog would.

"He is waking," Blackburn said. "Normally would not ask this: do not tell Briar the truth. If you do, and he asks for confirmation, will not give it. Pains me greatly, knowing how long he has to live. Not something anypony should ever know, unless something permanent can be done."

A few moments passed, and Briarthorn shook from his stupor. "Oh stars and comets, my aching head..." he murmured, blinking his eyes open and rubbing his temple. "Did anypony catch the license plate on the truck that hit me?"

"Briarthorn, are you okay?" Rarity asked, placing her hooves beside his head.

Briarthorn gave her a tight smile. "Will a 'no' get me some more smooches?" he asked, pursing his lips. "My body is ready."

"Apparently fine," Blackburn said, bonking Briarthorn over the head.

"Hey, ow! I didn't say you couldn't help her, Queenie."

She rolled her eyes and laughed. "You've done well, Briar. Diffusion system charged beyond normal capacity, withstood Devastator Cannon fire."

Briarthorn's eyes widened. "Holy smokes, no kidding? Devastator fire? Really?" He laughed a great, proud laugh. "Well now, that's slick! How long was I out, and how's my ship? Wait, strike that. Reverse it. Gotta prioritize. How's my angel holding up?"

Blackburn sighed and patted Briarthorn on the head in an attempt to reassure him. "Minor systems at minimal capacity. Diffusion system holding, Gadget keeping it operational and attempting to optimize functionality. Dynamic thrusters and main engines, out of power."

"My beautiful Thunder... nooo..." Briarthorn groaned and held his head, then gave Blackburn a pleading, puppy dog-eyed look. "Your Majesty, *please* tell me you're gonna help me with the bill? You're the one who broke my baby."

"Will discuss after we arrive in Utopia. Matters are complicated."

"*Discuss*, huh? I guess that's gonna have to be good enough for now." He turned to face Twilight, giving the unicorn a bright smile. "Hey Twily. You look tired. Are you tired? You shouldn't be tired, you haven't been up that long."

Twilight gave Blackburn a quick glance, then cleared her throat. “Well, Briarthorn, I’d like to answer your first question now, if I could? It’s been about two hours since we brought you back aboard the ship.”

“Ha! A new record!” Briarthorn’s jovial expression gradually dimmed as Twilight neglected to return it. “Hey, is something wrong, Twily? You look down. You didn’t get hit out there, did you?”

“No...” Twilight said, shaking her head. “I’m fine, Briarthorn. Thanks for asking. You should get some rest, though. Being out like that isn’t good for your health.”

“Yes, darling, you should just lay down and relax for a while,” Rarity insisted, using her magic to wipe Briarthorn’s sweaty brow with a napkin. “Look at you, you’re a mess!”

Blackburn cleared her throat. “Evidently, a repeat of the situation is necessary. Briar, Diffusion system holding steady, Gadget spending full time and effort on endeavor to optimize. Thus, Gadget unavailable to repair engines, which are barely operational. Only one other pony on board with expertise in repairs.”

“Right right, I get it, Queenie. On it now,” Briarthorn said, rolling onto his stomach and pulling himself to his hooves with a strained grunt. “I’ll have the engines fixed up in a... a jiffy. Just as soon as... my head stops doing its own Diffusion loops, if you get me. Did I paint the kitchen blue? Why is everything blue?”

“He really shouldn’t be moving so soon,” Twilight said, trying to stymie Briarthorn’s attempt to get up. “Look at him, he’s barely able to stand. I’m sure he could walk somepony else through it, like Tick Tock or—”

“Little time to argue, Twilight Sparkle, repairs are a necessity,” Blackburn said, giving Twilight a sharp glance. “Briar will get his earned rest in Utopia. May consider giving a vacation, as he’s earned it.”

“Huh? A vacation? Aren’t I on public booze probation?” Briarthorn gave Blackburn a coy smirk. “You can’t exactly stop me from drinking some fine Utopian spirits, Queenie.”

“Fine Utopian *pisswater*, you mean. Utopian alcohol not terrific, but satisfactory. Probation temporarily lifted. Did more work than expected, can go easy for a time.” She narrowed her eyes and pointed at the door. “For *now*, your ship needs your help. Can’t risk being long in the Belt, not with sub-optimal Diffusion levels.”

Twilight snorted. “I really must insist—”

“Twily, hey! Relax, I’ll be fine,” Briarthorn said, giving Twilight a reassuring pat on the head with his wing. “I’ve suffered worse than this. No big deal. Don’t get warty on me. Just a mild case of Diffusion feedback, nothing some bed and a booze-fest won’t fix!”

“Mild case... right...”

“Hey, after I get everything fixed up? I’ll take a nap and, apparently, a little vacation. Sounds good, right? I know it’s pretty much midway through the winter quarter and all, so no hitting the beaches, a damn shame to be sure. I’d love to show you the beaches when they’re in season! I bet you and Lady Rarity here would look drop-dead *gorgeous* in swimwear.”

“Well... if you’re okay with it...”

“Swimwear... hmm, I never thought of that,” Rarity said, tapping her chin. “Say now, that gives me an idea for when we get home! Fashionable designer swimwear! What a brilliant idea, Briarthorn. I wonder why I never thought of anything like that before?”

Briarthorn hopped off the table and trotted—staggered, really—towards the door. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about it, Twily. No warts for you, your face is too nice! I may not be an engineer like Gadget is, but I know the Thunder. She’ll be back up in no time!”

“I certainly hope so. You need some rest, Briarthorn, really you do,” Twilight said, biting her lip.

“Sure! Sure, I’m just gonna get changed first, then I—oh, you two should change also—then I just need a little help with the heavy lifting and we’re all good to go.”

Blackburn nodded and stepped out of Briarthorn’s way. “Heavy lifting... ah, yes. Crossfire would be glad to assist. He is down in the cargo hold.”

Briarthorn laughed and shook his head. “Crossfire? Oh ho, no no no, that big slab of muscle has had enough of a workout today. Yeesh, Queenie, you’re *brutal*. Give the guy a chance to replenish himself before you ride him again, huh? I was gonna ask somepony else for some help, actually.”

“Somepony else?” Rarity asked, shooting Twilight a brief, confused look. “Who?”

“Why exactly are we here again?” Flathoof asked, keeping in stride with Applejack as the pair followed Briarthorn into the bowels of the Thunder.

The pegasus did not wear his usual vest and belt combination, and instead wore a

different sort of full-body suit than the one he'd been using for flying earlier. It certainly had nearly as many pockets as his vest did, that was for certain.

"Your ship is really fascinating, Briarthorn, and Applejack and I certainly appreciate the grand tour that's taken all of... what? Fifteen minutes? But I'm still not sure what we're doing."

"Yeah, y'all made this sound urgent," Applejack said, keeping her eyes forward and focused on the path ahead. "I don't really know what any o' these here doohickies are, ta be frank with ya."

"I told you: repairs," Briarthorn said, wobbling towards a thick metal door labeled *Engine Control*. "I'm the only pony on board other than Gadget that can fix the engine, right? Well, I need your help to do it."

He trotted up to the door and tapped a sequence of buttons on the numerical panel to the side. A second later, the door gave a loud click, and he pushed it open and gestured for them to enter.

Flathoof and Applejack entered the room, which was not much larger than the cargo hold above them, though that did still make it about the size of a large den. Briarthorn followed right behind them, and shut the door in his wake before trotting towards the square-shaped room's center.

Flathoof took a quick look around, and other than a small door just to the right labeled *Emergency Pod*, nothing really stood out. In fact, it became quite clear to Flathoof that something about Briarthorn's story was amiss.

The room's entrance was too small to look as though anything particularly heavy and movable would even fit into the room, outside of unicorn teleportation. All the techno-magic equipment looked like it was attached directly to the walls and fitted upon panels of various shapes and sizes, apart from the large device in the center of the room, which was attached to the floor and ceiling. The floor of the room was clean and devoid of debris, and apart from a single, small box in the opposite corner, nothing in here looked as if it even needed to be lifted, let alone would require great strength.

Briarthorn must have noticed Flathoof's curiosity. "Like it?" he asked. "The Thunder's engine room's probably the most *private* room on the ship. If I'm cruising the nice, open night skies of Utopia, I often park this big girl somewhere out of the way, and..."

His eyes drifted for a moment, and he looked distant. The pause lasted so long that Flathoof reached out to tap Briarthorn's shoulder, but jerked his hoof back as the pegasus shook his head.

“Sorry, still woozy. Anyway, the engine room is one of the better places onboard for... uh, *intimate* pursuits. If you know what I mean?”

Flathoof groaned and shook his head. “I really don’t want to—”

“Sex. I mean sex.”

“Yes, we got it,” Flathoof deadpanned. “Thank you, for that mental image.”

Again, Briarthorn didn’t respond for a moment, looking distant. He shook his head again. “Oh, are... you’re visualizing me in my... in your head now, are you Flathoof?” Briarthorn grinned and gave his typical eyebrow waggle. “What am I wearing? Wait! Wait, let me guess—”

Flathoof shoved the pegasus away. “Oh stars, put a sock in it for one second, will you? Do you ever take anything seriously?”

Applejack scratched her head and looked around, her eyes betraying her obvious lack of understanding of what anything in the room did. “Well, ignorin’ the raunchy stories, let’s just get back on topic, yeah? Lemme get this straight here, Mister Briarthorn: y’all needed us ta help ya in here with repairs... why again?”

Briarthorn smiled and folding his wings in a pose of innocence. “Again, like I said: heavy lifting. See, in my condition, I’m not exactly able to operate at my peak. Can’t really fly too well right now, yeah? Without my *ample* wing power at my beck and call,” he added, flexing his wings and giving Applejack a wink, “I need the help.”

Flathoof snorted and gave Briarthorn the most impatient, disapproving look he could muster. He hated when Lockwood did something with ulterior motives, and over the years had grown to see the telltale signs of one of his adopted brother’s crazy schemes from miles away. Briarthorn was significantly less subtle about it.

“Briarthorn, there isn’t anything in this room that even looks it *could* be lifted,” he said, gesturing through the room with an outstretched hoof, “except that toolbox in the corner.” His hoof lingered on the aforementioned box. “Now, don’t tell me that thing’s even remotely heavy. It’s tiny!”

Briarthorn massaged his temples with his wingtips, then gave Flathoof’s shoulder a slow, demonstrated pat. “Oh, you’d be surprised at how much appearance can deceive, Flathoof. ‘Size matters not’, after all. Got that off a fortune cookie. Anyway, if it’s such a cinch, just bring it on over. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Flathoof rolled his eyes and trotted over to the perfectly-cubic silver box in the corner. Other than the large, orange, circular insignia on the top, it was entirely nondescript. Flathoof

reached out a hoof and pushed it from the side. It didn't budge, but Flathoof hadn't really put much effort into it. He did note that the box was warm to the touch, though.

"I can't believe you're such a wuss," he said, shaking his head. "You really can't lift this thing? Seriously?"

Applejack snorted. "Just lift the dang thing, Flathoof. Briarthorn said he was injured, stop makin' the guy—"

Briarthorn laughed. "My dear southern comfort, Applejack, jumping to my defense. I appreciate the gesture, but—"

"I ain't jumpin' ta yer defense, I'm just tryin' ta get Flathoof ta hurry it up. I wanna get back up ta th' others."

Flathoof shrugged. "Fine fine, I'll take care of it."

He placed his hooves on the sides of the box and hoisted it up. Well, attempted to anyway. He realized after giving it a second sharp tug that it wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. He grunted and tugged again, but the box didn't budge an inch. Was it bolted to the floor? Did it have magnets on it? Was it really just a piece of decoration, not a box at all? There had to be something wrong here.

"Well? Are ya gonna stop foolin' 'round, or ain't ya?" Applejack asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Yeah, we're waiting over here," Briarthorn added, his mouth cracking a rather large grin.

"Uh..." Flathoof mumbled, giving a nervous glance back to the others. "Let me try that again. I just... couldn't get a good grip, is all."

He grabbed the sides again and put more effort into the lift, straining his rear legs and giving a great exhale in his attempt. This time, he managed to get it off the ground, and with it in his grip, he stumbled over to Briarthorn and dropped the heavy box at the pilot's feet. Then, he staggered back and let out another sharp exhale and began rubbing one of his hind legs.

"Holy cow, what's *in* that dang box? Weights?" he asked, struggling for breath. "I just about threw out my back lifting that danged thing."

"So much fer 'super strength', I guess?" Applejack said, shaking her head and giving Flathoof an amused grin. "I thought y'all got in shape after runnin' 'round the Wastelands fer two weeks?"

“Yes, well... you try lifting it then,” Flathoof said, standing upright and running a hoof through his mane. “No really, what’s in that thing?”

“What I need to fix the ship engines,” Briarthorn said, snapping his goggles over his face. He waved his hoof towards the door. “You two may want to back up a bit. There’s some dangerous stuff in here, and you two don’t have protective suits or even goggles like yours truly. Wouldn’t want you guys getting, like... I dunno, magic cancer or something.”

He fumbled in one of his suit’s pockets for a large, square key, which he then inserted into the small slot in the center of the orange marking. With a twist, he unlocked it, and a dim blue glow crept out of the slit that had been opened. When the box was fully opened, the glow was bright enough to almost light up the room. Briarthorn then grabbed a small, clawed device from the side of the large machine in the center of the room, and stuck it inside the compartment with a loud click.

He pulled a bright blue glowing orb out, brandishing it in the air. “And here we are!”

Applejack shielded her eyes from the glow. “Shoot, who turned on the danged *sun*?”

“One fully-charged energy module, ready to go! Yet another damn shame. Too many of those, lately. I mean, that air show Queenie gave you lovely folks means I’ve gotta bring this little thing out so soon, y’know? I figured the current module would last another few *months*, but I guess I didn’t expect Her Worshipfulness to be giving my babydoll such a workout.”

“That’s what was in there?” Flathoof asked, eyebrow twitching. “It’s not heavy at all! You didn’t need—”

Briarthorn shook his head and laughed. “Oh no, no. What was *in* the box wasn’t heavy. The box itself was what was heavy. It’s layered with all sorts of radiation protection.”

Flathoof balked. “So why didn’t you just open it up and bring it over from there? You didn’t need me to bring the box over.”

Briarthorn blinked, and narrowed his eyes, looking at nothing, in apparently serious thought. He shrugged. “Well, whaddya know? Seems like you’re right, and we’re way past too late. Sorry, big guy!”

Briarthorn chuckled and pushed a small, orange button on the side of the large machine. A hatch on the side opened up, exposed a flickering blue glow much like the small orb he was holding. The glow was noticeably dimmer and the flickering was reminiscent of a dying light bulb. He pushed a red button next, and the machine gave a loud hiss, followed by a clang that echoed through the chamber. The glow from the machine disappeared after that.

Briarthorn then inserted the orb he was carrying into the hatch, and twisted the device in his hooves with another loud click. He then removed the device, without the orb attached to it. The machine was glowing blue again, brighter than ever.

“And there we go, one brand spanking new power source all set to go,” Briarthorn said, pushing a green button on the side to close the hatch and lock the machine up. He preened his wings, giving them each a proud smile. “We’ll be chugging along in no time.”

“Really? Well, okay then. So what’s next?” Flathoof asked, stepping forward. “What else do we need to do to help?”

Briarthorn turned to face them, his smile wide. He gave both an apologetic bow. “Weeellll... now to the important things. I’m going to finish setting up all the remaining charging parameters and getting the engines properly started up. You two are going to head over into the corner and talk. A private talk. You follow?”

Flathoof and Applejack gave each other quizzical looks, then turned back to Briarthorn.

Applejack scratched her head. “Uh, beg pardon? Private talk?”

“You mean... you don’t need us anymore?” Flathoof asked, darting his eyes back and forth between Briarthorn and the door.

Briarthorn shook his head, giving an embarrassed chuckle and a flourish of his wings. “I guess not!”

“Well then why did you call us down here?”

“Like I’ve probably said fifty times now: I just needed help with the heavy-lifting here, which apparently I *didn’t* need, and I’m all set to finish the repairs on my own. If I needed more than that I’d have brought dear Twily along for the ride, but honestly I don’t think I’m really in the proper shape right now. Hence, you two.”

Applejack and Flathoof shared looks again, more baffled this time than before.

“So... why’d y’all call us both?” Applejack asked. “I didn’t even do nothin’ but stand here, an’ I guess if y’all wanted ta really count it as anythin’, I guess I kinda gave Flathoof a stern talkin’ ta?”

Briarthorn stared at them for a moment. “You two. You *two*. You can head to the *corner*, and have a little chance for a *private* talk. Y’know, without any of the others listening in on your *business*?”

He tapped his ear briefly. "As a show of good faith, I didn't even bring my earpiece, so no accidental eavesdropping from *anypony*."

"What the hay is that even s'posed ta mean? 'Private talk'? What sorta 'business' d'ya think we got—"

The pegasus began massaging his temples again, his eyes closed. "I thought I'd be a decent *gentlecolt* and give you the opportunity to work out any *issues* you might be having without making *anypony* else suspicious."

Flathoof rolled his eyes. "Gentlecolt, right. What's the real reason?"

Briarthorn finally stopped massaging his temples, folding his wings with an exasperated sigh. "The most *private* room on the ship, bar none, right? So you two can work out *your issues* and hey, maybe do what comes naturally after that! I'm hoping after you two work *your issues* out and kiss and make up, etcetera, maybe you'll remember who made it happen."

Applejack turned red and started towards the door. "This is stupid. Can't believe I got talked into this."

"Come on now, Applebottom, don't tell me you're having the jitters," Briarthorn said, giving a wink. "I saw the way you were looking at the big beefy police officer here back at the boutique. If stares were bits, you'd be a millionaire!"

"Y'all keep yer big mouth shut!" Applejack shouted.

"Staring at me? At the boutique?" Flathoof turned to Applejack and narrowed his eyes. "What, were you laughing at me too? At least the others had the decency to do it up front, but I don't think I heard *you* laughing."

"I... I wasn't laughin', Flathoof." She sighed and tilted her head towards the corner. "Look, let's just go talk this out, okay? I think Briarthorn's right, and we do... kinda got some issues ta work out..."

Flathoof scratched his head as she stepped towards the corner. "Uh... okay then."

"Finally!" Briarthorn said, trudging over to the opposite side of the engine machine. "Yeesh, and ponies say *I* can't take a hint."

Flathoof shot one last confused look at Briarthorn as he followed Applejack over, giving her a quick once-over. Something was off, and it was worrying to him. "Applejack, what the hay is going on here? You've been acting funny since this morning."

"F-funny? I ain't been actin' funny. Funny how?" Applejack asked, not meeting his eyes.

"Well for one, you're talking to me again," Flathoof said, his lips curling in a brief smile. "For the past week up until today, we've kind of been—" His smile fell, and he averted his gaze. "Avoiding each other."

Applejack sighed and nodded. "I know, an'... I'm sorry. Y'all're right, I ain't been payin' ya much attention lately an'... I'm sorry. Can ya forgive me?"

Flathoof gave Applejack a cursory glance. "I'm not much on holding grudges, but I'd really like an explanation. Why you stopped talking to me as much from the day we left the checkpoint, and better yet, why you started talking to me again today. Heck, right now, it's hard to notice anything even happened."

"I... I'd like it if we could just forget anythin' ever happened in the first place, if we could? I'd just like thing ta go back ta normal, is all."

"I said I don't hold grudges, but I also don't forget. I'm willing to talk again and everything, but unless I know why this all happened, I can't promise things can go back to the way they were."

He scratched his chin and sighed. "I know I said some things myself, and I'm sorry about that too. I'd just like to know why I felt the need to say them in the first place."

Applejack paused for a moment, staring straight ahead at the wall. She finally took a deep breath. "Well... I s'pose it's 'bout time I came clean with ya. Seein' as that's what got us in this here mess in the first place." She turned to face him, giving him a sheepish look. "I stopped talkin' ta ya because... I thought y'all were lyin' ta me. Ta everypony."

Flathoof blinked and shook his head in disbelief. This was unexpected. "What? Lying? About what?"

