CRISIS: Equestria
Chapter Thirty-four: Impossible

Fluttershy never considered herself a good flier at any point in her life, and, for the most part, tried to stay on the ground. The only times she really flew for any extended periods of time were the rare visits to Cloudsdale to see her family and friends. So, it wasn't an enjoyable experience, being asked to fly today, but she knew that it was for a good reason: going home and leaving this world for good. Then, she could see her Angel again, and just shut herself in at home with her animals, the only creatures who she knew wouldn't do anything to hurt her and didn't only care about themselves.

Of course, she knew a large part of her discomfort at the idea of flying to these Elysian Islands was the present company. Rainbow Dash flew at the front of the trio of pegasi, having looped for the third time after racing around, then coming back.

Rainbow swooped around Fluttershy, then pushed forward to fall into pace with the third member of their trio, Blackburn, who was only a few yards ahead and flying at less than maximum speed as well. "Geez, this is taking forever. How much further is it, you think?" she asked.

Blackburn grunted. "Estimated travel time at pace of slowest member: seven hours, seventeen minutes. Accounting for break, forty-six minutes to go."

"Seven hours? Sheesh, it feels like we've been flying longer than that," Rainbow said, looking back at Fluttershy, who was the "slowest member", as Blackburn so bluntly put it. "Maybe it's just getting to actually fly again that's messing with my sense of time," she added with a shrug. "I'm not complaining about the time, really. I mean, do you have any idea how long it's been since I've had a chance to really *fly*, not counting all that dirty air up north?"

"Based on what memories Twilight Sparkle showed me, nearing seventeen days. Hourly measurement not precise; thus, an estimate."

"Nopony actually asked you to answer," Fluttershy spat. She'd grown tired of the other pegasus always having an answer for everything. "It was a rhetorical question, so you don't need to show off how good you are at math."

Rainbow frowned and turned to Fluttershy. "Hey, come on now Fluttershy, it's okay for her to answer. You don't need to—"

"Don't tell me I'm being mean, either, Rainbow." Fluttershy interrupted. "I have every right to treat her the way she treats me."

"And how do I treat you?" Blackburn asked. "Interested in your evaluation of the situation."

Fluttershy turned to Blackburn and snorted. "You treat me like I'm some sort of two-bit hussy that tried to steal your stallion. Well I'm not! I'm not even interested in that lying jerk anyway, so it's not my fault nopony told me he was already in a relationship. If it's anypony's fault that anything nearly happened between us, it's yours and his!"

Blackburn stayed silent for a moment before nodding. "Ah, good. Thought you had more, but it sounds like you're done." She slowed down so that she was flying side-by-side with Fluttershy, then shook her head. "You can blame my future husband as much as you want. Not going to change anything. He didn't say, because you didn't ask. No point in blaming Lockwood. No point in blaming Rarity either, because it wasn't her job to inquire about *your* relationships. Might as well go ahead and blame all your friends for all the good it will do." She poked Fluttershy in the chest. "You went to visit him, confessed your feelings, *stole* a kiss. *Your* responsibility to ask."

Fluttershy huffed. "He should have told me the second I—"

"Told him you liked him? Been told he attempted. Been told that you, inebriated, forced yourself on him, then promptly passed out. You made a mistake, can't change it, have to live with it. Am willing to forgive and forget your behavior, if you let it go."

Fluttershy drifted away, shaking her head. She knew it wasn't her fault. She didn't even want to get together with him in the first place; it was all forced upon her, and she just went along with it. Rarity was the one that thought she and Lockwood would be great together, so it was her fault that the situation even came up in the first place, since she pushed for them to interact much more than they probably would have otherwise. Lockwood was the one that just kept sending mixed signals; if he wasn't attracted to her, he shouldn't have acted the way he did around her. Staying the night with her at the Goldridge checkpoint was something an engaged stallion should not have been doing.

Not anymore, though, Fluttershy thought. No longer would she let anypony lead her along into their own agendas against her will. Once she got home, she'd just stay at home with her animals, and nopony was ever going to take advantage of her ever again. Not Rarity, not her other friends, not anypony.

Rainbow swooped up alongside her. "Hey... Fluttershy, look—"

"This had better be good, Rainbow," Fluttershy interrupted.

Rainbow sighed. "Look... don't let anything Her Royal Pain-in-the-Flank back there says get you down, okay? I can see where she's coming from, so I understand why she's mad. Do

you have any idea how mad I'd be if I knew somepony had been trying to get their mack on with *my* special somepony? Pinkie's kinda too friendly and nice, like Lockwood is, so she probably wouldn't think anything was going on."

Fluttershy wheeled around on Rainbow and narrowed her eyes. "So you're saying it's my fault too, huh? For 'macking on' Lockwood?"

Rainbow held her hooves out. "No no, now hold on, I'm just saying I can see why she's mad at you. She clearly loves that idiot, and she's got a real territorial thing going on, so it makes sense for her to be protective of everything in her life, him included. Just... don't let it get to you, okay? I'm not gonna try and tell you not to get mad at her right back; that's your right. But, you've been kinda acting like a jerk to the others ever since—"

"Oh, well *excuse* me!" Fluttershy shouted, throwing her hooves in the air and making Rainbow flinch. "I'm sorry if everypony thinks I'm being so mean to them! Maybe if somepony wanted to talk to me and make me feel better instead of everypony just going along with everything the Almighty Blackburn says and does, I might be willing to give a flying feather what anypony else thinks!"

Rainbow frowned. "You haven't given anypony a chance to try. Pinkie's been trying for *days* to get you to mellow out, but you lash out at her just the same as Rarity. I get that you're mad, Shy, but you're taking it out on the wrong ponies. I did the same thing to you all, remember?"

"Whatever, if you're just going to try and tell me to lay off or calm down or whatever it is you're trying to do, I don't want to talk to *you,* either."

Fluttershy slowed her pace to fall out of formation. She was tired of her supposed friends trying to tell her what to do and how to act, and tired of them telling her how Blackburn was helping them, so she should be nice. She knew they all wanted to go home as much as she did, but did any of them have the heart to think about what she was feeling and going through, rather than trying to tell her she was just being mean? Did any of them want to tell Blackburn that she was being purposefully antagonistic? No, they just wanted to take the easy way out and be non-confrontational since it might help them get home faster. Well, Fluttershy was tired of being treated like the bad mare in this situation.

Almost an hour later, as the trio passed through another layer of cloud cover, the Elysian Islands came into view. Fluttershy had an expectation of how the place would look thanks to Mémoire's information, but she certainly didn't expect the sight that awaited her to be as impressive as it was. For one thing, she knew the islands were going to be airborne, but they weren't situated on clouds as she'd expected. Instead, they were real islands that had once been in the sea far below. There wasn't anything Fluttershy could see that would allow them to be here in the air; no machinery, no magical apparatuses, nothing of the sort, almost as if they

were floating in the air of their own accord.

Even after thousands of years, the islands still had a distinct tropical look to them, though they now floated in the sky high above the ocean. Nature had begun to reclaim the islands some time ago, as most of the gryphon-made structures and roads had been encroached upon by thick ivy, growing trees, expanses of brush, and swaths of grass. How it came to pass with no natural water in sight was beyond Fluttershy's comprehension. Some of the natural environment still seemed to be unnaturally organized: palms dotted the island edges in precisely-measured intervals, and green grass and white sand were left in neat, uniform patches in various locations. Perhaps the gryphons had maintained it during their time here, but there were no longer any gryphons here to keep the environment from taking over.

Apart from the remnants and regrowth of the tropical habitat, the chain of islands was covered in various buildings made of marble in mostly gold and silver, and decorated with vast amounts of gems in every color imaginable. The buildings were of all different sizes and shapes, many with unique architecture that made them stand out from the others. One island, far to her left, caught Fluttershy's attention, as some of the buildings were curiously shaped like familiar animals; the central structure, to her displeasure, had a clearly draconian shape. Perhaps that was where the gryphons did their Zoolomancy research. Most of the structures were unrecognizable now, though she could still just make out a lion, a bear, and an eagle. Decorative pieces - statues, gazebos, and the like - dotted the rest of the landscape, making the chain of islands resemble a tropical resort, like the Haywaiian Islands back home. Was this really where the gryphons just came to do research, or did they actually live here, too?

The trio circled around the island chain until they came to the southernmost island, which had several bright, red lights set up around a clearing so that they could be seen for miles. This was their intended landing area, and where they would meet the members of the Harmony Guard that had been sent here ahead of them. As they got closer, Fluttershy could see dozens of knights, all of them pegasi, dressed just like those at the temple, in formation around the clearing.

The trio came in for a landing. A single knight flew out of the decorative archway at the edge of the landing area, leaving several fellow knights behind in the process, and made a beeline straight for them. The knight—a snow white pegasus with a red mane tied in a ponytail—wore the same armor as the other knights, but had a rather large crest on the center of her chestplate, bearing the emblem of Harmonia. She was rather well-built, for a pegasus, but not overly large like certain other pegasi Fluttershy knew. She greeted the trio with a brisk salute.

"Bonjour, mesdames," she said, her voice rather velvety for a mare her size. "I trust zat you did not 'ave any problème finding your vay 'ere?"

"A straight flight northwest from Utopia wasn't exactly difficult," Rainbow said. "I could've

made it here hours ago."

"Ah, oui oui, c'est vrai. You must be Lady Dash, zen? I vas told you vould be zee vantarde one. Zat would make zee ozer one Lady Fluttershy, zen?"

"I'm Fluttershy, yes," Fluttershy greeted.

The knight tapped her chin. "Let me see... I vas told I vould be meeting viz just Ladies Dash and Fluttershy, il me semble? 'oo is zis troisième mare?"

"Hmm... you are Dame Marshmallow," Blackburn said. "Recognize you from Newhaven's Harmony Guard contingent. You've been promoted recently." The knight made to speak, but Blackburn held up her hoof. "No need to confirm. Just making an observation." Blackburn nodded. "Queen Blackburn, of Hope's Point. Came along to help—last minute decision."

The knight gasped, and immediately bowed low. "Oh! Pardonnez-moi, Votre Majesté, I did not recognize you vizout votre tenue formelle."

Blackburn brushed the gesture away with her hoof. "Don't bother with that. Wasting time."

"Oui oui, pardonnez-moi, madame. Last I 'eard, zere was un assaut on 'ope's Point, and you 'ad left zee city but did not arrive in New'aven."

Blackburn raised an eyebrow. Fluttershy found it a particularly odd sight; she'd never seen Blackburn caught off guard before. "Who did you hear that from?"

"Capitaine... Auroran. Not directly, but from some of zee vorkers at zee ambassade."

"Auroran... hmm, curious. Even had invasion not occurred, not scheduled for deployment. Explain."

Marshmallow frowned. "Je suis désolée, madame, I only know 'oo zee captain vas and zat you vere supposed to arrive before 'im. You are right, zough, 'e vas not on zee schedule."

"Something isn't right here. Hmm." Blackburn shook her head. "Will keep in mind for later—pay a visit to Newhaven after our mission here. Let's move on."

Marshmallow nodded. "Oui, madame, c'est zee best course of action. Quel est votre plan?"

Blackburn reached back into her side pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper, which she unfurled. Fluttershy knew Tick Tock had insisted on lending Blackburn her map, but

she hadn't expected to see it used. On the map, she could see that the entire layout was not blank, as it had been at the ruins of Aeropolis, but completely filled; Tick Tock had said that the map was designed by the gryphons, so Fluttershy figured its creator had perhaps lived here. Clearly, Blackburn had the same idea.

Blackburn opened the map and crumpled it into a sphere so that it became a three-dimensional display of the Elysian Islands, then showed it to Marshmallow. "Two structures would logically contain obidium stores: storage complex, and metallurgy research and development center. Have you explored either yet?"

Marshmallow looked over the map with great interest, apparently having never seen such an object before. "Which ones are zose?" she asked, pressing a hoof against the map's surface. She seemed disappointed that her hoof didn't pass through the translucent paper to touch the images of the islands.

Blackburn pointed at the far eastern island. At her hoof's touch, that island's image glowed yellow for a brief instant. "Metallurgy center." She next pointed at the central island, which glowed as well. "Storage complex. Lack of obidium suggest your knights haven't reached them, or there was no obidium to find."

Marshmallow shook her head. "Non, ve 'ave not gone to eizer yet. Ve 'ave been vorking from zee ouest side and moving est, but 'ave not gotten to zee central islands yet."

Blackburn nodded. "You and your knights will continue to the central islands, then. You're closer, less time coordinating; you're greater in number, able to cover the larger area in less time. My team will explore the east islands."

"Oui, madame, zat sounds acceptable," Marshmallow said, with a salute. "Ve vill save time zis vay, n'est-ce pas? Une bonne idée. I vish ve 'as known about zese locations earlier."

"No trouble. Best of luck in your search, Dame Marshmallow."

"Merci, madame. Bonne chance to you as vell!"

Marshmallow turned and took off, circling off towards where the rest of her knights were stationed.

"Let's be off," Blackburn said.

"*Your* team?" Fluttershy interjected. "Who died and made *you* leader? You're not *my* queen, so I don't have to take orders from you."

"Tick Tock gave me her map. She was asked to handle organization; gesture signifies

acknowledgement of leadership."

"That's it? Anypony could read that map and tell everypony what to do; you're not so special. Leadership, heh. Not even a good queen anyway—can't keep her city safe from a little invasion."

"Fluttershy!" Rainbow exclaimed.

Blackburn sneered in Fluttershy's direction and made to speak, then paused and turned to Rainbow. "Ironic, that I must speak to you as the level-headed one. Neither of you are knowledgeable about navigating gryphon cities. Lockwood learned, taught me how. Have used Tick Tock's map to piece together more. Will find obidium in no time." She held the map out towards Fluttershy. "Don't even really need this to do it anymore, but provided excellent visual aid for our ally. You want the map? Will it make you feel better?"

"I don't want your fake charity. You're just trying to act big. 'Ooh, here, have the map because I'm so smart I don't need it'," she added, putting on her best attempt to sound like Blackburn. She snorted, and batted the map away.

"Whoa!" Rainbow yelped, and stretched out to grab the map before it fluttered away in the breeze. "Geez, Fluttershy, get a grip, would ya? Blackburn's trying to help get us home, and this isn't even *her* map; it's Tick Tock's. She'd be pretty mad if you lost her map, y'know."

"Oh, boo hoo," Fluttershy huffed. "Tick Tock cares even less about how I feel than the rest of you. All she cares about anymore is learning magic from Twilight, and getting us out of her hair."

Rainbow sighed. "Look, the faster we find this obidium junk, the faster we can get to Zeb'ra'den and the others, *our friends*. You want to see them again, right?"

"Whatever."

"Rainbow is correct. Working together saves us time, have no desire to be late," Blackburn added. "Don't like leaving Lockwood alone around zebras. Don't trust them."

"What? Why?"

"Zebras not fond of pegasi. Consider us cowards; seen too many pegasi use flight for fleeing, not fighting. Very few exceptions. His scars may or may not be of help in convincing them otherwise. Trust Lockwood to put them to his advantage, not be humble for once."

"Hmph, so he's still humble about those, is he?" Fluttershy huffed. "He doesn't need to be anymore. It's not like he's going to impress me by being humble about being my 'savior'. Still

can't believe I fell for that."

"Not humble to impress. Never was. Humble because it is his nature. You would know that if actually knew him; can't blame you for it," Blackburn said, with a shrug. "Not your fault you knew him for two weeks and thought he loved you back. Simple mistake."

"You're right; it's not my fault your loving fiancé couldn't tell that I was attracted to him and had feelings for him. Simple mistake from a simple stallion, I suppose. You two have an awful lot in common."

Blackburn sneered. "Insult me, if you want. Insulting Lockwood... ill-advised."

