

Chapter IV

Flying Dice

A few hours after daybreak, the weary ponies trod along a mossy valley, overgrown with ferns and vines, between the looming walls of ruined buildings, where patches of grey stone were occasionally visible. The flesh of the new world covered the bones of the old. Yet there were those who worked to drive the jungle out, to restore the grandeur of Fillydelphia. A column of thick black smoke rose from a point along the avenue the caravan was travelling, no more than ten or twelve minutes away. A shift in the breezes that whispered through the verdant canyons brought the harsh, ashy haze blowing through their path, filling the air with a nauseating odor.

Bright Horizon wrinkled his nose, frowning at the stench. It seemed familiar, yet not. He knew the smell of burning vegetation; anypony who had travelled to New Fillydelphia did, and there was more in that fire than trees and moss.

Blaze drifted over from her position farther up her column, asking the same question that was coursing through his own mind, “Bri, d’you smell something that doesn’t quite fit?”

“Exactly what I was going to ask you, Eve. Something is wrong, best keep our eyes sharp, and noses not.”

This smoke reeks of something, but for the life of me... I could swear that it almost smells sweet!

By this time, the wagons had gained enough ground for the source of the fire to be visible. A squad of New Fillydelphians wearing jungle-clearing flamethrowers was in the process of torching a moderately intact apartment block, and were already well into the task of burning out the abnormal plant life. This was the only reliable way to push back against the jungle: burn it out, and keep burning it long enough for unicorns to put suppression fields in place to prevent it from growing back. It was a slow process: the spells could cover no more than a city block, and could take weeks for a team of unicorns to cast, even for smaller areas. Smaller areas of coverage were necessary, as well, as the spells occasionally collapsed, allowing months or years of blocked potential growth to burst forth in seconds, destroying everything in the area formerly covered by the spell. Even with weekly inspections and reinforcement of failing spells, accidents still happen, and this protocol minimized the damage of collapses.

What that didn't explain was why these ponies were out here in the wilds, clearing a building far from the recovered district, with nary a unicorn technician in sight. They had guards, of course, a dozen ponies armed and armored from the great foundries and smithies of the industrial district.

The world has a way of making such things emphatically clear, often as disturbingly as possible. For Bright, the moment of clarity in this situation came when the burning filly jumped, screaming, from a fourth story window. She landed on the mossy pavement with an audible crack, and her shrieks of agony redoubled as she lay burning, unable to stand. One of the guards casually strode over to the foal, and took her head off with a clean swipe of her sword.

As Bright reeled in horror, he could hear Greyshanks talking to one of the guards, who had approached their caravan, "I can't say I like the sight, but one cargo lost to thieving savages is too many. Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"G-Goddesses preserve them..."

Bright glanced up at Blaze, who was staring at the scene with disgust written across her face. She glanced at him, he returned her gaze. They nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, Bright saw Softhooves and Bluebottle sharing the same sort of wordless agreement. Out of the other, he saw that one of their companions had already acted. The zebra, whose name he still did not know, was standing over the bodies of the guard and their former employer, their heads resting at abnormal angles. She charged at one of the ponies carrying a flamethrower, who turned in surprise as her hoof caught him in the throat, crushing his windpipe. She turned to another, preparing another strike. Too slowly. A jet of liquid fire washed over the striped foreigner, coating her in a wreath of flames. As she burned, she rushed forward, drawing a curved dagger from her vest, slashing a deep wound into the Fillydelphian's throat even as she collapsed under the immense pain and heat.

In those few moments, Blaze had taken to the air, and rained a hail of bolts onto a trio of guards who sheltered behind a collapsed tree, chipping pieces of soft, waterlogged wood away from the upper face of the trunk. She was interrupted by one of the Fillydelphians' two pegasi, who swooped down, sword clashing against barding, as Blaze loaded a new clip of bolts into her crossbow's integrated magazine. As the other pegasus circled around, Blaze flipped the locks on her own blade, extending it and securing it in place. She accelerated upward, the wind of her passage sweeping her

mane out behind her. The two pegasi met above the rooftops, striking at each other as they passed. The Fillydelphian's sword struck against the metal discs of Blaze's barding, while her own found flesh at the join of the other pegasus' foreleg.

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Bright saw little of this, as he was rather busy hiding around a corner while one of the Fillydelphians fanned the tongue of her flamethrower across the opposite side of it, and along the street, as she slowly moved around toward an angle from which she could see him. Gripping his crossbow tightly, he popped around the corner, squeezed his jaws, and ducked back. The heavy bolt pierced the tank on the mare's back, striking sparks. The refined fuel within caught, detonating with a low, muffled report. Bright slung his crossbow, drawing his sword as he galloped past the smoldering remains toward an armored guard standing over the corpse of one of the colts who had joined up in Ponyville.

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Softhooves had cast her illusion the moment the zebra had begun to move, and was now creeping towards one of the surviving flamethrower carriers, who was sweeping the wand back and forth, letting off bursts of flame nearly at random. The stallion knew she was here, but had no idea where. