Dying's so nice I did it twice...

Weatherworks are running overtime, trying to scrub out all this radiation, Rainbow Dash thought as she winged away from the remains of Canterlot. She didn't know if any of her friends made it out, and hadn't risked flying in the pink cloud choked streets to find out. She didn't know what that stuff was; she needed an egghead like Twilight to tell her.

The enormous glowing crater of Maripony blew that idea up as much as the Balefire bomb had.

"Emergency protocal one. Withdraw to pegasi cities and subterranean bunkers," she recited as she flew over the green clouds. "Check." Such as it was. The evacuation had been cut short far too fast. They could have loaded Thunderhead and Shadowbolt tower with a few thousand more at least. "Emergency protocol two. Begin atmospheric cleansing using clouds to purge potential biotoxin or harmful substances from the atmosphere."

That was going to be pretty damned hard without Cloudsdale. If she hadn't been out getting Memory Orbs that Pinkie has demanded, she would have been vaporized too. Had Pinkie known... no. She would have said something. Probably a twitch or twinge or something on Mint-alls....

So many parties... and Rainbow Dash hadn't once stopped her. Hadn't once said she should cut it out. You stood by your friends. Supported them, right? But when Twilight said it was too much, and when Pinkie said she could handle it, who were you supposed to be loyal to?

There was a blast of green lightning, and Rainbow narrowly peeled out of its way. Her special wonderbolt suit had a build in radiometer, and it was clicking away; some egghead thing that measured arcane magic. It was going nuts. Twilight had warned it might. Twilight had known so much. That the zebras were working on things that she couldn't imagine. But Twilight hadn't known everything. The behind lines sabotage missions her ministry did every day had taught Rainbow that the zebras were terrified of losing, and were ready to do anything to win the war.

Even this.

Another blast of green lightning flickered between the clouds. This was long enough. She broke upwards, darting past the lightning rods that were trying to direct the chaotic magical energy downwards.

Where to go? Where were her friends? Dead in Canterlot and Maripony? Evacuated? Right now the pegasi were virtually all that was left of Equestria and the military was following their protocals to the letter, and the letter seemed to stop at two. Countless pegasi were working desperately to squeeze out enough rain and snow to keep the fallout out of the air.

And her ministry was gone...

"We need to get down there, Lightning Dust!" Rainbow shouted as she stood at the edge of Shadowbolt Tower. Something was wrong in the city below. Screams, then silence. No balefire bombs or megaspells. Just death. She'd lost two people trying to find out, she wasn't going to lose anymore.

Major Lightning Dust stood in her crisp military uniform. "The generals in Neighvarro have already decided, Rainbow. All war materiel has been commandeered per emergency

protocols. As the secession of power has broken down, they're assuming command of all Equestrians in the skies."

"Ah," one of her agents said as she raised a wing. "Technically Shadowbolt Tower isn't in the sky. Technically it's just really, really tall." No one said anything else as Lightning Dust's glare made it abundantly clear that technically they didn't care. "Just sayin," the mare mumbled.

"Lightning Dust, don't do this!" Rainbow begged. "If the military wants to use their stuff to clear the radiation fine! But there's still thousands of ponies down there we can help. Shadowbolt Tower's got room."

Lightning turned her back on Rainbow. The dozen soldiers with her tensed, guns trained on Rainbow Dash. "My wings are tied," the aquamarine mare stated as her wing pushed the brim of her hat down. "You're to come with me."

Fat chance of that! Rainbow hit a button on her forehoof and it emitted a siren that echoed shrilly in the hanger. She was already in motion, turning and launching herself towards the exit. The rest of the soldiers balked, but Lightning Dust drew her pistol and fired four times after the mare. The round slammed into the purple shadowbolt armor, but she was going to need something a lot tougher than that if she was going to pierce it!

Still... ow.

But as Rainbow raced towards the green clouds, more bullets rang out. She glanced behind her at Lightning Dust zipping down after her. She had to avoid going straight down into the Core, and so wove serpentine though the clouds. Then as they approached one of the lightning rods spikes, Rainbow hooked around tight, rose, and paused. Predictably, Lightning Dust came around as well at top speed. Rainbow's hooves came down... not to kill. She could, and had, done that. No, it was a four hoofed lovetap against Lightning Dust's skull; the hardest part of her body.

"Have to fly better than that!" she called out as she zipped off into the clouds. She had six memory orbs burning a hole in her saddlebags... and a promise to keep.

Ponyville. That was the key. Ponyville was where it all started. Ponyville was where all her friends would eventually go, if any of them survived. Heck, Applejack was probably...

...dead.

Rainbow flew over the shimmering, greenish white snow that glowed with an eerie, pearlescent sheen. Her radiometer was clicking away as she stayed about the drifts. No Applejack. No Apples, period. The ones that remained unbucked seemed different somehow; leeched of their color. Her friends weren't here; if they were they were being buried under that steady white snow.