"You're right, I shouldn't be insulting him—it's not his fault he's had to live a lie for seven years, and tell everypony he wasn't in a relationship," Fluttershy said. "Maybe if he was allowed to be an honest colt and tell ponies he was with you, none of this would've happened. That stuff about trying to keep him safe is a bunch of baloney, and you know it. He's resourceful, and—"

"I should know that?" Blackburn chuckled. "Resourcefulness of his kind good only for certain things. Business deals, things like that. Lockwood doesn't involve himself with the military, has no connections with them, no way to keep himself out of trouble. Told him to be careful; never told him to lie to his brother. He did that on his own; did not disapprove."

"Right, because lying to his friends and family is such a *noble* act that you would encourage it!"

Rainbow groaned, stepped between the two mares, and pushed them apart. "Geez, am I gonna have to break you two up every twenty minutes or what? I thought Twi and Tick Tock were at each other's throats before they got all buddy-buddy, but man, you two take the cake! Give it a rest, will ya?"

Fluttershy glared at Rainbow and grunted. "Why do you even care so much about how I act around her, Rainbow? Or Lockwood, for that matter? Ever since you met Lockwood, you've hated him because you thought he just wanted to get physical with me and nothing more! And, you and Blackburn butt heads the second you met her, like when she pretended she was going to have you shot, remember? Why are you defending *them* all of a sudden?"

Rainbow frowned. "I remember all that, yeah. But being this close to home... I guess I'm just willing to try and get on good terms with everypony. I may have judged some ponies too quickly. Like Lockwood, I was wrong about him, wasn't I? He obviously wasn't trying to get you into bed with him by playing nice."

"Yeah, *obviously*," Fluttershy interrupted.

"And, Pinkie's been trying to get me to calm down for weeks, so I guess I'm finally trying to take that to heart."

"Calm down, or roll over? Is that why you're gonna defend their feelings over mine? I thought we were friends, Rainbow."

Rainbow balked. "Fluttershy, c'mon, I'm just trying to—"

"Whatever, just mind your own business, Rainbow *Crash*," Fluttershy snorted. "I'm not gonna let Blackburn bully me around and insult me like it was my fault that I even liked her stupid fiancé in the first place. I'll handle this myself, since my so-called *friend* doesn't want to."

"You'll handle nothing," Rainbow said. "Blackburn isn't bullying anypony, and she isn't throwing around insults. *You are*. You need to take a major chill pill, Fluttershy, before you do or say something you'll regret. I am your friend, and I am trying to help you, but you need to—"

Fluttershy huffed and stomped away, not wanting to hear another word on the subject.

"Wasted words, wasted time, Rainbow Dash," Blackburn interjected. She pointed east. "Let's move. Need to find obidium soon; likely purer samples at the metallurgy center than storage complex, may be more useful. Come." She took wing and flew east, Rainbow just behind her.

Fluttershy snorted and followed after them, wanting to help if only to get home more quickly. After passing by several islands, each with its own unique structures and landscape, Blackburn went into a dive to land at the easternmost island. The several structures upon it were decorated with metals Fluttershy had never seen before, in colors she never thought metal could be in: purples, blues, oranges, reds. She was used to seeing gems and cloths in these colors, not metals. The central structure was about the size of Harmonia's temple, built in the shape of a hexagon. Punctuating each corner was a tall tower, each of a different color, and each large enough to hold a few hundred ponies.

Blackburn slowed her dive and swept towards the silvery tower on the northernmost corner, and continued to slow so that she fell in formation with Rainbow and Fluttershy.

"There," she said, pointing at the tower they were approaching, "Obidium development. Off-silver coloration matches pre-forged obidium."

Fluttershy looked ahead towards their destination. The tower was in better shape than the others along the rest of the corners of metallurgy research center. It had been assaulted by less vines and erosion; if Fluttershy didn't know better, she'd swear it was only a few years old, not thousands.

"I hope the gryphons didn't pack everything up and leave," Rainbow said. "Sure would suck if we came all this way and there wasn't any obidium to take back."

Blackburn shook her head. "Wouldn't come as a surprise, but should not impact mission success. If there is no more to find, will make more."

"Make more?" Rainbow asked. Her eyebrows rose. "Oh, because this is the development center! You think this stuff still works?"

"Consider it a likely outcome."

Fluttershy followed the other two pegasi as they swooped down and landed on a platform roughly halfway up the tower, marked specifically for landing purposes with a large emblem shaped like a pair of wings. Ahead of them was a large archway leading into the structure, and a door larger than any gryphon Fluttershy had ever seen, including the artificially-large Gilderoy. It was marked in hierogryphics. The largest was a symbol in the shape of a winged shield. There was a large dent in the center of the shield that was clearly not supposed to be there.

"What's with the weird markings?" Rainbow observed. "Tick Tock and Lockwood said they figured out that the gryphons used—"

"Logical symbols to represent locations on their maps," Blackburn completed. "Obidium is a near-impenetrable metal, useful for protection. Thus, the shield. Obidium also light, known for ability to be grafted to wings. Before gryphons became pacifists, were known as brutal warriors using their wings as weapons." She glanced at Rainbow. "Sound familiar?"

"Yeah... like that pegasus that keeps going after Tick Tock... and that killed—" Rainbow paused, then shook her head.

"An ancient technique. Lost. Requires very intricate magicks," Blackburn continued, apparently unperturbed by Rainbow's incomplete series of words. "Tick Tock claims attacker lacked these weapons prior to the Blood Mire. This... disturbs me," she added with a frown. "Somepony gave him those wings; should not be a pony alive with the knowledge of how."

She shook her head. "Getting off track. Distractions waste time. Moving on."

Blackburn pressed against the door, and ran her hoof along some of the symbols. As she ran her hoof along one that was shaped like a key, the door opened instantaneously with a loud swish. Rainbow and Fluttershy jumped back in surprise; the noise had been rather loud and sudden.

"Hmm... curious." Blackburn stroked her chin in thought. "Door should have been

locked, required a key. Opened automatically; suggests has been opened since gryphons left. Dent, however, suggests opening was forceful."

"Well, this place had been here for a while, hasn't it? Maybe some archaeologists came through here, Daring Do-style," Rainbow said, with a sagely nod.

"Daring Do?" Blackburn asked, her tone betraying a hint of curiosity.

"Oh, right," Rainbow said. "You don't know who she is. She's the star of this adventure book series, and is just like, the coolest pony *ever*. She's an archaeologist that seeks out ancient treasures because they, and I quote, 'belong in a museum'. Sometimes she had to get a little rough with the mechanisms in order to get past them."

She grinned, and gestured towards the tower with a wide sweep of her hoof. "This is like her adventure in *Daring Do and the Fate of Abyssinia*. Except the machine we're looking for makes metal, not alicorns. And we're not underwater, we're in the sky. And there weren't any gryphons in that book." She paused, then scuffed her hoof on the floor. "Okay, so this isn't like *Fate of Abyssinia* at all."

"Archaeology not a popular subject in this world," Blackburn said. She smirked. "To most. Have a particular interest in it for practical purposes. Obidium, for example. Might find interest in these books."

Rainbow laughed. "Really? Well hey, if I could find a way, I might lend you some of mine someday."

"Well, aren't you two just buddy-buddy now?" Fluttershy mockingly cooed. "Give me a break, Rainbow. Can't you see she's just trying to get you on her side so that you'll stop talking to me?"

"That's not—" Rainbow sighed, then turned to Fluttershy and gestured inside. "Look, I'm not gonna sit here and argue with you, okay? C'mon, let's just get searching. We'll find all the obidium we need in no time."

"Or method to create more," Blackburn added, as she stepped into the archway. "If gryphons took remaining obidium, as theorized, may need facility's development machinery. As said, have an interest in the subject. Access to obidium-creating techno-magic a boon for Hope's Point. Come."

The trio entered through the doorway and into the complex. The door closed behind them the instant Fluttershy was out of its way. Fluttershy found that unlike the ruins of Aeropolis, the interior of the structure was crafted of concrete and metal, not of polished stone. In fact, it reminded her much more of Pandemonium's construction than anything else. The hall was kept

alight by the faint glow of magical torches that hung from the ceiling from unseen wires. They reminded her of ones from the chamber she and her friends had been mysteriously warped to before meeting Gilderoy. The one thought that crossed her mind was, how were they still working, while the ones in the ruins of Aeropolis weren't? Did the gryphons leave the power on?

"This place doesn't feel like it's been abandoned at all," Rainbow said, apparently on the same mental wavelength. "Those ruins up north were all dusty and dirty, but this place looks—"

"Clean," Blackburn completed, with a nod. "Likely gryphon magic, automatically cleans structure and maintains systems. Couldn't turn off; logically, same system keeps islands afloat. 'Ruins' not a completely accurate term for this place."

"So, where's the Obidium development center in this 'relic'?" Fluttershy asked. "The less time we spend hanging around, the better. I'd liked to get home as soon as possible."

Blackburn glanced at the map. "Three floors down. Not far."

"Thank goodness for—"

"Hey! Flutterbitch! Back here!"

Rainbow, Fluttershy, and Blackburn raised eyebrows and exchanged glances, then turned towards the source of the voice.

Rainbow groaned at the sight of the approaching mare. "Oh, what the hay? Havocwing? What the hay are you doing here? Wait, how did you even *get* here? Seriously, *what?*"

"Buck, I've been waiting here forever! You have any idea how long it took to get this set up?" Havocwing snorted smoke and cantered forward. "Whatever. *I'll* be asking the questions here, Rainbow Dyke. And I wasn't talking to you, I was talking to Flutterbitch back there. Mind your own bucking business."

Rainbow snarled and postured herself, ready to charge forward. "Uh, excuse me? Wanna run that dyke comment by me again, dragonbreath?"

"I said I wasn't talking to you, so shut your stupid mouth!" Havocwing snapped. "My beef's with the wimpy crybaby behind you. If I were you, I'd just step aside before I got *hurt*. You read me?"

"What, and you think I'm just gonna let you get past to do anything with her?"

Havocwing tilted her head. "Yeah?"

"Well fat chance, hothead. You wanna get to Fluttershy, you gotta go through me. Bring it on—I'm always game for kicking your tail."

"Have to go through *us*," Blackburn added, stepping forward to stand beside Rainbow. "Lockwood would be upset if Fluttershy allowed to be hurt."

"I don't need *you* stepping in to my defense," Fluttershy snorted. "Either of you. I can handle this—"

"Yourself? Perhaps."

Havocwing blinked, and raised a hoof in confusion. "Uh, and just who the buck are you?"

Blackburn grunted and took several steps forward. "Not important."

"Yeah, I guess not." Havocwing shrugged. "Not like I'm gonna be dealing with either of you anyway. I've got Flutterwimp, and you've got a bigger problem than me to deal with, Rainbow Crash. Not that I couldn't kick your ass, but I don't got dibs."

Rainbow stepped up alongside Blackburn and rolled her shoulders. "Oh yeah? And what would—"

A loud crash from above made Rainbow leap back in time to avoid a large pile of broken machinery, as it tore a hole through the ceiling and ripped straight through the floor, leaving a hole wide enough to fit several ponies through.

"Holy hay!" Rainbow shouted.

Rainbow and Blackburn shielded their eyes to keep from being blinded by the spray of dust, smoke, sparks, and metal. Grayscale Force burst forth from the ceiling above them, crashed through the floor beneath them, and dragged them down with her. Fluttershy leapt back to avoid the falling debris, then realized she was left by herself. With Havocwing.

"I'll hoof it to her, Gray's got a real showy way of doing things when she wants, for somepony that doesn't seem to care." Havocwing cackled, and bounded through the smoke cloud so that she and Fluttershy were on the same side of the gaping hole in the floor. "Finally, here we are."

Fluttershy shook off a layer of dust that had covered her, and glowered at Havocwing. Normally, she would be afraid and be running for help right now, but couldn't afford to be weak anymore, and she wasn't going to let some foul-mouthed pegasus stand in the way of her getting home and getting away from everything that hurt her.

"Yeah, here we are," Fluttershy replied, keeping her voice steady. "How *are* you here, anyway?"

Havocwing shrugged. "What's it matter? What matters is I'm here, and you're here. I've been waiting a long time for this, you know," she said, her mouth curling into a grin. "Ever since I first laid eyes on you, I've wanted to punch your stupid little face into a bloody pulp. I didn't need any motivation to do what I'm about to do to you. This... is gonna be *fun*."

Fluttershy narrowed her eyes. "So, you wanna fight me, is that it?"

Havocwing smirked. "Fight you? No... I wanna *kill you*."

Havocwing lunged forward, pulled back her hoof and ignited it with fire, then swung it around to strike Fluttershy.

Her blazing hoof was caught inches from Fluttershy's unflinching face by the hand of a spirit gorilla. Ophanim, standing just beside Fluttershy, whipped Havocwing around and slammed her into the nearest wall.

Fluttershy laughed, and stepped up behind Ophanim. He bent over so she could pat him on the head. "Good boy, Ophanim," she cooed. "We're going to show this jerk pegasus what we're made of. Nopony is going to keep me from getting home." She turned to Havocwing and narrowed her eyes. "You hear me?! Nopony! Especially not you!"

"Ow..." Havocwing grunted and staggered away from the wall, then rubbed her head. "Figures. I never expected you to let me just get your murder over with." She snorted smoke and clicked her tongue. "Fine, sic your dumb ghost animal... thing on me!" she shouted, igniting both forehooves. "I'm gonna burn him to the bucking ground!"

Havocwing shot at Ophanim like a bullet, tackling the spirit creature more than twice her size and knocking him back into the opposite wall. She punched him with both forehooves in his midsection, and the force of impact blew apart the wall and sent him flying through it. The blast knocked Fluttershy aside, and she rolled to the floor.

Havocwing swept around towards her as soon as she was able. "Gotcha!"

The wall next to Havocwing exploded outward as Ophanim burst through in the form of a rhinoceros. Rubble flew every direction, knocking Havocwing out of the air and into the opposite wall.

"You can't touch me, Havoc*wimp!*" Fluttershy snapped as she rose to her hooves. She gave Ophanim, now in the form of a tiger, an approving glance. "Just give up! You're all bark and no bite! Ophanim's gonna teach you a lesson about messing with the wrong ponies."

Havocwing snarled and shook off debris and dust. "I'm not the one hiding behind her pet like a bucking coward! Fight me like a mare, you pansy!"

"Talk all you want, you're just mad that Ophanim's better than you! You think you're so tough, but you're just a little wuss!"

"Buck you!"

Havocwing lunged back at Ophanim, flaring her hooves and sending flames sweeping in a frontal arc. Fluttershy had to duck behind a chunk of rubble to avoid getting hit, but Ophanim was not as lucky and caught a face full of flame. Havocwing swept at him and punched him in the face. As he was knocked through the hole he'd made and into the adjacent room, he managed to rake his claw across her face and knock her to the floor.

Havocwing snarled and rose to her hooves, and pressed her hoof to her forehead. Blood was trickling from the wound. She swung to attack Fluttershy again, but was pounced upon by Ophanim, now a wolf, and slammed to the ground. He roared in her face and pressed his paw down on her stomach; she roared back up at him, jammed her hoof into his mouth, then fired a blast that knocked Ophanim off her.

"Okay..." she panted as she struggled to her hooves. "So maybe... your little pet... has some... bite to him..."

Fluttershy smirked. "What's wrong, Havocwimp? Having trouble keeping up?"

Havocwing spat blood on the floor and wiped her lip. "Just keep running your mouth. I'm gonna enjoy wiping that smug—"

Ophanim, now a lion, roared and leapt at Havocwing, claws extended and maw agape.

Havocwing must have been ready for Ophanim this time, as she slid out of the way, then fired a fireball directly at him. Her mouth curled into a cocky smirk as the blast reached him, until he batted it aside with his great paw, and charged at her again.

"Buck this shit!" she snapped as she took to the air to avoid his lunge.

Once airborne, she lobbed another barrage of flames at the lion beneath her. Ophanim sprinted out of the way, taking the form of a cheetah as he did so, to avoid the blasts. He leapt over rubble and debris to enter the adjacent room.

Havocwing chased after him. "Get back here, you punkass cat!"

Fluttershy followed behind them to keep her eye on the fight, as she was still in command of Ophanim's forms and didn't want him to lose his advantage. Havocwing was tough and fast, but Ophanim was tougher and faster so long as Fluttershy kept Havocwing from establishing any sort of strategy. The room they were in now was a large circular chamber with all manner of assorted machinery covering the walls and placed in a predictable pattern around the area.

Ophanim used this machinery to evade Havocwing's pursuit, slinking around the metal silo-like columns to keep his attacker from getting a solid bead on him. He shifted forms constantly to force Havocwing to adjust her aim, as differently-sized targets moving at fluctuating speeds required more thought than Fluttershy felt the other pegasus could handle in the heat of the moment. First a cheetah, next a swift, then an antelope, followed by a merganser, then a greyhound, then a teal-

"BUCK! THIS! SHIT!" Havocwing screamed.

She abandoned all pretense of trying to aim and instead just started launching fireballs in a chaotic volley, blasting through machines and spraying the floor with searing fire. Fluttershy was able to take cover behind one of the larger machines in the corner. One blast caught Ophanim in the wing and sent him careening into the nearest wall. He changed into a tortoise beforehand and hit the wall with his protective shell.

Havocwing swooped down and slammed into Ophanim, pinning him to the ground, belly up.

"Ha! Gotcha now you little rat bastard!" she spat as he squirmed under her.

Ophanim shrunk down, taking the form of a rat, and loosened himself from under her in a matter of seconds.

"What the hell?!" Havocwing yelled as he scampered up her leg. "Get off!"

She shook her leg to try and shake off the tiny rat, but Ophanim was already on her back by the time she reacted. She started flailing around to get him off, but he dodged her wildly-waving hooves and wings, morphing into various small-sized creatures to do so and infuriating her with every move.

Ophanim took position on top of her head after several moments of struggle, morphed into a crab, raised both his pincers up, and snapped them down on Havocwing's ears.

Havocwing's pupils shrunk, and she screamed. "Owww! You little piece of shit!" She flailed around like she was on fire, rolling to try and dislodge the crab from her ears, but his grip was like iron. "Get off!"

"Like I said, Ophanim's too strong for you," Fluttershy taunted as she trotted over. "How does it feel, Havocwimp? To be called weak? To be called useless? It doesn't feel good, does it?"

Havocwing snarled, and attempted to lunge at Fluttershy, but Ophanim, having just morphed into a bison, easily pinned her to the floor.

"You bucking punk-ass *bitch!*" she shouted as she attempted to squirm out from under the massive bear on top of her. "You wanna taunt me? Do it while fighting me like a real mare! You can't call me weak while you hide in the corner and don't do shit!"

"If you're as tough as you say you are, Havocwimp, you shouldn't have any problem getting out from under my precious Ophanim and beating me up." Fluttershy chuckled. She nodded at Ophanim, who turned into an elephant at her command. "Looks like you bit off more than you could chew, huh?"

Havocwing tried to push herself out of Ophanim's pin, but the spirit elephant didn't budge an inch. "This is such a load of shit! If you didn't have this stupid pet, I'd have pounded you into a little bloody pulp by now! It's not bucking fair!"

Fluttershy sat down next to Havocwing and bopped the other pegasus on the nose. "I'm just doing everything you told me to do. I know it took awhile to sink in, but your lessons really opened my eyes. If I fought at all I'd probably fight fair, but now, I just remember lesson fifteen: you ain't got a *prayer*, if you insist on fighting *fair*."

"Did... did you just quote *my* lessons to prove your point?"

"What's wrong? You don't like it that I'm listening to your advice?"

Havocwing snorted smoke in Fluttershy's face. "Kiss. My. Ass."

Fluttershy waved her hoof in front of her face to drive away the smoke. "So I take it you *don't* like my improved attitude?" She sighed. "I thought you of all ponies would approve of how I've decided I'm gonna do things from now on. I was tired of being a chewtoy. So, I needed to be more assertive, right? But just being assertive wasn't enough; I needed to be able to back it up! Maybe if I had been stronger sooner... I could have *made* him—"

Fluttershy paused, then shook her head. "Of course," she added with a shrug, "if you don't like it... you only have yourself and your sisters to blame."

Havocwing quirked an eyebrow. "Did... I take too many blows to the head or something? I swear I just heard you try to say it's *our* fault you're acting like a little bitch."

"That's exactly what I said, glad to hear you've been listening." Fluttershy petted Ophanim's trunk, and glared down at Havocwing. "See, your stupid sister Red Velvet went and frightened me back when I was just a little wimp that needed her friends to save her from the 'big, scary meaniehead'. That caused a whole lot of trouble between us all, and led to us getting separated and going through this really nasty place called the Blood Mire.

"There, we encountered some monsters. Horrible things, monsters worse than anything I've ever seen. Ponies that had been turned into mutated... *things*. They attacked us, and Lockwood saved my life... and nearly lost his in the process."

"Uh... I don't see how that—"

"Shut up! Do I sound like I'm done talking yet?!" Fluttershy shouted, pressing her hoof onto Havocwing's forehead. "See, when he did that... I thought it was because he really cared about *me*, and the little feelings I had before blossomed into something more. I began to think maybe... I was falling in love."

Havocwing made a face of disgust. "Ugh... enough with the sappy stuff! What does this have to do with—"

"Turns out, he didn't love me back! Not the way I wanted him to, anyway!" Fluttershy spat. "That other mare you saw earlier? That's his fiancée! He doesn't love me, he loves *her!* You want to talk about fair? Tell me that that's fair!"

Havocwing quirked her eyebrow again. "Okay, how the buck is that *my* fault?"

"If we hadn't gotten separated, he would have never had the opportunity to save my life like that! I wouldn't have developed the feelings I did! I fell in love with him because you forced us into that situation!"

Havocwing laughed. "Wow... you're just a heapful of crazy, aren't you? I've heard some stories before, and I won't say I'm some master of logic or anything, but... how does that make any sense? Listen to yourself. You sound like you're bucked in the head!"

"I'm crazy? I'm *crazy?!*" Fluttershy snorted. "Lesson twenty-nine! If somepony thinks you're *nuts*, you'll have to kick their *butts!* It's your fault I'm like this, so I'm gonna take all my anger... all my frustration... out on *you!*"

"See, now I know you're crazy, because I don't remember giving that lesson at all. We didn't get that far."

Fluttershy turned to Ophanim and stroked his head. "Ophanim? Time to get to work."

Havocwing shook her head, and shouted: "Buck that! Either fight me without your stupid pet, or let me finish him off first!" She started squirming again, pushing up against Ophanim's huge body but still not budging an inch.

Fluttershy cooed at Havocwing, like she was a foal. "Aww, what's wrong, Havoc? Chicken?"

Havocwing stopped squirming, and her pupils shrunk. She slowly turned her head towards Fluttershy. She was trembling, and she grit her teeth, biting into her bottom lip with her fang. Smoke was escaping from her ears and nose. "What... did you just call me?"

Ophanim morphed into a chicken, perched himself on Havocwing's muzzle, then pecked her rapidly on her forehead.

Fluttershy snickered at the display. "Good boy, Ophanim! See, Havocwimp? Even Ophanim thinks you're just a little chicken."

Havocwing exploded, sending both Fluttershy and Ophanim flying. "I! *AM NOT!* **A CHICKEN!**"

Fluttershy recovered before she hit the wall, and landed safely on the ground on the other side of the room. The blast had singed parts of her coat, and ash stung her eyes. She blinked the discomfort out of her eyes and glanced up to see Havocwing glowing white-hot. The floor under her hooves started letting up spurts of steam in the presence of her intense heat. Ophanim leapt in to put himself in between her and Fluttershy, changing into a tiger midleap.

Havocwing glared over Ophanim's head at Fluttershy, her eyes completely red, and pointed her hoof at the yellow pegasus. "You think *you're* angry?! You don't *know* angry! I *am* angry! If you think you can out-anger me, Flutterbitch, you're *dead wrong!* You think it's *my* fault you're angry? It's *your* fault I'm angry! It's your fault I even exist!"

"That doesn't even make any sense," Fluttershy muttered, though she was cautious in saying it. "*My* fault you exist?"

"I was made from you!" Havocwing snarled. "I'm *you*, twisted from a pathetic, sentimental wuss into this hate-filled rage bomb with only two purposes: to hate you, and to destroy anything that gets in my way!" She shifted her gaze to Ophanim and barred her teeth. "I'm tired of your stupid pet getting in my way, so first, I'm gonna destroy *him,* then, I'm gonna destroy *you!*"

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Rainbow groaned and groggily opened her eyes. The last thing she remembered was an

explosion and a crash. She grunted, and as she rose to her hooves, bits and pieces of metal debris flaked her body. She wobbled a bit, and almost stumbled into a large, blinking machine. It reached up to the ceiling of the grand circular room she was in, and she could see many other machines just like it spread about in a neat pattern. Each of them had glowing rings of neon blue and flashing strips of neon green; were the machines actually on? What were they even doing? She could see a large hole in the ceiling, and she guessed that that was how she'd come into her current situation. The pounding in her head certainly reflected that.

A low groan to her side drew her attention. She'd almost forgotten about Blackburn. The other pegasus had, at some point during the fall, donned her power-enhancing hoofguard, and used it to push a large chunk of debris off of her. She did not, however, look like she was able to stand on her own, so Rainbow offered a hoof.

Blackburn stared at the offered hoof, then took it with her unarmored one and allowed Rainbow to help her up. "Thanks."

"You okay?" Rainbow asked.

Blackburn shook her head and pressed her unarmored hoof to her temple. She was apparently suffering the same light-headedness Rainbow was. "Ugh... uninjured, mostly. Some grogginess; likely cause, minor concussion. Wise to seek medical attention soon."

"Yeah, I'll keep that in mind," Rainbow agreed. "What happened? Where are we?"

"We fell," Blackburn observed dryly as she pointed towards the hole in the ceiling. "Everything happened too fast. Havocwing... not responsible," she added when Rainbow opened her mouth to speak. "Too much damage. Trajectory from directly above us. Only one other pony is a likely candidate."

Blackburn turned her head and glared at something behind Rainbow. Rainbow turned, and sure enough, Grayscale Force was there behind her, prone and leaning against one of the machines, eyes closed as though taking a nap. In her completely motionless state, she looked eerily statuesque, with her great wings tucked in tight against her body.

Rainbow narrowed her eyes; Grayscale was just the pony she wanted to see. She had a few choice words to share with her, and a few choice actions too.

"Grayscale..." Rainbow muttered.

Grayscale gave a great yawn and stretched her body out. Her eyes remained closed the entire time as she rose to her hooves, rolled her shoulders, and cracked her neck. When at last she opened her eyes, she craned her neck ever-so-slightly to look at the other two pegasi.

"About time," she said, bringing her hoof to her mouth to stifle another yawn. "Long time no see, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow made to leap at Grayscale immediately, but Grayscale was quick to flex a wing; Rainbow fell flat to the floor less than a few inches from her launching point.

"Easy there, Dash," Grayscale taunted. "I want this over quickly. Gotta get back to my nap, after all. But, we're gonna do this *my* way. I have something important to tell you before I kill you."

"You... *you...*" Rainbow trembled with barely contained rage, and slowly rose to her hooves. "After everything you said to me... *did* to me... what makes you think I wanna talk to *you?!* You've had a good flank-kicking coming for a long time, Gray!"

"Have I now?"

"I'm gonna make you pay for what you and your sisters did to my friends!"

Blackburn cut Rainbow off. "Remain calm, Rainbow Dash. Have said before, your hotheadedness invites trouble. Have seen this mare in action, via Twilight Sparkle's memories. She requires more precision to deal with."

Grayscale eyed Blackburn up and down. She grunted once. "Who the hell are you, again?"

"Not important."

"You look like you're raring for a fight, whoever you are," Grayscale said. She pointed at Blackburn's hoofguard. "Neat toy. I saw what you did with that. I'm actually interested to see just what else it can do. But anyway, if you're here with Dash and are willing to team-up with her, you're not just some nameless mook."

Rainbow stepped forward. "She's—"

Blackburn stuck out her hoof. "Will introduce myself, if you insist." She stomped her hoof once, but stuck her nose up in greeting, exuding all the regal air Rainbow figured she could muster. "Queen Blackburn, of Hope's Point."

Grayscale hummed. "Hope's Point's queen, huh? I guess you escaped during the invasion. Shame you weren't there to watch my sisters and I slaughter your militia."

Blackburn's eyebrow twitched. "My militia? You claim... no." She took a deep breath. "Tone too level, eyes too focused. A truthful statement. Cannot let actions go unpunished."

"That's what I like to hear." Grayscale nodded and smiled. "Rainbow Dash and you, against me. This might *maybe* be a challenge. Nothing else matters to me anymore... I just need something to keep my blood pumping."

"You... you *killed* ponies?" Rainbow asked. "Gray... that's horrible. I knew you were bad, but... wow. I thought—"

"You thought you knew me?" Grayscale chuckled. "Dash, that is the dumbest thing I've heard today. You don't know me. But... I know you. I know everything I needed to know... to make you snap. How does that make you feel, Dash?" she asked, her tone dropping to a steady monotone. "To be a tool? I know that feeling all too well, myself. Just another thing we have in common."

Rainbow flared her wings and drew her goggles over her eyes. "I'm not gonna let you get away with what you did, Gray! Ponies like you... they deserve to face justice!"

Grayscale smirked and rolled her shoulders. "I look forward to seeing you try."

"You have plenty in common with her," Blackburn interjected. "Curiously so, in fact."

Grayscale paused.

"Eyes have exact same hue, for example," Blackburn continued. She cocked her head. "Claims to be a tool... theory has been expressed from multiple sources that you serve Nihila. Truth in that, ascertained."

"What are you doing?" Grayscale asked, eyebrow raised.

Blackburn ignored her and continued on. "Servants of Nihila... interesting indeed. Together provide an interesting reflection of Twilight Sparkle and company."

"Seriously, what are you doing? Are you... are you examining me?"

"She does that," Rainbow said.

"Both parties ally themselves with a goddess most directly connected with their morals and beliefs," Blackburn continued. "Twilight Sparkle and her friends follow the Light, while you and your sisters follow the Dark. Both groups contain six mares. Each possesses incredible magical powers beyond those of any normal pony."

Grayscale's mouth curled in a cocky smirk. "Ooh, I'm liking this train of thought you've got rolling. Saves me the trouble of revealing anything."

"Revealing what?" Rainbow asked.

Blackburn shook her head. "Many theories could arise from this information alone. However, remember another event from Twilight Sparkle's memories. Hoof Rot immunizations. Seemed suspicious, but all events in line with typical New Pandemonium policies. Seeing a clearer picture now. Believe events to be connected."

Grayscale let out a single laugh. "You're good, you know that?"

"What's she talking about?" Rainbow asked, addressing Blackburn. She shook her head. "For that matter, what are *you* talking about?"

Blackburn cocked her head just slightly at Grayscale. "She possesses copies of your genetic code and magical capabilities, amongst other things. A clone, albeit one twisted for some other pony's intentions. Grayscale Force, you will confirm my suspicions"

Grayscale merely shrugged.

Rainbow blinked. "My what? I have a *what?*" She shook her head. "This is... so... wow, I think I need a minute..."

"All information points to one theory," Blackburn explained. "Grayscale and her sisters designed specifically to counter you and your friends. Personalities in stark contrast, but oddly compatible. You admit Grayscale corrupted your thoughts. As servants of Nihila, would make sense to force you to stray from Harmonia's path.

"However, our world does not have 'Elements of Harmony', and thereby no 'Discord' to counterbalance. Tick Tock's explanation made that clear. If these six counterbalance you, suggests they were artificially created." Blackburn gave Grayscale a quick once-over. "Does not explain difference in body structure. Cloning process flawed? Or intentional?"

Grayscale shrugged. "Part of the process in making me Dash's 'counterbalance', like you said. You're pretty observant. I can respect that."

"Pity. Cannot say same for you."

Rainbow snorted. "Yeah, you're going down, Gray!"