"Well, not so much lyin' as bein' dishonest." She reached up to tug at her hat, again forgetting that it wasn't there. "See... I thought y'all were sneakin' 'round behind everypony's back and... uh... foolin' 'round with Tick Tock. Y'know, an' not tellin' nopony."

Flathoof was glad that physics was still working, because otherwise he was sure his jaw would've hit the floor. "Wait... wait, *what?*"

Applejack shied away from his stark glance. "Yeah... yeah, I know... it's stupid. I know it's stupid now, but at the time I thought it was right. I'm sorry fer ever thinkin' it..."

Flathoof shook his head again, holding out his hooves to gesture for Applejack to hold

up her train of thought a moment. "Hang on, let me get this straight. You... you thought... Tick Tock and I were sneaking away at night to... what, make out? Is that what you thought?"

Applejack scuffed her hoof on the floor. "Well... yeah. Like I said: stupid."

Flathoof gave a great, loud laugh. "That's... wow, that's the craziest thing I've ever heard. Tick Tock and me? She's not exactly my type, Applejack. Where the hay did you get a boneheaded idea like that?"

Applejack exhaled. "Rarity. It was Rarity."

"Rarity?" Flathoof asked, arching an eyebrow. "And where would *she* get such an idea?"

Applejack sighed and stomped a hoof on the floor. "That's just it! I... I asked her 'bout it last night after the contest thing, after I heard Tick Tock talkin' 'bout havin' a boyfriend." She craned her neck to make sure that Briarthorn couldn't hear her. "Or rather, *not* havin' a boyfriend," she added in a whisper. "So it turns out, y'all're off the hook."

"Well, *duh*," Flathoof deadpanned. He tapped his chin. "Wait, so then, why aren't you mad at Rarity? *She* lied to you, not me. She actually outright lied if she said Tick Tock and I were together, or at least misled you if she said she *thought* we were. Which is it?"

"She said y'all were outright a couple. So y'all're right, that'd be a lie, and I was right angry at Rarity when I asked her." Applejack grunted and shook her head. "That's what makes me so dang confused."

"I don't follow."

"Y'see, when Tick Tock said she was single, she seemed absolutely earnest 'bout it, an' ta top it off, she was drunk as all get out. I pride myself on readin' a pony's words fer lies 'n' baloney like that, and I didn't see none o' that. She was tellin' the truth.

"So I asked Rarity 'bout it... an' she said she had no idea what I was talkin' 'bout. She remembers the entire conversation we had back at the checkpoint down ta the word, but doesn't remember tellin' me one dang thing 'bout you 'n' Tick Tock gettin' cozy with one another. I've known Rarity fer years; I know when she's hidin' somethin'. She was tellin' the truth too."

Flathoof shook his head. "So... wait, I don't get it. Then, if it wasn't Rarity, who told you—"

"That's just it, I don't get it either!" Applejack blurted, throwing her hooves in the air. "I've been wrackin' my brain on it all ding-dong day, an' I just can't make hide nor hair o' the whole thing. I'm wonderin' if I'm goin' crazy.

"I know dang well I talked ta Rarity at the checkpoint, but / talked ta her outside. *She* insists we talked in the hallway. Nothin' adds up, and what's worse, the Rarity I talked ta back then, when she told me all them things, she seemed like she was tellin' the truth too! I just... I don't know what's goin' on, sugar. It don't make any sense."

Flathoof chuckled and pat Applejack on the shoulder. "Well, don't you worry, Tick Tock and I... aren't—" He paused. "Wait a second, I just realized something. You were worried that I was in a relationship with Tick Tock? Um..."

Applejack flushed and rubbed her neck again. "Well... yeah, that's... that's the other thing I wanted ta be honest 'bout." She turned to face him, giving him a big smile that he hadn't seen in a long time. "I... I kinda like ya, sugar. A lot. I guess I just got a lil' jealous that some fussy unicorn snagged y'all out from under me an' that y'all weren't upfront 'bout it."

Flathoof didn't know what to say. So, he just stared. And stared.

Applejack frowned and scuffed her hoof against the floor. "So... uh... yeah. I'm... I'm sorry 'bout everythin' I've done an' said, an' I guess didn't do or say neither. I know I got them green eyes an' all, but I ain't no green-eyed monster. Can ya forgive me?"

Flathoof's mouth cracked into a small smile. "You don't need to apologize to me, Applejack. I forgave you the moment you started talking to me again."

Applejack smiled back. "Thanks, sugar. I... I feel awful 'bout the whole dang thing."

"Well, if you want to put it behind us, then that's fine with me," Flathoof said. He averted his gaze, feeling a flush coming to his face as well. "If I can be honest a moment, I... I kind of like you too, Applejack. It's been a... a long time since I've been able to tell that to somepony."

Applejack laughed. "That suits me just fine, sugar. I don't care what Rarity says—just 'cause y'all happen ta... look like—"

She suddenly stopped talking and began sniffing at the air, her nose scrunching up in disgust.

Flathoof raised an eyebrow. "Look like... what? Applejack? What are you—"

"Y'all smell that?"

Flathoof sniffed the air, and his nose crinkled much as hers was. "Ugh... oh stars, what is that *smell*?" He turned behind him, towards the center of the room. "Hey Briarthorn, you doing something over there that makes a smell or something?"

“Huh?” Briarthorn asked, peeling himself away from his work. He too sniffed at the air, and scrunched his own nose in disgust as well. “Oh wow, *pee-yoo*, that is nasty! Stars and skies above, that is just... ugh! Who the buck let one go in my engine room?!”

“That ain’t nothin’ like that. It sure does smell familiar though,” Applejack said, holding her nose with one hoof and waving the other in front of her face. “I know I done smelled this odor before. It’s real familiar, kinda like—” Her eyes widened. “The Blood Mire. Or Red Death, or whatever the hay it’s called. That freaky red swamp zombie place!”

“Oh, so this is what that smelled like, huh?” Flathoof asked, copying her gesture and putting his hoof over his nose. “No wonder you and Twilight reacted the way you did. Sure am glad Twilight and Rarity thought of those air bubbles, if this is how bad—”

“Naw, this ain’t as bad as what Twi ‘n’ me smelled, no sir. Still ain’t mean it’s pleasant or nothin’.”

“Well, what the hay is a smell like this doing way out—”

There was a loud clang from the rear of the room that drew everypony’s attention. The grating over the wall there burst outwards, sailing out and colliding with the engine’s power source before falling to the floor.

Everything after that happened in such quick succession that Flathoof wasn’t sure how he’d even been able to react, even as he was doing it.

The murky shadows started to *move*, slinking along the darkened wall like an oil slick before bolting towards the corner.

Flathoof could see that they were dead-set on a single target: Applejack.

Without a second thought, he shoved her out of the way and into the adjacent wall. A great flash of silver metal swept down between them; Flathoof jerked back, the flash narrowly missing his face by mere inches. The swish of air from the slice jostled the hairs in his mane.

“What in tarnation?!”

The mixture of shadows and metal twisted and moved towards Applejack again. With less than a yard of distance to travel, Flathoof again just reacted as quickly as he was able, and leapt and tackled the shadow, striking it to the floor.

It remained pinned for all of a second before it swept up into the air with Flathoof in tow, and slammed him into the wall of machines. The impact loosened some of the panels, and

Flathoof let out a pained grunt alongside the sound of snapping bone.

He wasn't sure what had been broken, but it hurt like hell.

"Flathoof!" Applejack shouted.

Flathoof, not loosening his hold on the shadow despite the pain, was swung around again with the shadow and slammed into another wall of machines. He still held firm, forcing the shadow to attempt to dislodge him by slamming him into the floor.

This time, Flathoof lost his grip. He jerked to the side, rolling to avoid the silver flash sweeping down at him again. It impacted with the floor and just kept going through, slicing through the durable metal with so little resistance that the floor may as well not have even been there.

"Will you just stay *still?!?*" the shadow bellowed, its voice dark and carrying a sinister reverberation.

Flathoof's eyes widened, and he took two large steps back. He knew that voice from his haunted dream. "*You.*"

The shadow took shape as it flew at him again, until it was no longer a shadow, but a black-clad pegasus with wide, silvery-metal wings. His body was black with decay, and large tears in his flesh through ripped pieces of his suit exposed his rotten insides.

One wing sliced through the air, and Flathoof ducked just under it. The wing and the pegasus it was attached to tore through the machine behind Flathoof like tissue paper.

Flathoof bolted at the pegasus, colliding with him and sending him flying into the opposite wall of machines, knocking panels loose and denting the wall.

The pegasus tumbled out and glared at Flathoof, his left eyeball hanging just out of its socket and his jaw not quite lining up with the rest of his face. He pushed the eyeball back in with a sloppy, wet pop, then attempted to smirk at Flathoof. With half his jaw missing, it didn't look quite right.

"Ynnn ggnnn... mmnn..." The pegasus snorted and straightened his jaw into its proper position. "You've gotten stronger, Captain Flathoof. That was quite a tackle."

Flathoof snarled and braced himself for more sudden movements, not taking his eyes off his opponent. "How did you—"

The pegasus swept his wing back and forth in a silencing gesture. "Ah ah, that's not

really important right now, is it?" He pointed his wing towards Applejack, who stood quiet in the corner just behind Flathoof. "The farmer needs to die. She's powerless out here. Defenseless. *Weak*. Make things easier on everypony and step aside."

"Not a chance." Flathoof stomped a hoof and dragged it along the floor.

The pegasus shrugged and surged forward again, flaring his wings outwards in a show of force.

Flathoof dove to the side to push Applejack out of the way, letting the pegasus crash head-first into the wall of machines behind them again. Before the pegasus could dislodge himself, Flathoof charged at him from the side, slamming his shoulder into the assailant's midsection.

The pegasus swiped his wing outward just as he was knocked away, slicing through Flathoof's leg. Flathoof yowled in pain and stumbled to his knees.

"Flathoof!" Applejack darted over to Flathoof and reached a hoof out to help him up. "Are ya okay, sugar? Let me—"

"Get out of here, Applejack," Flathoof said, still not taking his eyes off the recovering pegasus. "This isn't the place for you right now."

Applejack snorted and settled herself in at his side. "I ain't leavin' ya. I may not have my powers, but that don't mean I—"

Flathoof stomped the hoof of his good leg, pushing himself upright. "This isn't the time to argue, just go! Get help!"