"We waited too long," Rainbow muttered as she hovered over Golden Oaks. "We waited too damn long..."

Being in the Ministry of Awesome, you developed certain instincts. Like that tightening of muscles in the back of your head just before a zebra sniper fired a shot. You learned to listen to that instinct, or you didn't last long in the ministry.

Rainbow launched herself into the air just as a high caliber round smashed right where she'd been standard. "Oh come on!" she shouted, her voice echoing in the steady trickle. "War is fucking OVER. You win! Congratulations!" A second bullet zipped after her, and she turned tail and streaked away over Ponyville towards Ghastly Gorge.

And a shadow flicked through the snow drifts behind her. A batfetish zebra assassin? Rainbow zipped and clipped along the rocks. She had a pistol and that was it. And quite honestly, she didn't even want to use that. The world was blown to pieces! What the hell were they fighting over!

She landed, breathing hard. The radiation was relentlessly ticking upward. She paused to take some medication to try and counter it. Two healing potions and one high caliber pistol. Damn. What she wouldn't give for her power armor right now. Or a wing of Shadowbolts watching her flank.

Or her friends. And Spike. All of them. Her chest ached as she wished and hoped somehow they were still alive, somewhere. Anywhere. Some of them. Any of them...

"Waited too long... too damned long..." she muttered. But she'd be damned if she was going to let herself get killed. Not her style. There was stuff that needed to get done. She darted into a crevice in the rock wall. If they were dumb, they'd poke their head over the edge. If they were smart, they'd drop a grenade. But if they were clever, they'd circle around.

Rainbow bet on clever. Stupid would be dead and Smart wouldn't be out here in death snow.

She leapt up out of the crevice...

And straight into the barrel of a high powered rifle. A high powered rifle on a suit of black talon armor. Familiar black talon armor. "Hey, Dash," the griffoness said through the speaker.

"Gilda," Rainbow Dash said. Any sensible enemy would blow her head off here and now. But not Gilda. No. "Zebras put a contract on my head just before they balefired the world to death? Don't think there's anyone left to pay you." She moved slowly, landing on the ledge next to the gorge. The depths of the Gorge were flickering wildly behind her. It seemed like all the junk people had been dumping in the gorge was now reacting with the green snow and rain washing down into the ravine.

"Oh Dash. So long as there's a pony, a zebra, and a griffon in the world there will always be someone to pay," she said as she made room. After all, if Dash dashed, she'd need time to get the round off. Gilda was good. Damned good.

Maybe too good...

"But you're wrong," Gilda went on. "Wasn't the stripes that hired me."

Rainbow's eyes darted as she thought furiously. Who'd want to hire, let alone be able to afford, Gilda to take her down? The zebras had made it a short list. "No... Lightning Dust..."

"Your own side wants you out of the picture, Dash. Technically, my orders are to take you alive unless you offer resistance. But if I know you, Dash, you're going to resist. By breathing if nothing else."

Rainbow seethed as her pipbuck clicked. "Damn it, Gilda! This isn't time to be screwing around! Ponies are dying!"

"You don't say..."Gilda crouched. Know who else is dying? A whole lot of griffons. Typical pony, interested in her pony friends."

"This is bigger than our stupid feud, Gilda!"

"It always was, Dash. It always was."

Rainbow lunged, but Gilda's assault rifle cracked, and the ground infront of Dash exploded in slow. A dart in the opposite direction. Another gunshot that cut her short. Rainbow's heart hammered in her chest. "Time to find which of us is faster, Dash."

“Guess it is, G.”

And she stepped backwards and launched herself to Gastly Gorge, kicked off the rock face, and tore down the canyon wall. She didn’t need to look to know Gilda was right behind her. When bullets started zipping past her, it was all the confirmation she needed.

Neither of them were in their prime. Gilda was in power armor, which made her all but impregnible to Dash, but Dash was exposed to the radiation, and had been out in it much longer than the griffon, she guessed. They were as closely matched as they’d ever been.

They snaked. They looped. All the while G stayed behind her, tracking her motion. Rainbow might be a hell of a target, but a belt fed battle saddle rifle like that would get her sooner or later.

She streaked straight at the canyon wall. G had to be wondering if she’d go up, down, left or right. But just before she hit, Dash turned herself sideways, planted her hooves and blasted her wings down in one powerful flap, and launched herself at the griffon. Bullets ripped through the air a second too late as Rainbow moved under her. Gilda’s scorpion tail slashed, but Rainbow hooked her forehooves around Gilda, transferring her momentum into a spin and adding it with a snap of her wings. Rotating the griffon on three axises, she released Gilda as she was swung upward, drew her pistol, and blasted at several of the arcane talismans that supported it.