Blackburn put her hoof on Rainbow's shoulder. "Remain calm, Rainbow Dash. Stay focused. Do not rush in. Gravity actually a weak force. Take advantage of that weakness."

Grayscale scoffed. "Weak, huh? Here's an experiment we can try: *jump*." She jumped up

into the air, then came crashing down on the floor, impacting the metal with a large crash and knocking Blackburn and Rainbow off-balance.

Blackburn snorted. "Of course, gravity *is* relative."

"Now, are we done talking?"

"Actually... I've got one more question," Rainbow said. "Why? Why are you doing this?"

"Why? What does it matter, 'why'?" Grayscale laughed. "The hows and whys don't matter. I just... do. Nothing else matters... and soon, nothing will matter at all. Not for you, anyway."

Rainbow felt the pressure lift off of her, and in that instant knew that Grayscale was on the attack. She bolted left, grabbing Blackburn as she did so.

Grayscale lunged forward and slammed her hoof into the machine just behind them. The construct's base was torn apart by the impact, and the rest of it crumbled towards the ground. Grayscale flared her wings, and the debris and flames sharply diverted away from her.

Rainbow and Blackburn swerved around another mechanical column, then charged at Grayscale. Grayscale's mouth curled in response, and she flicked her wings again.

Rainbow and Blackburn collided with the immense flat surface of the floor, which was now a wall. They began sliding down the new wall's surface, and glanced up just in time to avoid falling debris from the destroyed machine and the ceiling, which was now another wall. The debris crashed through more of the now-horizontal machines, taking some of them to the new floor along with it.

Rainbow hovered in place and shook her head, completely disoriented by the new change in perspective. She caught sight of Grayscale standing on the wall as though it were perfectly natural, despite the broken chunks of machinery and concrete that still scattered past her towards the other two pegasi.

"Did she just flip the entire tower?!" Rainbow blurted, not able to believe such a thing possible.

"No," Blackburn replied, "merely altered gravitational pull of the wall, now floor. Altered perception of balance. Remain calm. Not a major threat."

Grayscale wordlessly swept around to another machine and broke it apart with a few short kicks. The flaming debris fell, and Rainbow and Blackburn prepared themselves to avoid it.

Then, Grayscale flicked her wings again. Suddenly, up was down.

Rainbow and Blackburn found themselves falling towards the debris, which suspended in free fall long enough for them to catch up to it. They pushed upwards to avoid running into it, then caught sight of all the debris from above plummeting towards them as well. They darted in opposite directions to avoid the debris, even as it tore into more machines in its descent, sending sparks and flames blazing about the room.

"Gravity doesn't seem so weak now, does it?" Grayscale taunted. "Come on, Dash, step it up. You two are just running around. I'm bored. When I get bored, it's not usually a pretty sight."

Rainbow was tired of playing defense. She rolled around and burst towards Grayscale with all the intensity of a lightning bolt, swerving between machines and absorbing their electrical current mid-flight. She drew her hoof back to deliver a blow, and rocketed towards her target after looping around one last mechanical tower.

Grayscale flicked her wings, one up and one down, and kicked the base of the tower closest to her. The tower swung like a pendulum straight into Rainbow's path.

Rainbow swerved to avoid the tower, dropping out of her lightning state in order to maneuver properly. She then felt a fearsome tug to her left, and immediately began plummeting back towards the floor, unable to escape the sudden influx of gravity without her lightning's speed. When she glanced beneath her, she saw all the abundant debris and wreckage flying *up* towards the ceiling.

"Aw geez," she muttered.

She sprung back into her lightning state to fly away from the approaching chunks of metal and concrete. The pendulum machine from earlier swung back across her path; she dove to avoid it, then suddenly found her dive to be gravity-assisted. She pulled up just in time to avoid the new floor, only to feel another sharp tug and find herself hurtling towards the ceiling.

The debris from before, however, hadn't changed its path in the slightest. Rainbow spun to and fro to avoid as much of it as she could. Luckily, she made it through without a scratch. One thought kept pressing in her mind though: *Where's Blackburn?! She didn't get hurt or anything, did she?*

Grayscale yawned. "Still can't do anything but run, run away. They don't call you 'Dash' for nothing. But, if that's really all you've got..." She shrugged, and flicked her wings again. "Then I think we're done here."

Rainbow prepared herself to avoid the storm of debris as it abruptly reversed directions to tumble towards her. "We're not done until I say we're done, Gray!" she called.

Instead of focusing entirely on avoiding the falling wreckage, Rainbow kept a portion of her attention on Grayscale's current position. She bobbed and weaved between shards and chunks of metal; some struck true, scraping into her coat and skin and drawing blood. She pressed on, and the second the opportunity presented itself, she bolted towards Grayscale, exploding into her lightning state midway.

Rainbow noticed Grayscale's movement a split-second before she made it; Grayscale was becoming easier to predict, and just a twitch of a wing was all Rainbow needed. She swerved early in order to avoid whatever attack was coming. Grayscale flicked her left wing, and the shattered machine just to her left swung towards Rainbow.

Rainbow was able to avoid it, just grazing the side, and used the opening to close the distance between her and Grayscale. She punched Grayscale in the face with everything she had; in that same instant, she snapped backwards to loop around for another strike. Grayscale slammed into the machine just behind her, but was back on her hooves again in no time.

"I may only have my speed," Rainbow taunted as she surged in to deliver her next attack, "but that's all I need!"

Grayscale saw Rainbow coming this time. "Nope."

She swung her metal-plated hoof forward to meet Rainbow's blow.

Rainbow bounced off and rolled to the floor, then grabbed her hoof in pain. All of the impact force had been transferred to her hoof; it felt like she'd cracked it.

She started to pull herself up, but Grayscale simply flicked her wings. Rainbow found herself pinned to the floor, and though she tried to get up, she couldn't force herself out of the pull.

"Now you see the futility of it all. Fast just isn't good enough, Dash," Grayscale said, taking large steps in Rainbow's direction. "You need a little something better than that. Pathetic. I can't believe I was even spawned from you."

She stepped up to Rainbow and lifted one hoof, preparing to stomp down on Rainbow's head.

Blackburn swooped around from behind the wreckage of the nearby machine and swung her gauntlet straight at the back of Grayscale's head. Grayscale reacted in time to block the strike with her own hoof; the impact created a shockwave that knocked Blackburn back, and

Blackburn's gauntlet flashed a bright blue.

"Surprise an acceptable addition to speed," Blackburn said.

In this instant, Rainbow was able to move, and took the time to tackle Grayscale, crushing her against the same machine Blackburn had used as her hiding place.

Grayscale flared her wings, and Blackburn and Rainbow instantly fell sharply away from her towards the newest floor. She then perched herself on the wall and rubbed her chin, wiping away blood.

"Thanks, Your Majesty," Rainbow said, not a hint of sarcasm in her tone, as she and Blackburn regained their balance and took wing.

Blackburn grunted. "As said: focus. She is keeping you from utilizing speed. Location chosen specifically for that purpose. Must relocate."

"That really *is* a fancy toy you've got there, Your Highness," Grayscale interjected. She lifted a hoof up and mockingly displayed her metal boot. "I still think I like mine better."

Rainbow noticed Grayscale shaking, taking deeper breaths.

Blackburn apparently noticed too. "Grayscale Force. You are unnerved. I am to blame?"

Grayscale snorted. "Just caught me off guard, that's all. I honestly thought you were hiding." She shrugged, and rolled her shoulders. "Not gonna fall for that again. Let's see you two handle my next trick."

She flared her wings, and the room gave one fierce shake. Rainbow felt herself pulled to the side, the wall her new floor; Blackburn, however, dropped like a stone towards her own floor, hoofguard-clad hoof-first. She struck with enough impact to shatter most of the wall, and crumbled in a heap within the rubble. Several pieces of debris slammed into the rest of the wide floor, creating holes large enough to fit a pony through.

Grayscale then tucked her wings in and leapt forward into a dive. Rainbow swooped down to intercept; Grayscale rolled on her side, flicked a wing, and Rainbow found herself fall towards her floor, pressed upon by a heavy weight.

Rainbow pushed; she needed to get the speed needed to supercharge into her lightning state again. Grayscale's dive was drawing in wrecked machinery as she soared towards Blackburn, accumulating in a trail behind her, drawn to her own intense gravitational pull.

Rainbow strained against the pull of her own floor, and at last she snapped off as a bolt

of lightning, resisting the gravity's pull easily. She shot after Grayscale. Blackburn was just recovering from the impact. Grayscale was closing fast. Rainbow pumped her speed as much as she could. She was gaining. Grayscale was within reach. She rolled to the side and slammed into Grayscale as hard as she could.

Grayscale was knocked off course just enough to impact the floor only a yard away from Blackburn. The floor was shattered further, but managed to hold. Blackburn, now able to move, lifted her hoofguard and swung at Grayscale's face.

Grayscale flicked her wings again; Blackburn went sailing past Grayscale and into a mechanical pillar, and Rainbow went sailing the other direction into her newest floor yet again. She slammed into a machine pillar, and found she was unable to dislodge herself.

Grayscale sneered, and with another flick of her wings, the machine that Blackburn had crashed into began to emit a loud whine. Seconds later, it began to crumble in on itself, wildly sending sparks flying outwards in all directions.

Blackburn snarled as a spurt of static-charged shrapnel sprayed into her face. She could move her body just fine, but her hoofguard was caught in the machine's construction. She pulled to get it out, screaming in anger and pain as she did so. She finally dislodged it, and swung around, only to come face to face with Grayscale.

"Your toy is getting on my nerves," Grayscale said. "Let's see what you can do without it."

Blackburn swung, but Grayscale caught the strike easily. With a flick of her wings, Blackburn slammed face-first to the floor. Grayscale placed the hoofguard between her hooves, and started to squeeze; Blackburn howled in pain, then hardened her features and tapped two buttons on the side in unison with her other hoof. The gauntlet gave a high-pitched whine and began to glow not blue, but red, and Blackburn's hoof fell right out of it.

A second later, and the tiny gauntlet exploded in a fierce blast of energy, flinging both Blackburn and Grayscale away in opposite directions. Blackburn impacted the same machine that had held her prisoner seconds earlier. Grayscale rolled along the floor, her face and forehooves emitting a faint trail of smoke.

Grayscale's concentration was broken, and Rainbow found herself abruptly removed from the machine she was attached to and able to move freely. Blackburn fell from her own machine towards the floor—the original floor—so Rainbow darted forward to catch the other pegasus and, without a second thought, shot through one of the myriad holes in the wall.

Rainbow flew some distance away before she let Blackburn fly on her own. She took a look around. It had been some time since they'd entered the tower, it seemed; the sun had finally set. The larger of the planet's two moons was just peaking over the horizon, while the

smaller lingered high in the sky.

Blackburn cradled the few bits of scrap that remained on the leg where her gauntlet had been, then pulled her hoof close to her chest for a moment before she let them drop away. "Trusted partner, and treasured gift, that weapon." She took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. "Sad to see it go. Leg not broken, though. Relief."

Rainbow grunted. "So you okay then?"

"Minor injuries. Will recover, but can be of no further assistance." Blackburn pointed at the tower they'd just left. "Grayscale Force will come soon. Relocated, so you have advantage. Take it slow... stay calm, be focused."

"You'd better get out of here, and pick up the, uh, obidium. And check on Fluttershy... please."

Blackburn nodded. "Affirmative, on both counts."

A shrill screech filled the air, followed by a loud crash as a massive chunk of assorted metal blasted through the hole-filled wall and sailed through the air towards Rainbow and Blackburn. They yelped and shot higher to avoid it, then watch it plummet to the sea far below.

Blackburn gave Rainbow a small sideways glance. "Will leave you to it, then. Want more advice? She doesn't like to lose; shares that quality with you. Loses focus all the same." She smirked, and patted Rainbow's shoulder. "Pretend you *are* fighting yourself. Make her flinch."

"Right." Rainbow saluted. "I'll take it from here. Just help my friends get home, okay?"

Blackburn dove out of sight beneath a cover of clouds, leaving Rainbow alone in the sky.

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Havocwing lunged at Ophanim, hooves ablaze, screaming at the top of her lungs. She tackled the tiger and pulled him to the ground, then proceeded to punch him with explosive force, ignoring him grabbing onto her sides and digging his claws into her coat. Each burst she unleashed crushed him further into the concrete.

Ophanim shifted into a smaller shape, a hummingbird, to escape Havocwing's assault, and darted away as quickly as he could. Havocwing rocketed after him and was on him again in less than a second, forcing him to change again to defend himself, now as a wolf. They wrestled on the floor, claws and flaming hooves flailing.

Ophanim pinned Havocwing to the floor again, taking the form of a gorilla to hold her

body steady with his two large hands. He growled in pain as he did so, as the heat of the pony's body was too intense to handle easily.

"Stop flinching, Ophanim!" Fluttershy shouted. "She's gonna get loose!"

Havocwing squirmed for a few seconds before snarling, opening her mouth, and letting loose a torrent of flame from her throat, straight up into Ophanim's face.

Ophanim jerked, releasing his grip and allowing Havocwing free. She was on him instantly, rapidly pummeling him and knocking him around like a rag doll with every blow. Ophanim recovered, and they traded fierce blows in quick succession. Fluttershy was baffled at how Havocwing was able to even stand after taking a punch from a silverback gorilla.

One powerful strike sent Ophanim flying through a nearby machine. Havocwing lunged through the collapsing wreckage to get at Ophanim again, but he vanished before her eyes in a flash of light.

Fluttershy glanced at her bracelet, and noticed the orb was glowing again, but with a dimmer light. "Ophanim?" she muttered. She knew full well that the only reason he'd return to his orb was if he'd taken extreme damage.

Havocwing snarled and bolted out of the wreckage, and immediately began taking large steps towards Fluttershy. "There, your stupid pet can't help you anymore!" She raised a hoof and ignited a flame large enough to count as an inferno. "Now it's your turn, Flutterbitch!"

Fluttershy snorted, and held out her leg that had her bracelet attached. "Ophanim, we're not done yet. Be a good boy, and keep this pony away from mommy," she commanded.

Ophanim did not immediately come out of the orb.

"Ophanim!"

Ophanim slunk out of the orb, taking the form of a small dog as he did so, and turned his head to give Fluttershy a nervous, pleading look.

"Don't give me the puppy dog eyes!" Fluttershy shouted. "She wants to hurt me, and you're supposed to protect me from her! Get to it!"

Ophanim whined, then stepped towards Havocwing again after morphing back into a lion. His light had dimmed since he was last out of the orb, and he flickered a little with every step he took towards his mistress's assailant.

Havocwing growled. "Back for more, huh? Fine! I've still got loads of anger to let out!

Come and get it!"

She bolted forward and tackled Ophanim again, ignoring him biting down on her back and raking her sides with his claws. She smashed him against a wall, grabbed his tail, then swung him around into the floor, rage fueling her strength and allowing her to toss the great lion around without trouble.

One more solid hit was all it took. Ophanim staggered away, then crumbled to the floor and remained still. His light flickered and dimmed, until it was no more than a faint glow barely bright enough to keep his surroundings alight.

Havocwing gave a loud, deep-throated laugh. "Eat it! Nopony, and I mean *nopony*, messes with Havocwing!" She turned to Fluttershy, and her mouth curled into a wide grin; Fluttershy could see that her fang had been knocked loose in the scuffle. "Your turn."

"Ophanim, get up!" Fluttershy shouted.

Havocwing lunged at Fluttershy, only to have Ophanim slam her to the floor.

"Bucking dammit!" she screamed, her eyes flashing a brighter red. "You just don't let up!"

Ophanim gripped her tail with his teeth and dragged Havocwing away from Fluttershy, but was clearly putting a lot of effort into just doing that much.

"Ophanim! Stop messing around!" Fluttershy shouted, angry that her pet wasn't effectively stopping Havocwing.

Havocwing flipped over and launched a fireball at his snout, forcing him to release his grip, then rocketed at him again, slamming him into the nearby wall. She punched him once, then again, then again, and she did not stop even though he was not fighting back. Every punch was punctuated with a loud scream and a fierce explosion.