The pegasus shook himself out of the wall and lunged forward again. An explosion burst outwards from his side, slamming him hard into the wall. Flathoof and Applejack staggered back from the explosive force.

"Get off my ship!" Briarthorn shouted, cocking a tiny gun in one hoof.

"About time you joined in!" Flathoof snapped.

Briarthorn shrugged. "Sorry, too many pockets." He aimed his gun at the point where the other pegasus had impacted the wall, and fired again.

The other pegasus swept his wing out, knocking the explosive projectile out of the air with another great burst. Not enough to stagger him.

The other pegasus snarled, spitting rime on the floor. "More fodder for the meat grinder. You're delaying the inevitable!"

He glanced at the glowing engine machine, then gave them all a wicked smile. "I wonder... your engine's power casing wouldn't happen to be made of anything that can resist Obidium, would it?"

"I think I've got the Diffusion system back up at optimal power, Your Majesty," Gadget said, wiping her brow with an oil-soaked rag and giving an enthusiastic salute. "We're good to go the remaining distance across the Belt. Or at least, we should be. There may or may not be a slight calibration error. I think a few zeroes are off, so we're somewhere between one percent capacity, and ten thousand percent. Give or take."

"Well done, Gadget. Exemplary work as always," Blackburn said, her voice slightly distorted by the thick, reinforced glass of the flight compartment. She flexed her wings, which were once again coated with a strange black material. "Engine status? Is the Thunder prepared to move?"

Gadget scratched her chin and looked over the instrument panel in front of her. Nothing but an expanse of yellow lights, only one green among them under a label reading *Power Source: Online*.

"Well, engine power has returned to full capacity, but I'm not getting any readings from the secondary systems or the final checklight. I can't start the engines up proper until everything is green. All we've got now is impulse power; we're nearing the edge of the Belt with it, but it'll take almost a full day to reach Utopia like this."

Blackburn snorted and flittered her wings, obviously uncomfortable standing around in the stuffy compartment for an extended period of time. "What is taking Briar so long? Unlike him. Usually quite punctual."

"Well, he is still recovering, Your Highness. Maybe he's just a little tired? Golly, I guess he really *does* deserve a rest?" Gadget chuckled and shook her head. "He might be an idiot, but dang if he isn't hard-working."

Blackburn sighed and nodded. "Agreed. Already promised an extended vacation. He deserves it. As soon as we land, will discuss further. Estimated arrival time at current velocity?"

Gadget hummed and double-checked a few of the instruments on the panel. "Well, assuming all my math is correct that that I'm not too foggy on my geography, we'll be out of the Belt and passing over the eastern half of Cardinal Point in roughly three minutes. If Briarthorn

hurries up and gets those engines ready, we'll be in Utopia itself in no—"

A huge explosion rocked the ship. In a matter of seconds, the Thunder began lurching forward in a sharp dive. All of the instrument panels turned bright red and began blinking incessantly.

Blackburn stumbled back upright. "Gadget! Report!"

"Massive energy feedback detected in the engine room! We've rocketed off-course!" Gadget shouted, frantically flipping all the switches and buttons she could to absolutely no effect. "The hull has suffered a critical breach in the lower aft, so the Diffusion system is unable to complete its circuit! It's losing power!"

Blackburn swore loudly, then settled her hooves on the floor and started beating her wings in an attempt to get the ship to stay airborne. Her eyes widened when she heard a very loud metallic snap, followed by another explosion that sent the ship into a sickening spiral.

"Portside emergency wing down! Diffusion system down!" Gadget held her head in her hooves and started darting her eyes everywhere around the cockpit. "Lower aft hull damage critical, that whole section of this ship is gone!"

Blackburn's eyes widened. "Gone? Briar! Any word from Briar?!"

"Negative, he didn't bring his comlink with him! I'm trying to reassert control of the ship, Your Highness, but I can't... it's just..."

Then, she stopped, and stood silent and still in the center of the room, just in front of Blackburn's piloting compartment. She looked towards the compartment's occupant, her eyes alight with worry and determination.

Blackburn continued beating her wings, her face contorting with strain. "Must pull up! Gadget, assistance! No time for distractions!"

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but orders are orders. We're moving out of the Belt, but the Thunder's current trajectory indicates an imminent crash. We have minutes." Gadget shook her head, and tapped her hoof to her ear. "Crossfire, do you read me?"

Crossfire's voice crackled over her earpiece, loud enough that Blackburn could hear it over the whining of the ship. "*Loud 'n' clear, Gadget! The hay's goin' on up—*"

"Emergency Protocol One. I've got Her Majesty, you get Future-Prince Lockwood."

Crossfire took a moment to respond. "*EPO, huh? Roger that. Good luck, Gadget.*"

“Same to you.”

“Emergency Protocol One... no.” Blackburn’s eyes widened and she began frantically shaking her head. “Gadget! Don’t you dare! Not hopeless! *Not hopeless!*”

Gadget smirked and grabbed her lightning gun from the nearby instrument panel, then aimed it at the metallic top section of Blackburn’s piloting compartment. “I took an oath, Your Majesty, to His Highness, your grandfather. I am sworn to protect you, at any cost. That is my primary mission in life, to the end if I must.”