That’d slow her down at least. She holstered her gun and flew off. Gilda’s EFS would pick her out, no doubt, but she could put some range between the two of...

Gilda’s rifle round slice right along Rainbow’s back, cutting the purple shadowbolt jumpsuit and nicking the muscle critical for flying. She risked a glance back, but Gilda had both stabilized her flight and was once again in pursuit.

“Damn it. Don’t force me to kill you, G...” Rainbow said as she doubled back along the gorge, with more bullets snapping around her. The highway bridge to Stalliongrade lay just ahead. There’d been reports of fighting around it. She darted for the bridge with Gilda following. It’d be a while before the repair talisman got her back up to speed.

Landing in the layer of green snow, she surveyed the battlefield. She needed a powerful spark charge. Most equestrian troops had been issued them to counter robots. She dusted off bodies of the green snow, her radiometer clicking away. How much was too much?

There! She spotted the apple shaped grenade with the blue band, and pulled it from an earth pony bandolier. Unfortunately Gilda must have spotted it too. She ducked under the bridge. Rainbow bit the stem and froze. Left side or right side? If she got it wrong, she wouldn’t have time to find another. Gilda was approaching from the left, maybe she’d swoop under and pop up on the right? Or maybe she knew Rainbow would think of it, and pop up on the left. Or maybe she knew Rainbow would think of that too and go right...

Then she saw the dosimeter crawling up into the red and realized that Gilda didn’t need to pop up at all to kill her. Besides, her change of hitting Gilda with the grenade was pretty small... she needed something bigger...

When Gilda peeked her head up around the bridge, Rainbow was already flying up.

“Running away? That’s not like you!” Gilda taunted as she coiled up from underneath. Once Rainbow was in the open sky, she was done. “You always were an idiot, Dash! Did you think this was going to end well for anyone?! Do your friends know how many people you killed, Dash?”

No, Rainbow thought as she kept her eyes peeled. There should be one close. Don't think about Gilda. Don't let her close in.

"Leaving friends behind is kinda your thing though, isn't it!?" Gilda continued.

Imagines of Pinkie at the club, laughing. Images of Rarity, desperately trying to find some way to save themselves. Images of Twilight desperately trying to solve the war like a math problem. Of Applejack trying to keep family and the country together. Of Fluttershy, saving Equestria's soul. And her, laughing and being 'awesome', doing the dirty work.

If she'd been less concerned with winning, would she have lost what she cared about most?

Three more bullets sliced into her flank and she slowed. Between radiation and blood loss there was no way she could keep ahead now, but that didn't matter. She was where she needed to be. She turned in the air, looking down at Gilda. "Where's your new friends now, Dashie?" Gilda taunted.

Rainbow pulled the pin on the grenade and tossed it down towards her.

Gilda deftly dodged to the side and it detonated into the air below her. "Seriously?" the griffon muttered.

The air above Dash filled with a 'BwooooOOOO' as the clouds parted and the needle like tip of the lightning rod pointed right at the spark discharge of the grenade below the griffon. Dash flung herself aside.

A single green bolt flickered through the clouds.

The griffoness plunged towards the gorge, trailing smoke. Dash dove alongside her, trailing blood. She pushed herself as fast as she could, despide the holes in her hide. "Damnit!" she shouted as she pushed faster and faster. "I still have one friend left!" she screamed.

And she caught Gilda's leg, hooked it, and spread her wings wide in a desperate attempt to slow before slamming into the ground. The green snow tingled on Rainbow's wounds. But no time to worry about that now. "Gilda! Gilda!" she shouted as she released to locks and pulled the helmet off. Her feathers were definitely toasty, but not quite charred. Blood trickled from one nostril.

Rainbow pulled out her remaining healing potion and poured it down Gilda's throat. She coughed, her eyes focusing. "Damn it... I thought you... killed me..."

"Come on. You're way too tough to kill," Rainbow said as her wound throbbed. With luck, the pair of them might have enough to get to a base. Then they could deal with the military. The surface wouldn't be abandoned for long... "I'm not going to kill the only friend I've got left."

"Friend..." Gilda murmured. "I'd like that... Friends... I wish we could have talked like this... another time..."

"I never did get to try your scones," Rainbow said with a smile.

"You... dweeb..." Gilda muttered.

"Doofus..." Rainbow replied with a smile.

The gunshot echoed along the canyon as a fountain of fire exploded in Rainbow's chest. She pulled back, looking at the torrent of blood pouring out of the gunshot wound. Gilda grit her teeth, tears streaming down her plumage as she clutched Rainbow's gun. "I told you, Dash," she said, her words bitter. "I took a contract."

Rainbow manages one last step before she tried to step into air. She tumbled down into the glowing gorge. “I took a contract, Dash! I told you, I took a contract!” Gilda’s screams echoed in the canyon as Rainbow tumbled into darkness.

A darkness without friends.