Ophanim's light flickered and dimmed with every strike, and he gradually changed color from his normal pearly white to a gritty orange that grew brighter and brighter. He tilted his head just slightly in Fluttershy's direction, his expression sollem and his eyes dim with sorrow. Fluttershy quirked an eyebrow, unsure what what wrong.

Eventually, Ophanim's light got so bright that Havocwing stopped mid-punch. "What the hell?" she muttered. "What's up with—"

Ophanim exploded in a flash of orange and red. The force of the blast rocketed Havocwing into the wall opposite the machine, hard enough to crack the concrete. She fell, limp, to the floor.

Ophanim crumbled in a heap, his light losing its luster instantly.

He did not get up.

"Ophanim?" Fluttershy peeped.

She took a step forward, then stopped when she heard a crack. She glanced down at her bracelet; the gem had a large gash that had not been there before. She watched in horror as the crack widened until the entire gem was nearly split in two. Fluttershy glanced back at Ophanim, whose bright orange light had become white again, and was quickly fading. She rushed to his side, and cradled his head in her hooves.

"Ophanim? Ophanim!" she pleaded. "Speak to me!"

Ophanim did not respond.

"Oh... oh no..." Fluttershy sniffed. "Ophanim... please, get up."

Ophanim did not move.

"Ophanim, please..."

Fluttershy stroked her hoof along Ophanim's back, then pulled it away when a sharp burning sensation shot through it. She glanced at her hoof, noticing a faint glow there that matched Ophanim's color. With a quick glance down at Ophanim's back, she saw strips of his light disappearing. He was coming apart in her hooves.

"No... no!"

Fluttershy pulled Ophanim in tight, holding onto him for dear life. Seconds later, his light vanished entirely, spreading into the air like dandelion seeds, and she was left grasping air. She fumbled around to try and catch a part of his fading flickers to no avail. Just like that, he was gone. Fluttershy slumped back on her hindquarters, her limp gaze focused on the scorch marks Ophanim had left behind on the floor.

"Ophanim... p-please... don't go. D-d-don't leave me!"

She cried, harder than she had ever cried before. In desperation, she grasped at the air around her, trying to catch some of the flickering remnants of Ophanim's light, but her hooves just passed right through. The air around her felt cold, unnaturally so, and that cold gripped at her heart. She was now truly lonely, and that loneliness sank in with alarming speed.

Her sobbing continued for several moments. She pawed her hoof weakly at the floor beneath her, keeping her eyes focused on the gem in her bracelet. She was half-expecting the little orb to regain its glow; that Ophanim hadn't disappeared, but had just gone back into his home.

"Wh-what have I d-d-done?" she whimpered as she curled into a ball and stroked her tail. "He's gone. He's really... g-gone. Th-th-this is all m-my fault. It's my fault... he's dead because of *me*." She took a deep breath, and started crying again. Now she knew why he'd given her that sad look. "He's... d-d-dead because of me... he s-sacrificed himself f-f-for me..."

Other thoughts flooded her, and made her feel even worse.

"It's all my fault..." she murmured. "My f-friends think I'm a j-j-jerk... because of h-how I acted. I treated them all... like dirt." She sniffed. "Blackburn... Lockwood... *Rarity*. It's *my* fault... that I t-treated them the way I did. Blackburn's right... it's not their f-fault things happened the way they did... but... I s-s-still chose to react the way *I* did."

She sunk back to the floor, cowering behind her mane from an unseen foe. "Oh... h-how could they ever... f-f-forgive me? I was *worse* than a monster... I was... I was..."

A sudden thought came to Fluttershy. Had she really made the decision to act the way she did entirely on her own? Fluttershy knew she'd had problems with her anger before, but not like this, and she'd always felt bad about it afterwards. This time, though, she felt that all her anger was justified, just like Havocwing did.

"Just like... Havocwing," she muttered. "Oh... oh my..."

Fluttershy connected the dots: if Rainbow Dash, the most loyal pony she knew, could be convinced to abandon her friends by Grayscale Force, then maybe it wasn't a stretch to think that Havocwing had done the same to her, and had done so so covertly that she hadn't even noticed. But why?

A low groan from nearby snapped Fluttershy from her reverie. She turned her head towards the wall just to her left, which still bore a large impact crater from where Havocwing had slammed into it. Havocwing herself lay limp on the floor beside it, her body no longer glowing white hot, her mane and tail no longer ablaze. The impact had been intense and had caused the other pegasus severe injury that just added on to the myriad injuries the rest of the fight had given her. She was out cold, barely breathing, bleeding from multiple cuts and scrapes, and her left wing was bent at an awkward angle. Fluttershy cringed.

Fluttershy rose to her hooves and took a step towards the other pegasus. She took another, and another, keeping her steps slow and quiet. Havocwing remained still, so Fluttershy took another step. She grew bolder the closer she got, increasing her pace to close the distance

between her and the other pegasus, until eventually she was right at Havocwing's side. From this close, everything looked worse; Havocwing's multitude of injuries were so severe that Fluttershy was astounded the other pegasus was even alive. Just another thing that Fluttershy knew was her fault. Another thing she needed to fix.

Without a second thought, Fluttershy set about tending to Havocwing's wounds, though she was worried about her lack of materials. She settled on tearing her blouse and using the cloth as bandages, as Rarity had done for Lockwood. Havocwing's wounds were not as severe, but they were much more numerous; Ophanim had really done a number on her. The only thing that worried Fluttershy was Havocwing's wing, which, with its awkward bend, did not look flight-capable. She did her best to wrap it so that it was straightened out, and was thankful that Havocwing was not awake and thus couldn't squirm around.

As Fluttershy was applying the sling, though, Havocwing did wake up.

"Ugh... my head," Havocwing muttered. "Who hit me with a bucking house?"

Havocwing attempted to stand, causing Fluttershy to skitter back in surprise. Havocwing didn't make it more than a step before she stumbled and fell, giving a low groan as her body cashed back to the floor.

"You shouldn't move yet," Fluttershy said, keeping her voice calm in an attempt to be soothing, though her mind was racing with worry and panic.

The effort had the opposite effect, as Havocwing jerked sideways in surprise and landed hard on her side. "W-w-what the hell?! You're still alive?!"

"Oh dear... please be careful. You really shouldn't be moving right now. You're hurt."

Havocwing snarled. "Shut up! Don't tell me what to—" She flapped her wings, and immediately winced in pain and stopped moving. "Ow! Son of a—"

"Oh... um... you definitely shouldn't be trying to use your wing. It looks like it might be broken."

Havocwing glanced at the cloth wrapped around it, then narrowed her eyes and switched her glare over to Fluttershy. "What did you *do?* What is this crap?"

Fluttershy smiled. "It's a sling. It'll keep your wing still so the bone can set. I put one on your leg too."

Havocwing glanced back to confirm it, then returned her gaze to Fluttershy. "You... wrapped my wing and leg in slings? So they can heal?" She tilted her head, her mouth slightly

open as if the idea confused her. "What's your game here? Is this some trick to let my guard down so you can sic your pet on me again?"

Fluttershy frowned and shook her head. "He... w-won't be attacking you anymore today..." she said, though it was hard to do.

Havocwing snorted. "Then nothing's stopping me from blowing you into teeny tiny bits." She raised her hoof and aimed it Fluttershy, then ignited a fire.

Fluttershy remained calm, despite having a raging inferno just a foot away from her face. The heat bothered her and so she had to back off a little, but she otherwise tried her best to show Havocwing that she wasn't scared.

Havocwing quirked an eyebrow. "You're serious, aren't you? He's not hiding somewhere just waiting for me to attack?"

"No." Fluttershy paused. "He's... g-gone."

Havocwing smirked and attempted to unleash her blaze, but the fire sputtered and died the second it left her hoof. Fluttershy peeped as the embers harmlessly flickered against her face.

Havocwing lowered her hoof slightly, and gave it and its smoldering flames an accusatory glare. "Buck... *dammit...*" she growled as she held her ignited hoof with her other one, her face contorted in pain. She returned her glance to Fluttershy. "I guess you're... telling the truth. If your pet was around, he would've been... all over me for that."

She frowned for half a moment before shaking her head and returning her mouth to a scowl. "What gives then? I'm trying to kill you... and I was out for who knows how long. I... your pet is gone because of me. You could've ended me, but you wrapped me all up... and tried to *heal* me. Why?"

"Because I'm sorry I hurt you," Fluttershy said with a sweet, genuine smile.

Havocwing's eyebrow raised further, until it disappeared into her mane. "'Sorry'? I was trying to kill you—you'd be stupid *not* to try and hurt me! Seriously, what's your game here?"

Fluttershy frowned. "I'm... j-just showing you a little kindness. You're h-hurt, and—"

"Kindness? Don't give me that crap. There's something else here you're after. I'm not stupid. I can smell a trick coming a mile away." Havocwing spat on the floor. Fluttershy couldn't help but notice the obscene amount of blood mixed in with her saliva. "You're still weak! You could've been done with me, but you're gonna show me *mercy?* What kind of a bucking idiot are

you?”

"If I'm an idiot for helping somepony in need... then I'm content with that." Fluttershy sighed. "I don't know why you're so angry, Havocwing, but you say that it's because of me. If it's my fault that you're like this... then I'm sorry."

Havocwing quirked an eyebrow. "Again with the apologies? Seriously, what's—"

Fluttershy swept forward and wrapped Havocwing up in a hug.

"Whoa! Whoa whoa! Not cool!" Havocwing snapped as she tried to squirm out of Fluttershy's hold.

"I'm sorry, Havoc."

"Ugh! Get off me with that crap!" Havocwing spat as she pushed Fluttershy off. She winced when she attempted to flap her wings again; true enough, her injured wing bent awkwardly and didn't come close to giving her any altitude. "Sorry's not good enough! I hate you!" She sneered and raised her hoof. "I oughta just blow your top off right now. Then I can go back to my sisters, and tell them I did what I said I'd do, and we can all figure out what to do from there."

"I just don't understand, Havoc," Fluttershy said. "Why do you hate me so much? I'm s-sorry about whatever it is I did, b-but... w-what did I do? I want to m-make amends."

"Shut up!" Havocwing ignited a flame, and launched a fireball at Fluttershy. It screeched just past Fluttershy's head and blew apart the wall behind her so that the sky outside could be clearly seen. "Just... just shut up!" she yelled, grabbing onto her flaming hoof with her other one, once again contorting in pain. "I don't know, okay?! I don't know why I hate you! I just... I just do! I hate everything! I'm a hate machine! It just comes naturally to me... to be angry at everything..."

Fluttershy felt nothing but pity for the other pegasus, who was so angry at the world but didn't even know why. She went back to tending to Havocwing's wounds, ignoring her constant squirming.

"I'm s-sorry that whatever I did to you... made you like this," she said, "b-but I know you're not so filled with hate that... you can't love. I've seen the way you act towards your sisters. I know you girls fight a lot, b-but lots of families do. I can see that you're not like... this. You're not a hateful pony, deep down—"

"So I love my family, big bucking deal! What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, d-do you think you're happier being angry, or... being together with your sisters?"

Havocwing paused. "I... I never thought of—" She shook her head. "So what? That doesn't mean a damn thing. What's your point? That the way I treat my sisters is the same as the way you treat your friends?" She snorted and tried to get up and walk away, but collapsed after only a single step. "I'm nothing like you. I'm strong, I'm aggressive, I'm not afraid of anything. We're nothing alike, don't try to compare us."

Fluttershy frowned and returned to Havocwing's side. She was trying to get the other pegasus to stay still, but Havocwing just seemed more and more eager to get away with each passing second. "Oh... w-well, if that's the way you feel... b-but—"

Havocwing's eyebrow twitched. She didn't seem to like it that Fluttershy wasn't outright agreeing with her. "I'm not some nicey-nice wuss!" she shouted. "I don't do that sympathetic crap!"

"You don't necessarily... *have* to be a 'n-nicey-nice' pony to be kind to others."

"That doesn't even make any sense!"

Fluttershy shook her head. "Well... kindness is really all about compassion. You don't have to be nice, necessarily, because you can help them without them knowing it. You probably do that for your sisters, right?"

Havocwing tapped her hoof to her chin. "Well... I've been trying to help Curaçao and Insipid—" She shook her head. "No, hold on... that's not because I'm being kind or anything. I just hate seeing them fighting! See? I *hate* seeing them fight. Hate. Hate hate hate. No kindness there. Just hate."

Fluttershy tilted her head to the side and dropped the bandage that was in her mouth. "Insipid and Curaçao are fighting? What—"

"None of your business! Shut up! I didn't say anything!" Havocwing spat. "Okay, fine, so maybe I hate seeing them fight, maybe I want to do something to stop them from fighting, and *maybe* that something *isn't* lighting them both on fire until they stop. So what?! Does that make me kind?"

"That sounds pretty kind to me," Fluttershy said, with a smile.

Havocwing sputtered. "I... no! What? No! Stop agreeing with me! I'm not nice! I'm a lean, mean, killing machine! The best damn fighter this side of Pandemonium! So I love my family, what of it?! I'm not nice! I'm not kind!" She pushed herself upright and pressed her face right against Fluttershy's. "I'm not some sentimental wimp! I'm. *Not. **Nice.***"

Fluttershy stood firm. "Is it really so bad to be kind? Your sisters love you. I'm sure they'd be glad to know you love them back so much."

Havocwing paused, then snarled. "I... but..." She snorted and slumped back onto the floor, giving Fluttershy the opportunity to tend to her again. "Well, I... it feels good to know they're happy, I guess. You're saying I'm *supposed* to feel that way? That that's the right way to feel?" She rolled her eyes and snorted smoke out her nose. "Well if that were the case, then that would mean I've been wasting my time hating you."

"Well... isn't it a waste of time?" Fluttershy asked. "What do you think you'll accomplish by... k-killing me?"

Havocwing frowned. "I... I don't know. I just..." She rested her chin on the floor, her face suddenly paling as if she'd come to a horrible realization. Fluttershy equated it to how she looked when she first realized how much she wanted to go home. "Have I really been wasting all my time going after you, when I could've been trying to start a new life with my family? They're more important to me than all this crap..."

She grunted and lurched upward, placing a hoof to her chest. The color of her coat drained instantly. "Oh... b-buck, I c-can't breathe. Ah... d-dammit..."

"Havocwing? A-are you okay?"

Havocwing shook her head and closed her eyes. She looked like she was in severe pain. "W-who turned down the heat in here? It's... c-cold..." She clutched her sides and tucked herself into a ball, and began stroking her tail. "B-b-buck... m-m-me. W-what's going on? I c-c-can't feel m-my h-h-hooves."

"Oh dear... um... here, let me help," Fluttershy squeaked. She frantically looked about to see if there was anything left of her blouse she could use to keep Havocwing warm.

"Sh-shut up, I'm t-t-trying to think! I don't n-need your stupid k-k-kindness right—"

Havocwing's eyes widened, and she slowly turned her head around to look at Fluttershy. Fluttershy took a half step back. Havocwing's eyes weren't filled with rage.

They were filled with fear.

"Y-you! Y-you did this to m-me! Didn't you!?"

Fluttershy shook her head. "I d-don't know! I d-didn't do anything—"

"I f-f-fell for it! Oh sh-shit... I f-fell for your l-little t-t-trick! I g-g-gotta get outta here!"

Havocwing scampered past Fluttershy and headed for the gaping hole in the wall leading outside, limping all the while.

"W-wait!" Fluttershy called, realizing Havocwing was going to try and fly away. "Havoc, your wing is hurt! You shouldn't be flying—" She gasped when Havocwing ignored her and leapt straight through the hole. "Oh no!"

Fluttershy galloped towards the hole and leapt out of it herself. She could see Havocwing below her, tumbling through the air and desperately trying to right herself. Fluttershy dove as quickly as she could, and was glad that the tower wall had been facing outwards so that Havocwing wasn't falling towards the island it was built on, but towards a layer of fluffy clouds below.