Blackburn snarled. “Gadget, I am ordering you *not* to execute protocol! You hear me?! Do *not* execute—”

“Emergency Protocol One trumps your orders, Your Majesty,” Gadget said, shaking her head. “You know that... and I thank you for trying, but orders are orders. You’ll be safe, and I can trust Crossfire to keep Lockwood safe as well.”

She smiled, then double-checked her aim. She glanced back at one of the instrument panels for a moment, then turned back and fired. The blast of electricity tore apart the upper ring of the compartment hatch, shredding metal apart in a flurry of sparks. The flaring red light inside the compartment shut off.

“Pilot compartment damaged. Activating automatic emergency ejection,” said a mechanical female voice.

“Override!” Blackburn shouted. She was met with silence. “Override, damn you, stupid machine! *Override!*”

“You’re not the ship’s designated pilot, Your Highness. It doesn’t recognize the command.” Gadget tilted her head back towards the panel. “We’re just exiting the Belt now, so the compartment will eject you somewhere safe. Though, even the Belt’s magicks can’t break through triple-thick Obidium easily. You’ll be protected.”

She put her hoof on the glass as the thin sheet of metal started sliding up from the inside. “It’s been an honor to serve, Blackburn. I have been, and always shall be, your friend.”

Blackburn reached out to Gadget’s hoof, but the metal came up and blocked Gadget from view. “Gadget! *Gadget!*”

The compartment violently rocketed upwards and out of the Thunder.

Gadget nodded and turned back to the instrument panel. As she strode towards it, she

put a hoof to her ear. “Crossfire, report in,” she said, glancing at the instrument panel’s frantically-flashing buttons. Mere moments to impact. She snorted and flipped a few switches on the left side of the panel, hoping to at least try and crash smoothly.

“I secured the Future-Prince in one o’ the ship’s emergency pods near the airlock,” Crossfire said, his voice cracking.

“And the others? Is Her Majesty’s mission safe?”

“I also told Miss Sparkle an’ Miss Rarity ta keep their friends protected. I’m on my way down ta meet up—”

Everything went white.

“Applejack! Aapplejaaack! Where are you?! Hellooo! Applejack!”

Rainbow never thought she’d say it, but over the course of the last few hours, she had acquired a hatred for rain and rain clouds.

“Applejack! Flathoof! Flaaathooooof!”

Normally, the sight of them would be something that would make her happy, because after two weeks of nothing but gloomy, orange skies, even a dismal, rainy day was the best thing she could hope for.

“Applejack! Flathoof! Hello! ...Briarthorn! C’mon! Somepony, answer me! Hellooo!”

At least that held promise of the sun behind it, of clear skies ahead, even a rainbow above to bring smiles to the faces of all who could see it.

Now, all this rainy day held for her and her friends was grief.

Rainbow sighed and stopped to hover in the air a moment. Several hours had passed, but the search had yielded no results. With a heavy heart, she returned back to the tiny peninsula that they’d crash-landed on, to where her friends were expecting her return.

The remains of the Thunder rested on the side of a rocky cliff on a tiny beach, embedded in the rock, with debris scattered about the sand below. Smoke billowed from the wreckage which was now too dangerous to venture towards, as the rear engines were giving off violent surges of magic that, when they lashed out, tore into the surrounding cliff like lightning.

She the others had swept up and down along the beach first, but there wasn't even any sign of more wreckage, not even enough to give them hope. The entire bottom of the Thunder was somehow missing from the crash site, likely torn off in the explosion that started everything. Rainbow herself had even ventured as far out to sea as she could against the stormy weather, and found nothing. Miles and miles of nothing. No floating debris had made it out of the Belt of Tranquility, if there was even any still in there. She'd ventured inside for a few brief moments, but found it impossible to while traveling safely. Her hunt had yielded nothing.

They had managed to find two pieces of the ship intact: one was Blackburn's piloting compartment, which had been ejected from the Thunder and landed in the shallow waters less than half a mile west of the Thunder's crash site; the other was Lockwood's emergency pod, which had landed just north of the crash site in a pile of rocks. Neither of them seemed too grateful to be alive, given the circumstances.

Rainbow was not surprised to see the two carefully-made grave markers on a stable stretch of rock near the sand. She didn't want to think about the state she'd found Crossfire in, even less about Gadget. Blackburn sat in front of the two markers, in the exact spot that Rainbow had seen her before. Had she moved at all? Lockwood too remained just behind her, his hooves on her back, though he did seem to take notice of Rainbow's arrival. His hat rested on Blackburn's head, hiding her face from view.

The others clamored over to her when she landed empty-hooved. Everypony's faces were expectant of good news, even though their eyes all betrayed the fact that they knew none was coming. Rainbow blamed herself for that. She didn't want to look at them. She couldn't. It hurt too much to see them, and in the back of her mind she wondered if they blamed her for not finding anything.

Still, she told them what nopony wanted to believe. It couldn't be true, but there wasn't anything to convince anypony otherwise. As Blackburn had said, once you eliminated the impossibilities, then the improbabilities, no matter how improbable, must be true.