Unfortunately, Havocwing didn't hit the clouds and stop, but kept going straight through, so desperate to get away that she chose to keep falling. Fluttershy increased her speed, and crashed through the clouds in pursuit of Havocwing's falling form. She heard a popping sound, but paid it no mind. But, when she broke through the layer of clouds, Havocwing was gone.

Fluttershy gasped and frantically looked about to try and find the other pegasus. "Oh dear... um... Havocwing! Havoc! Where are you?!"

Havocwing was nowhere to be found, and this worried Fluttershy greatly. There was nothing but ocean beneath the islands, so Havocwing should have been easy to spot. So, where was she? She didn't just up and vanish, did she? Fluttershy briefly scanned the cloud cover above her, hoping to see Havocwing somewhere in the fluffy white layers. How could the other pegasus even fly properly with that injured wing?

Fluttershy sighed. If Havocwing was hiding, there wasn't much good she could do here now. Any further attempts to help might just make the situation worse. "Oh... I hope Rainbow's okay. And Blackburn too..." she murmured as she swept back up through the clouds.

The island came into view again, and Fluttershy got the chance to take a good look at the tower. One side of the tower was riddled with so many cracks, holes, dents, and tears that Fluttershy was surprised the tower was even still standing. Only one hole, far, far above her, was familiar; the others must have been caused by-

"Oh no..." Fluttershy muttered. "Rainbow..."

Fluttershy flew up towards the side of the tower and made to investigate, but stopped when she heard somepony call her name. She turned, and saw Blackburn approaching, looking rather worse for wear than Fluttershy remembered from seeing her last. Her jacket was torn,

and her gauntlet was gone.

"Your Highness! Are you okay?" she asked when Blackburn swooped up to her.

Blackburn did not respond immediately, but rather raised an eyebrow. "Uninjured... " she said slowly after a long moment. "You are well. Outfit torn... reminiscent of Rarity's dress when treating Lockwood. You tended to Havocwing."

Fluttershy blinked. "W-well... yes. She was injured from the battle, and I couldn't leave her like that."

"Then she cannot fight back." Blackburn glanced at the hoof that was missing her gauntlet. "Will have to make due. Must administer justice."

"Justice?"

"For deaths she inflicted upon my soldiers." Blackburn shook her head. "Grayscale admitted to killings; can assume her sisters participated as well."

"Oh..." Fluttershy frowned, and reached a hoof out to try and comfort Blackburn. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry..." Blackburn raised her eyebrow again, but only for a second. "Take me to her."

Fluttershy shook her head. "I... um... can't. She ran away, I don't know where she is."

Blackburn frowned. "I see. Unfortunate." She glanced down at Fluttershy's hooves. "Your bracelet is damaged. Eyes are red... suggests crying. Assumption is that Ophanim... my condolences."

Fluttershy teared up, and swept forward to hug Blackburn. The other pegasus was the only pony she could express grief to right now. To her surprise, Blackburn put a hoof around her back and tapped her a few times in an awkward comforting gesture.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty..." Fluttershy whimpered. "I've been—"

"Told you, would forgive if you let it go," Blackburn said. "If truly sorry about what has happened, apologize to Lockwood."

Fluttershy sniffed. "I will."

Blackburn nodded. "Come, then. Let us find obidium and leave this place."

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Rainbow was not alone for long. Grayscale swept up faster than Rainbow Dash had ever seen her move before, pulling cloud cover along in her wake. Her face was covered with soot and minor burns, and for the first time, Rainbow saw tiny blemishes on her otherwise always-impeccable boots.

"Where's your friend?" Grayscale asked. Her composure was still there, but only just. Her wings flapped in slow and even beats, and her face was placid and relaxed, but the fire in her eyes was unsettling.

Rainbow took in a deep breath. *Do I look like this when I'm angry?*

"You're not dealing with her anymore, Gray. You're after me. So here I am."

Grayscale snorted, then shrugged and landed on a thin layer of cloud. "Fair enough. I'm not gonna play anymore; we're fighting for real, now. Just you, and me. Winner take all."

Grayscale spread her wings to their full length. Rainbow did not feel any change in her surroundings, nor did she see any movement in any of the nearby objects. The display was just that: a display. Rainbow kept her gaze on her clone, now noting how truly odd it was that Grayscale possessed such a completely different build. It didn't make sense.

"That's just the way I like it," Rainbow said with a smirk. "I always win. That's what I *do*."

Grayscale's mouth curled into a tight smile, then she let loose one great laugh. "That's why I'm going to make you lose. All your boasting, all your confidence, all your ego; they mean nothing. You don't see it, but I do. I will *make* you see just how worthless you are."

Rainbow rolled her shoulders. "Yeah, well, we'll see about—"

Grayscale flicked her wings, and Rainbow dropped like a stone. Rainbow beat her wings to regain upwards momentum, and almost missed Grayscale dive-bombing towards her. She abruptly twirled around and shot downwards instead, bursting into her lightning state immediately.

She chanced a glance above her and saw Grayscale still diving, trailing not too far behind. She beat her wings, gaining speed and increasing the distance between the two. She punched through a layer of clouds, spinning as she did so to whip them into a trail behind her. With just a little effort, the white, fluffy clouds became black and smokey.

Rainbow took a deep breath, and kicked the storm cloud behind her with all her might. A torrent of hailstones fired to her rear, aimed directly at her pursuer. She kicked again and again,

launching volleys in quick bursts.

Grayscale slowed her dive with a small spread of her wings and a tiny twirl to the side to avoid the volley; it was enough to give Rainbow more distance. In doing so, the hailstones that had been fired at her missed. However, they did not just pass her by, but curved around her in passing; Grayscale was using herself as a slingshot to aim the hailstones right back at Rainbow.

Rainbow twisted around as the hail whizzed by her head, gathering the hailstones in a wind funnel. She kicked her cloud again and beat her wings to push the twister backwards, gathering up more and more ice. When at last her storm cloud was spent, she let it melt away, and turned to bolt straight at Grayscale.

"Incoming!" Dash taunted.

Grayscale tucked her wings and went back into full dive. "Bring it on, Dash!"

Rainbow kicked out of her tornado, sending the hundreds of hailstones flying straight up at Grayscale.

Grayscale flicked her wings and deflected the lot. Those that still managed to approach simply burst apart against her body, but Rainbow noticed Grayscale wince at each strike. Her altitude and speed dropped from the spread of her wings.

Rainbow zipped in and punched Grayscale in the gut. Grayscale shrugged it off, caught Rainbow with her body weight, and headbutted Rainbow in the nose. Rainbow tumbled through the air, hoof to her nose, for a moment before she regained control in time to avoid Grayscale streaking towards her.

Rainbow snorted, and pulled her hoof away from her nose. Blood stained her hoof, and she could feel it trickle from her nostril to her lips.

She swooped around to avoid Grayscale again. "If this is all you've got, Gray, I'm not impressed!"

Grayscale narrowed her eyes and gave a loud snort. "Me? All *I've* got? Please, Dash, you still can't do anything but run away. Such... a *pain*."

"And all *you* can do is chase me around," Rainbow retorted. "If you could keep up with me, you *might* actually be a challenge. *You're* the boring one."

Grayscale's eyebrow twitched. "Dash... no," she said, shaking her head. "I'm not going to tell you. I'm going to *show* you just how wrong you are. Say 'hello' to the ocean for me."

Rainbow bolted forward just as Grayscale flared her wings, and before she'd even made it near the other pegasus she was falling through the sky like a rock. With a quick glance downward and the sight of the swiftly approaching sea, she knew what was coming. She'd hit the ocean surface in under a minute.

She attempted to flap her wings, but found them too heavy to move. She flailed about in the air in an attempt to slow her fall, but could barely even spin. Every movement strained her body as though she were lifting the heaviest weights imaginable.

This is bad, she thought.

Fifty seconds.

Her thoughts raced as she tried to think of something, anything she could do to get herself out of the fall. But every idea she had ran headfirst into the notion that, as much as Rainbow knew about aerodynamics, she was used to adjusting for her own, normal weight. This was different.

She closed her eyes, and now her thoughts turned to worry. If she couldn't get out of this fall, she's hit the ocean below; one of the first things she learned in flight school was that hitting water at this speed was fatal, and she was gaining speed every second. If that happened, then what would happen to her friends? They'd all be in danger, and likely already were. Without Rainbow to stop her, would Grayscale go off to help her sisters with Rainbow's friends? Were they going to be okay?

Forty seconds.

No, Rainbow thought, she wasn't going to let that happen. Grayscale wasn't going to win, not as long as Rainbow was still alive and kicking. She knew what she needed to do.

She tucked her wings, strained to adjust her goggles to make sure they were straight, took a deep breath, then pushed herself forward, embracing the fall and turning it into a dive. Blackburn's tactic had worked, even it hadn't been Rainbow's intent; Grayscale had given her the opportunity to not just make a Sonic Rainboom, or to become a lightning bolt, but something better. Something stronger.

Thirty seconds.

Her body went faster and faster with her own prodding, assisted by the greatly-increased pull of gravity. Without any effort at all, she approached the sound barrier and then slammed through it, creating a Sonic Rainboom. Despite having done it so many times, the sensation of flying faster than sound still excited her.

Ten seconds.

She kept diving, faster and faster. Supersonic speed wasn't enough anymore; gravity could still greatly affect something going that fast. A split second attempt to flick her tail proved Grayscale's gravity was still pulling her down. She wasn't going fast enough to escape it.

Five seconds.

Faster and faster she went, unafraid of putting everything she had into her dive. The ocean was approaching so fast that she was sure she'd hit it within the next few seconds. Faster and faster. She pushed harder than ever, tucking her legs in tighter than ever until she was a missile.

One second.

Then, with one final strain of every last ounce of energy she had, she pushed herself faster than she'd ever gone before, or could ever hope to go again.

A Hyperspectral Rainboom.

A rapid series of rainbow stars exploded outwards along her trail, each one a different color and each one as bright as the sun. They expanded first, then merged with her in-flight, creating a shockwave that parted the sea beneath her. The world around her exploded into a prismatic display, flooding her vision with every color of the spectrum for just a fleeting second. She couldn't feel the wind around her, she couldn't feel the sensation of movement, and most importantly, she couldn't feel the pull of gravity. Her body fully embraced the speed, and in her mind she *knew*: this was her next level. Flying as fast as a rocket, as a bullet, even as *lightning,* was nothing compared to this.

Rainbow came to a complete stop just inches above the ocean surface, then rocketed straight upwards at the same speed she'd just been traveling.

She smiled, and glanced at the tiny dot that was Grayscale Force. "Let's do this."

She raised a hoof in front of her face, but instead of glimpsing her familiar cyan coat, she saw a multicolored *energy* that traced her movements. The Hyperspectral Rainboom had merged with her body, turning her into prismatic pseudo-light; she *felt* solid enough, as if she were merely sheathed in light.

 It had taken her nearly a minute to reach the ocean from the instant Grayscale had made her fall. She was back at Grayscale's level in an instant.

Grayscale balked at Rainbow's new pseudo-energy form literally warping in front of her

face. "What the—"

Rainbow reared her hoof back and punched Grayscale in the gut. The assault happened so fast that Grayscale hadn't even had time to react. She wheezed and fumbled backwards.

Rainbow did not let up. She swept forward and kicked Grayscale in the side, once, twice, three times. Each kick landed almost instantly after the last, and each hit before Grayscale's body could even register having been struck. She swung around and smashed Grayscale's jaw with an uppercut, then twirled into a spin and kicked Grayscale in the stomach.

To Rainbow, Grayscale moved in almost slow-motion, tumbling backwards through the air like a crumbled-up chunk of paper; the few seconds it took Grayscale to recover felt like minutes to Rainbow.

Rainbow lunged forward again, closing the distance in an flash, and tackled Grayscale. She drew Grayscale upwards with her, moving so fast that Grayscale was still in the process of reeling when the two pegasi were within a stone's throw of the Elysian Islands. They burst through all the layers of clouds so quickly that it was almost simultaneous.

A split second later, and they were above a wide clearing on one of the smaller islands, in what appeared to be the middle of some sort of garden. Rainbow body-slammed Grayscale, back-first, into the concrete with enough speed that Grayscale created a shallow impact crater.

Rainbow looped around and dove into the crater, and rapidly pummeled Grayscale with every ounce of force she could. Grayscale raised her hooves to curl into a defensive ball, but took so long to do so that Rainbow was able to punch her several dozen times.

Rainbow did not let up her assault until Grayscale managed to push her off. She twirled around and landed on the ground with no shortage of flair and style, and remained still so that Grayscale could recover.

Grayscale pushed herself out of the crater, grunting and groaning as she did so. Her body was covered in bruises and scrapes, and she wobbled as she walked. She rubbed her lip, and drew back blood. She glared at the stain on her boot like it was the most offensive thing in the world, then turned the glare to Rainbow.

"What is this?" she asked, her voice belying her enraged curiosity.

Rainbow chuckled. "That's called 'blood', Gray," she said, her voice carrying a slight, high-pitched static with it. She paused, then snickered. "Whoa, is that *my* voice? Man, Pinkie's *gotta* hear this."

Grayscale sneered. "I know what blood is, idiot. I'm talking about *you*. What's happened

to you? How did you get so fast?"

Rainbow flexed her wings and legs. "The Hyperspectral Rainboom," she declared.

Grayscale narrowed her eyes in disbelief. "The what?"

"No? You don't like it? Well, how about the Sonic Rainboom Mark Two?" Rainbow suggested. Grayscale continued to give her a blank, half-lidded stare. "Still nothing. Okay, how about... the Rainbow Blitzbomb?"

"Are you making fun of me by giving it these cheesy names?" Grayscale asked, her body trembling with anger.

Rainbow shrugged. "Whatever, it's a work in progress. But with this, I'm going to show *you* just how wrong *you* are, Gray. Let's go. Round Three."

Grayscale remained silent for several long moments; to Rainbow, it seemed like forever. At last, she said, "You know what's funny?" She rolled her shoulders and settled back into a relaxed state. "You think that beating me even matters. So you beat me. So I lose. Big deal."

"Uh... yeah?" Rainbow cocked an eyebrow. "For somepony that was so bored and cocky a minute ago, you sure have changed your tune. Why so serious, Gray?"

"Beating me doesn't matter, because I'm nothing special." Grayscale shook her head. "And beating you doesn't mean anything anymore anyway, so why should I care? You move faster than I can keep up with. I gave you a challenge... and you rose to surpass me. Just like you said you would. Bravo."

"Well, yeah. I told you, it's what I *do*."

"But here, even if you do, it means nothing in the end. Do you know why?" Grayscale pointed towards the tower in the distance, the one where she and Rainbow had been fighting earlier. "My sisters are after your friends... and even if you were able to beat me in the end, do you think your friends will fare the same?"

Rainbow stared at the tower for a moment. She knew Blackburn had managed to get away, and she believed the other mare would be able to help Fluttershy... if she arrived in time. But what about the others? Twilight and Rarity were being escorted by *Lockwood*, who could contribute practically nothing in a fight against either Starlight Shadow or Insipid. Who had went with Applejack and Pinkie again? Fireburst? She was a miner and a treasure hunter, so maybe she was good in a scrap, but fighting Red Velvet or Curaçao wasn't exactly a "scrap".

She shook her head. *No... they're gonna be okay. If I can beat Grayscale, they can beat*

their clones too. They'll be fine.

"You still think they have a chance, don't you?" Grayscale asked, snapping Rainbow from her reverie. Rainbow nodded; Grayscale smirked. "Maybe... maybe. Maybe everything's already over, and all my sisters lay defeated right now. If that's the case... then all of our goals and dreams really *don't* matter, not just mine. I thought, maybe..."

Rainbow raised an eyebrow. "Gray... seriously, why are you doing this?"

"It doesn't matter," Grayscale said. She chuckled. "Nothing matters. I've been delusional, Dash, but you've opened my eyes. I thought maybe, just maybe, my goal of beating you and proving how insignificant you are was something worth fighting for, if only for a moment. That maybe there was some reality to my existence. I was wrong. I can't beat you... not like this. And if that doesn't matter, well... then what *does?*"

"Gray... are you—"

"*Nothing. Matters,*" Grayscale snarled, her voice cracking. She took a deep breath, and stared at Rainbow, the rage in her eyes dimming and being replaced by a sadness that Rainbow had never seen before. "I have one last challenge for you, Dash."

"Go on..." Rainbow said warily.

Grayscale flared her wings out to full wingspan. In that instant, the entire island began to shake tremendously, and within seconds the ground began to crack.

Rainbow took wing to avoid the ground giving way from beneath her, and turned her gaze to Grayscale. Small chunks of the island that shattered off were being drawn towards her: gravel, bits of dirt and concrete, blades of grass, chunks of marble. They crumbled into dust before reaching her, crushed under incredible pressure. Even Rainbow, in her new form, could feel the pull.

Grayscale then pointed upwards. "See if you can keep up."

"Wh—" was all Rainbow managed to utter before Grayscale rocketed into the sky. The island completely shattered and fell towards the sea below, covering the great distance in seconds.

Rainbow shook her head to collect her wits, then without hesitation, bolted up after the other pegasus. She caught up in just over a second, and that made her realize just what altitude she was climbing to. While her new form seemed to be making it possible to breathe this high up without worry, she did not know how Grayscale was doing the same.

They climbed up, up, up, punching through the top layers of the troposphere, then through the stratosphere and into the mesosphere, which glowed with all the colors of the rainbow. The small moon was brighter than ever this high up, almost blindingly so.

Rainbow swerved to avoid small chunks of rock that were burning up in the atmosphere; Grayscale just slammed through them without stopping. As Rainbow passed through the aurora, she absorbed the light and carried it with her, creating a corona of light in her wake.

Grayscale stopped several miles up into the thermosphere.

Rainbow looped around to come to a stop as well. She looked around, confused, mostly as to how Grayscale was breathing. She noticed a sort of bubble around Grayscale's body, as if she was using her weight to keep air around her, at least enough to breathe. The air was so thin up here that Rainbow was glad her new form didn't seem to need it.

"Okay, Gray... why are we here?"

Grayscale turned to Rainbow, and spread her hooves wide. "From up here, you can see it all, can't you Dash?" She slowly turned around, sweeping a hoof out over the sight. "The whole planet. The entirety of Equestria."

Rainbow glanced below her. True enough, they were so high up that she could see almost everything: the tiny dots of the Elysian Islands directly below; the wide fields of grass that stretched for miles to the south; tiny swaths of dark green forests that broke up the lighter green of the grasslands; the brown mountains of Deepgrove; the white lights of Utopia in the distance; the expanse of white snow of the southern tundra. Only the northern hemisphere still remained a mystery to her, covered still by a churning cloud of murky orange.

Rainbow had never flown this high before, and the sight was rather overwhelming. "Yeah... it's pretty cool..."

Grayscale shrugged. "Take a good look while it lasts, Dash. Because when I'm done with it, it'll just be a smoldering cloud of rock and dust."

Rainbow made to speak, but before she could say a word, Grayscale swung around and launched herself in the opposite direction. All Rainbow could think of in that instant was, how did Grayscale get so fast? It really didn't matter; Rainbow knew she was still faster. She took off after Grayscale, and caught sight of the other pegasus within seconds. She was bothered by how long it was taking to catch up, and that Grayscale seemed to be getting faster.

When she finally managed to pull up alongside Grayscale, she had to push herself and her new form to its limits to remain at her side. "Gray! What is this?!" she shouted over the din of air whipping past their heads. "What are you doing?!"

Grayscale rolled over so that she was flying with her back to the planet. "It's called an 'orbit', Dash."

"Okay... I get that! But—"

"I've always wondered how I know about things, but why I don't remember learning about them." Grayscale set her hooves behind her head. "I remember talking with Starlight and my father about it. Knowing those conversations never really happened... well, it really puts things in perspective."

"And what would that be?!"

"Everything about my existence is just made-up. I'm just sompeony's idea made into a thing. My opinions and hopes and dreams are meaningless, because they're not mine. They're just somepony else's ideas." Grayscaled leered at Rainbow . "Why should *you* get to have any of that, but not me?"

Rainbow remained silent and let Grayscale talk, not to be polite or because she was particularly interested, but because Grayscale was still moving faster than ever, and even now was pulling ahead without seeming to expend much effort.

"My control over mass and gravity requires me to have a firm grasp on the concepts of physics. I know now that I had that knowledge implanted within me in the process of my birth and conversion."

Rainbow shook her head. "Gray, you're more than that, and you know it! Stop acting like everything about you doesn't matter! It does!"

Grayscale ignored her. "Did you know that if an object with enough mass strikes another object with enough velocity, both objects will pretty much be destroyed?"

Rainbow thought for a moment, then her eyes widened in realization. Grayscale was moving faster than Rainbow now, and was still gaining speed. If that continued, and if Grayscale put everything she had into increasing her own weight, could she really do what she thought Grayscale was implying? Could she crack the planet? Rainbow had heard a lot of crazy plans over the years, but this was just plain beyond crazy.

"You can't be serious, Gray! You couldn't do that even if you tried!"

Grayscale shrugged. "I intend to perform this experiment, regardless of how *impossible* you think it is. That's what science is all about: proving the impossible, one way or another." She chuckled. "That's funny, coming from me. But whether you think I'm right or wrong doesn't

matter. If I'm right, everything down there goes 'poof'. Are you really ready to take that risk?"

Rainbow grit her teeth. "Of course not!"

"Then just try and stop me."

Grayscale turned back around and returned to her orbital path. She gained more speed with every passing second, until, soon enough, she'd pulled far ahead of Rainbow.

Rainbow snorted, and pushed herself further into her flight, focusing every ounce of energy she had into catching up with Grayscale. She closed in within seconds, just as Grayscale dipped down and dove towards the planet, hooves first. Rainbow dove in pursuit, but Grayscale was pulling ahead, her metal-clad hooves glowing white-hot. Rainbow felt the effects of re-entry heat upon her, just barely, as her light form seemed to be nearly impervious. But she wasn't fast enough. Grayscale would enter the upper mesosphere soon, and it would take seconds to strike the planet from there.

She took another deep breath, and pushed herself harder than ever; she didn't think it was even possible to keep pushing her limits, but every new barrier she broke gave her new limits to break.

She rocketed towards Grayscale's form; the other pegasus glanced behind her in surprise. Rainbow reached out to grab Grayscale, but she was still too far away. The strain and intense heat made Rainbow's entire body ache. She pushed herself forward again, pulling closer inch by inch, until at last she was close enough and snagged Grayscale's tail.

"Gotcha!"

She used Grayscale's tail as leverage to pull forward and grab hold of Grayscale's body. Grayscale kicked Rainbow in the face as Rainbow tried to pull further up; Rainbow felt like she'd been smacked in the jaw by a runaway cart. She nearly lost her grip, but held on with everything she had.

Grayscale snarled. "Let go of me, Dash!" she shouted over the din of re-entry.

She twisted herself into a tight roll; Rainbow hung on for dear life as Grayscale's tail whipped back and forth through the spin. When that didn't work, Grayscale kicked her hooves back at Rainbow's face, but Rainbow twisted Grayscale's tail to avoid them.

 "Let go, dammit! You can't stop me by just going fast anymore! Anywhere we hit, the planet goes 'bang'!"

"I'm not gonna let you do this, Gray!" Rainbow shouted back.

"Fine. If you insist!" Grayscale swung around and wrapped her own hooves around Rainbow. "Then you can join me! More mass to add to my little world-cracking bullet!"

Rainbow was surprised at the sudden turn, and struggled to get out of Grayscale's hold. "We're not... going to destroy... *anything!*"

Rainbow fought with all her might to get out of Grayscale's deathgrip, but the other pegasus was too strong and too heavy. Her wings were locked against her body, her legs and head were positioned inconveniently to strike Grayscale and break the hold, and she could barely breathe.

The panic began to set in when she looked ahead to see just how close they were to the planet. She knew she had to do something, anything, to stop Grayscale from pulling off this crazy stunt. Even if they hit the ground, even if they were killed by the impact, she knew that she had to do whatever it took to prevent Grayscale from destroying the planet and killing everyone. From killing her friends.

To Rainbow's surprise, as she thought about making the ultimate sacrifice to ensure her friends survived, her body began to glow. Not just glow, but shine, so brightly in fact that the sheen began to overtake Grayscale's body as well. Then, an idea struck her: in her energy form, she had less mass; in this form, she wouldn't be able to destroy the planet. If Grayscale was enveloped in that form as well...

Maybe she and Grayscale would still hit the ground, and maybe the impact would kill them... but everypony and everything would survive. Her friends would survive.

Grayscale noticed the effect as well. "What are you doing?! Do you care so little about your life that you're willing to die with me?!" she shouted.

Rainbow glanced up at Grayscale laughed. "If giving up my life is what it takes to save my friends... then that's the price I'm willing to pay! I'm not like you, Gray!"

Grayscale continued dive towards the planet, even as her body began to glow with the same prismatic sheen as Rainbow. "You won't stop me, Dash! You won't—"

Rainbow heard a screeching blast as they tore through the atmosphere, and her vision filled with green as the planet's surface raced towards them. Then, everything went white.

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Rainbow opened her eyes, slowly at first; her head was pounding, and her vision was strained. Every inch of her body felt like it was on fire; it hurt just to think about moving. She

could taste blood in her mouth. She could feel the wind in her mane again, though it was a weak breeze that barely ruffled her mane. She stumbled to the side, realizing she was on solid ground, then tripped over an indent within a massive crater.

"Ow..." she muttered through a mouthful of dirt.

She spat out the undesirable stuff and rose to her hooves again. She glanced around her, and noticed she was surrounded on all sides by vast, green grasslands, minus the twenty-yard crater below her. It was nighttime, and she could clearly see the moon far above them. Directly above them, in fact. How long had it been since they left the islands? Well, she thought, at the very least, everything's still here.

A groan from below drew her attention. She turned to see Grayscale laying on her stomach in the crater, covered in dirt, bruises, and blood. She had landed hooves-first, so her boots had served their purpose and absorbed the entirety of the impact; neither her nor Rainbow had been killed by the blow that had created the giant crater they now resided in. Rainbow had to wonder what might have happened if her Hypersonic Rainboom hadn't worked, and Grayscale had been able to impact with more force.

Without a second thought, Rainbow climbed into the crater and shook Grayscale's side. "Hey... hey Gray!" she shouted. "Get up! C'mon, don't you die on me after I just finished pulling that off!"

Grayscale slowly opened her eyes, and glanced at Rainbow. Her expression remained dim, and she turned her glance skyward, ignoring Rainbow.

Rainbow snarled, and jostled Grayscale roughly. "Don't you ignore me, not after all we just went through! Look at me!" Grayscale remained silent, and did not shift her gaze. Rainbow jostled her again. "Look at me! I want some answers!"

Grayscale shook her head, and muttered, "You messed it all up. I really *am* nothing..."

"Yeah, I did. I wasn't about to let you blow up the planet, Gray," Rainbow scoffed. "What the hay is wrong with you, huh? Why were you even trying to do that? You're messed in the head, Gray, you know that?!"

"And I failed," Grayscale said, her voice barely audible, a colossal frown on her face. "Proof that I was right all along..."

Rainbow snorted. "Still harping on about that, huh? Are you trying to make me *feel bad*, Gray? You just tried to blow up the planet, and you want to make me *feel bad?*"

"Whatever." Grayscale rolled over so that her back was to Rainbow. "What do you care

about a nothing like me?”

"Be glad that I *do*," Rainbow snapped. "After everything you've done, after everything you've attempted to do, you don't deserve my sympathy or concern. You deserve to be punished for what you've done, just like Blackburn said. But most of all," Rainbow added, her mouth turning in a frown, "you deserve my pity."

"Pity... I don't even deserve that. I'm a failure. A nothing. What—"

"Shut up!" Rainbow snapped. "Listen to yourself! You're so filled with self-loathing and uncaring crud that you're willing to give up on life! You think you have it so bad that you're going to just kill yourself! What happened to the Grayscale I used to think was cool, huh?"

"She found out she was just a worthless copy of somepony else," Grayscale said in a flat monotone.

"So that's what all this is really about, huh? You're my clone, and you think that that makes you *worthless?* Any clone of mine would know they're more than that! No clone of mine would give up just because of something so stupid! They'd rise to the challenge! They'd try to prove themselves better!"

She offered her hoof to Grayscale to help her up. "Get up. Or are you just weak? Rise to the challenge, Gray!"

Grayscale snorted. "Leave me alone. We both know you're better than me, so why bother? Nothing matters anymore..."

Rainbow huffed. "For somepony that keeps telling me how 'nothing matters', you sure seemed to be dead set on beating me earlier."

Grayscale made to speak again, then stopped, her face pale. She turned to face Rainbow at last. "Wait... no... I... what?"

"Yeah, you heard me! I just told you how you're messed up in the head! You keep telling me nothing matters, but you were just all ready to blow up a planet to prove a point! What is it, huh? Do you care about beating me, or not? Because if you do, then get up! Get up, and we'll go again! I've still got plenty left in me, I'll take you on!"

"You... no, that's not... but..." Grayscale paused, and grit her teeth. "I... I don't care about beating you..."

Rainbow rolled her eyes and groaned. "By Celestia, you're getting on my nerves. So then, why do you want to do all this? If you don't care, why not just let it go, huh? Why not just

find some spot to lay down and just chill? No, you come after me! Why, huh?! Is it about what I said, proving you're better?"

"It's... it's because... because my sisters wanted to. I said I'd do my part, because—"

"Because you care what they think? What a load of horseapples!" Rainbow kicked Grayscale in the side again. "Stop lying to me! You just told me nothing matters again, and now you're trying to tell me your sisters suggested this whole crazy idea and you went along with it! Make up your dang mind!"

Grayscale paused. "I... I d-don't..."

"You don't even know what you want anymore, do you? Do you want to beat me, do you want to lay there and feel sorry for yourself, do you want to go find your sisters, *what?!*"

"Find... my sisters..."

"Yeah, I bet you would. Because My friends have probably beaten them, just like I beat you."

Grayscale paled.

Rainbow laughed. "So that's it, huh? See? I told you you were full of it. You care about them, don't you? That's why I don't think you could've gone through with this little game of yours." She snorted and shook her head. "Blowing up the planet. Man, here I thought you were really serious about that. What a waste of time."

"What... do you mean?" Grayscale asked, eyebrow raised.

"Well, if you destroyed the planet, you'd have killed them too. You weren't serious about all that, right? That was just you trying to goad me into messing up. Well it didn't work! I stopped you, because I'm better!"

Rainbow paused at Grayscale's blank expression, perplexed by the long silence. Grayscale's mouth was just barely moving, as though she was whispering the words to herself. Was she really thinking Rainbow's words over that intently? Rainbow frowned as the implications sunk in. Did she hit a nerve? Did Grayscale really care about her sisters, but... *not* realize her attack would have killed them too?

"Right? Gray?" she asked moments later. "Hello?"

Grayscale paled again. "I... no... wait, what—"

Grayscale suddenly collapsed to the ground, holding her head in her hooves and screaming in pain. She writhed around for a moment before the screaming finally stopped, and she lay completely still.

Rainbow took half a step back. "Uh... Gray?"

Grayscale shook in place and crumbled into a ball. Rainbow heard a sound that was all too familiar from years of being Fluttershy's friend, but it was not a sound she *ever* expected to hear out of Grayscale. She was crying. A lot.

"Gray, are you okay?"

"No! I'm not okay!" Grayscale suddenly wailed. "What was I thinking?! I... I could have killed them! Oh stars, what was I *thinking?!*"

Rainbow bit her lip. "Oh man... I... I didn't mean what I said. I wasn't trying to say—"

"Yes you did! And you're right!" Grayscale cried. She slammed her hoof on the ground, and to Rainbow's surprise, the dirt was barely even reacting. "You're right! Dammit, you're *right!* What the hell is wrong with me?!"

Rainbow tentatively reached out a hoof to touch Grayscale's shoulder. "Hey... uh—"

To her surprise, Grayscale sprung up and wrapped Rainbow in a hug, burying her face in Rainbow's chest and bawling her eyes out. Rainbow, on instinct, tucked her hoof around Grayscale to return the gesture in the most awkward way possible. Grayscale was so much bigger than her that it was hard to do.

"I got..." Grayscale sniffed loudly and wiped her nose with w hoof. "I g-got so focused on *nothing* that I f-f-forgot I have *something* that matters! I w-was so determined... to kill *you* that I c-could have killed *them!* What is *wrong* with me?!"

Grayscale sniffed loudly and pulled her face away from Rainbow to look her in the eyes. Her eyes were wide and red with tears. Rainbow suppressed a gasp; not only was seeing a pony like Grayscale crying a weird experience, but those *eyes*. Blackburn was right; Grayscale's eyes looked exactly like her own. It was extremely awkward to her to see Grayscale cry, and she didn't know why. Perhaps it was because Grayscale was *her*, and they shared some sort of connection? She knew she'd be embarrassed as all get out if anypony ever saw *her* cry.

"Hey... c'mon Gray, your weird plan wouldn't have worked anyway," Rainbow said, trying her best to comfort the other pegasus.

"But what if it did?!" Grayscale cried as she shook Rainbow. "W-what if it *did* work?! It's

n-not as impossible as it sounds, Dash! I c-c-could've done it!"

"Naw, c'mon, you totally... couldn't have," Rainbow said. She wasn't sure if she believed it or not, and knew she didn't sound convincing. "Look... I, uh... I only tried to stop you because you could have killed *yourself*. There's no way you could've—"

Grayscale held her head in her hooves, and stammered, "M-m-myself? Oh stars... if... if I d-died... I'd be leaving them all alone! W-what if they needed me?!" She gasped. "What if they n-need me now?!"

Grayscale abruptly broke the hug and took to the air.

Rainbow balked. "Whoa, Gray! What're you doing?! You can barely fly!"

"I've gotta find them!" Grayscale shouted. "I have to make sure they're okay! They're all I have left, and I *need* them to be okay!"

"Gray, wait!"

Grayscale bolted off into the distance with surprising speed. Rainbow took wing and made to follow, then decided against it. Grayscale wasn't looking to hurt anypony; she was worried about her sisters. Rainbow took a deep breath, and slowly glided off into the breeze, the only thought on her mind pretty much the same as what was on Grayscale's: *Are my friends okay?*

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Blackburn let out a heavy sigh as she looked out over the chain of skybound islands. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a tiny digital watch to check the time. She was growing tired of waiting for Rainbow Dash to arrive, tired of assuring Fluttershy that her friend was okay. Blackburn wasn't worried; no, she knew full well that Rainbow would be able to surpass the other pegasus. There were a few moments that she and Fluttershy had been concerned, sure. An extremely loud explosion about four hours ago, for example, which came just seconds before Blackburn noticed Tick Tock's map changing to reflect the complete disappearance of one of the islands.

Blackburn, however, had remained focused on her task, despite Fluttershy's objections and protests. After many hours of searching, they'd managed to find the machine that actually constructed obidium, and with it, made enough to send with the knights on their way to Zeb'ra'den. She knew in her heart that Lockwood would be there to receive it.

The other reason she wasn't worried was because of Tick Tock's map. Rainbow's dot was not only still on the map, but moving back towards the islands. The dot had disappeared a

few hours ago, about the same time that one island had disappeared, but had reappeared only a few minutes ago. Reappeared a few hundred miles away in the middle of the grasslands to the south, to be sure, but reappeared nonetheless.

A dull clank to Blackburn's side made her turn her head.

"Is she almost here?" Fluttershy asked.

Blackburn was still of the opinion that Fluttershy looked ridiculous in the suit of Harmony Guard armor that she'd been loaned, courtesy of Dame Marshmallow herself. The color was okay, but even though Marshmallow and Fluttershy were the same size and logically the armor should've fit snuggly, it somehow seemed too big. The helmet, in particular, kept dipping over Fluttershy's eyes, forcing her to lift the visor to see.

"At rate of travel, will be here in minutes," Blackburn answered. She stroked her chin in thought. "She is moving faster than usual."

Fluttershy sighed. "I'm glad she's okay. Thank you for staying here with me to wait. I know you could have left with the knights—"

"To see Lockwood sooner, yes." Blackburn shook her head. "Very important to see him... but must ensure safety of you and Rainbow. Made promise; will keep it."

A minute passed. And another. And another. Several minutes later, Blackburn and Fluttershy noticed a light on the horizon. The light grew brighter as it drew closer; they knew what, or more accurately, who, it was. Fluttershy anxiously walked in place, and continued to do so until at last Rainbow burst through the air over their heads, at which point she gasped in awe.

Rainbow had come to almost a complete stop just above them, shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow.

"Hey down there!" Rainbow called as she glided down, her prismatic sheen vanishing as she descended. She touched down just in front of Blackburn and Fluttershy and removed her soot-coated goggles; Blackburn noticed that she looked as though she'd take quite a beating, and her clothes were littered with both burn marks and signs of frost damage. "Nice digs, Fluttershy. You two okay?"

Blackburn nodded. "Experienced no further troubles since your departure. Fluttershy would agree; fear not, she is uninjured."

Fluttershy peeked her head out from the bush she'd used as shelter. "Oh... um, yes. We're just... f-fine. M-mostly."

"Good, glad to hear it." Rainbow looked between the two and raised an eyebrow. Her mouth curled in a small grin. "You two... uh, seem to be getting on a bit better. I honestly didn't expect to have *both* of you waiting for me. What gives? Did you two—"

"Make amends, yes," Blackburn said. She glanced at Fluttershy and gave the other pegasus a friendly nod. "Forgive and forget, good policy with subject matter. Would gain nothing from antagonistic relationship, hence why tried to make amends earlier. Fluttershy's eyes opened during fight with Havocwing. Realized who she was emulating. Just like—"

"Just like you with Grayscale," Fluttershy completed with a smile. "I'm... s-sorry, Rainbow. I've b-been a real j-j-jerk lately... and—"

Rainbow laughed. "Don't worry about it, Shy. I know you didn't mean it. You're right, you really *were* acting just like that idiot. Well, minus all the swearing. So, you really fought Havocwing, huh?" She raised her hoof to give Fluttershy a hoofbump. "Way to go! I never knew you had it in you. How'd you take care of that hothead?"

Fluttershy squeaked and muttered something under her breath, though she did hesitantly hoofbump Rainbow back.

"Say again, Shy?" Rainbow asked, leaning forward.

Blackburn interjected, "She said she handled Havocwing... at a cost."

Fluttershy frowned and gestured towards her bracelet, cracked orb and all. "Ophanim's gone, Rainbow..."

"Oh? Oh.... oh geez..." Rainbow frowned and put her hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy... are you gonna be—"

"I'll be alright," Fluttershy interrupted, shaking her head. She put her hoof on Rainbow's and gave her friend a small, kind smile. "It hurts, but... but I'll be okay... trust me. Thank you, though..."

"Are you sure?

Fluttershy nodded. "I'll m-miss him... I'll miss him terribly, but... b-but I know he did not die in vain. He saved me... and helped me see w-what I was becoming." She wiped a tear from her eye. "Thank you, Rainbow... for asking."

"That's what friends are for, Shy. If you need anything... you tell me, okay?" Rainbow turned to Blackburn. "Well... did we at least—"

"Obidium is en route to Zeb'ra'den," Blackburn completed. "Dame Marshmallow taking care of transport. Intended to follow immediately after your return; have decided otherwise. You need medical attention."

Rainbow snorted in amusement and flexed her wings, though it was clear she did so with some strain. Blackburn frowned; Rainbow had flown all that distance with injured wings? "Ha! Good one, Your Majesty. I'll be fine. Let's just get going. I've taken harsher beatings than this, trust me. This is foal's play."

Blackburn shook her head. "Insist upon it. Your friends would appreciate gesture, at any rate. Ulterior motive: also curious about information gleaned in regards to one of my captains. Will seek answers while you are given treatment. Should not take long."

"Oh come off it. Look—"

"Please, Rainbow?" Fluttershy pleaded. "You d-don't look so good. I... I don't w-want anything to happen to you..."

Rainbow sighed, then shrugged. "Right, right, whatever you say. Sheesh, guilt me into getting bandaged up, why don't you? Where we headed then? Utopia's too far to be worth—"

"Newhaven," Blackburn said pointing off to the southeast. "Not far from here. Origin point of knight detachment sent here to aid us. Site of Hope's Point embassy, can get assistance there." She strode to the edge of the island and spread her wings. "Come," she added, with a tilt of her head.

The trio took wing and immediately set off to the southeast.

Newhaven was only an hour's flight from the islands, and they arrived before it was too late in the evening. Blackburn led the trio straight to the Hope's Point embassy, the third-largest building in the port city. She'd always found Newhaven's old-fashioned architecture quaint, and as such tried to show her support to the city which kept their port neutral by constructing their embassy with the same style.

The embassy was a circular building made of dark red bricks, with wood used as further support. The wood had been painted dark gold to match the Hope's Point colors. The roof was dome-shaped and made of gold-painted wood as well, with a great flag bearing the Hope's Point emblem at the top. The grounds were mostly empty, only dotted by a few guards and workers here and there. From up here, it was easy to see the elaborate patterns purposefully set into the cobblestone walkways.

Despite the open-air grounds, Blackburn paid all of the same attentions to protocol and decency expected of anypony and landed in front of the large iron gates. The jaw of the armed

and armored guard stationed there could not have dropped faster if it weighed a ton.

"Y-Y-Your M-Majesty!" He straightened up in a brisk salute. "W-w-what are you—"

Blackburn nodded in greeting and gestured for the soldier to drop his salute. "At ease, soldier. Making a brief visit, on a strict time limit."

"Of course, ma'am! Right away ma'am!"

The guard tapped a button on the small console beside the gate, and the large iron bars slid open to allow Blackburn and her entourage inside. While the embassy grounds were mostly empty, the few guards and workers still working all dropped what they were doing to bow in Blackburn's presence immediately. Blackburn nodded to each and every one.

In a panicked fluster, an elderly, suit-wearing green earth pony stallion rushed out of the front door to the building before the trio of pegasi had even made it halfway across the grounds. How such an old pony could move so fast was always a surprise to Blackburn, and a welcome one as well. He was followed by a young mare with a hot pink coat and a fiery red mane, wearing a suit much like the stallion was, as well as a skirt. Blackburn was curious; she'd never seen the mare before and was usually always on the up-and-up on new additions to her staff.

"Your Majesty!" the stallion greeted, bowing in unison with the mare at his side. "What a surprise at this late hour! We were not expecting—"

"Not a formal visit, Concord," Blackburn dismissed as they continued towards the building.

They reached the door, and the stallion opened it graciously for all the mares in the group before following them inside. The interior of the embassy was not quite as old-fashioned as the outside; while the architecture was the same, several displays of modern techno-magic were prominently featured around the walls. The group moved past swiftly-bowing ponies, towards the large doors at the far end of the central hall.

Blackburn glanced at the mare that was walking at Concord's side, whose nose was still buried in a datapad and hadn't glanced towards Blackburn more than once or twice. "The newcomer is diligent. Hmmm... finally training your replacement."

Concord laughed and nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty! You never cease to amaze me. It only took me a decade, but I've *finally* found somepony that I trust with taking up the mantle as your ambassador."

"Have known you for a long time, Concord. Will be sad to see you go." Blackburn looked over the mare once again. "Introduce me."

Concord patted the pink mare on the shoulder. "This is Shroud, Your Highness. Just arrived from Pandemonium City itself, and has the most impressive résumé I've seen in years. She used to work in Pandora Tower itself, can you believe it? And she has an incredible understanding of every filing procedure, averages one hundred words per minute—"

"Sold me. Pandora Tower well-known for prestigious bureaucratic affairs. Trust you to pick an excellent replacement, Concord. But, as said, not a formal visit." Blackburn gestured to Rainbow. "Associate here requires treatment."

Concord saluted. "Right away, Your Highness." He turned to Shroud and nodded. "Shroud, if you would make a call please?"

Shroud nodded back and pushed a few buttons on the datapad she was carrying in her hoof. "Medical personnel are already en route, Ambassador Concord."

"She's been picking it all up so fast," Concord said with a smile. "Only been here a day and she's already learned almost every single procedure we have. Can you believe she used to just be some fat business mogul's *secretary?* What a waste of talent!"

"Glad to hear it. Will need capable replacement when you retire. You can stop selling her; as said, already sold."

"Forgive me, Your Highness, but I'm just so surprised that there's somepony out there able to keep up with me. I can't help it! Tell her how giddy I've been, Shroud."

"Extraordinarily giddy, sir." Shroud looked up from her datapad and glanced at Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy. She raised an eyebrow. "Huh..."

"Huh?" Concord blinked. "Yes, Shroud? Something the matter?"

"You two... look familiar," Shroud said. "Have we met?"

Rainbow and Fluttershy shared glances. "Uh... you don't look familiar," Rainbow said sheepishly. "Sorry, I don't really remember much about any ponies we saw in that city. Maybe you saw us on some sort of form or something? We did a lot of that stuff in a really short time."

"Yeah, that's probably it. My boss was the CEO of the NPRD, so I might've passed through your forms at some point."

"Making his secretary do the grunt work like that... hmph!" Concord shook his head in disgust. "To be able to keep track of everything in a city that size, you truly *must* have been a prodigy. All the happier to have you, Shroud."

"Thank you, sir."

Blackburn interjected with a loud snort. "If praise-slinging is complete, would like to redirect topic to purpose of visit: seeking answers. Heard Captain Auroran was here earlier in the week; Asteroid was not on departure list this week. Explain."

"The Asteroid... ah yes, Double Time cataloged its arrival." Concord quirked an eyebrow. "Yes, you're right, that was an odd situation. It was an emergency deployment, according to Captain Auroran himself. He arrived with some members of the Harmony Guard that were in Hope's Point. Wouldn't be the first time—"

"A dupe. Had no Harmony Guard knights on my registry," Blackburn said. She hummed, distraught by the information. "Was a 'Starlight Shadow' amongst them?"

Concord tapped his chin. "Starlight Shadow... ah! Yes, Your Highness. She and four of the others were entry-level recruits serving under a Dame Curaçao."

Rainbow sputtered. "What?! *You* guys brought them here?! What's wrong with your pilots that they'd bring those six maniacs over here?!"

"Calm yourself, Rainbow Dash," Blackburn said. "Likely threatened to kill more ponies if they were not granted passage. Will need to return to city soon to determine casualties. Most distressing..." she added with a sigh.

Blackburn could not shake the thought that perhaps she had made a mistake in agreeing to assist the Elements of Harmony in returning home. Ever since she had, she'd lost so much. In less than a week, more damage had been done to her city than had been since her father's rule. Were these six ponies really *that* magnetic to strange and dangerous occurrences?

"Casualties, Your Majesty?" Concord asked, drawing Blackburn from her reverie. "Threats? Were those six not—"

"No, not with the Harmony Guard at all. A clever ruse, though, and understand the confusion. The Curaçao mare speaks Romantique as fluently as any knight, if not moreso." Blackburn sighed again. "Very... unfortunate. Have lost many ponies in such a short time. Gadget... Crossfire... Briarthorn..."

Concord paled. "Gadget and Crossfire are... g-gone? No... they can't be."

"Perished en route when Briarthorn's Thunder crashed. Briarthorn himself killed prior to crash, fending off enemy stowaway."

"Oh... Your Majesty, I am sorry to hear this news. Gadget and Crossfire were valued allies and friends. I will see to it a proper memorial is arranged."

Blackburn paused a moment, then snorted. "You are forgetting somepony, Concord. No sympathy for Briarthorn? Know he was... eccentric; still expect respect to be given due. Expect... better—" She continued walking for a moment, then stopped and turned to Concord, who raised an eyebrow at her accusing glance. Her eyes widened. "*Where is he?*"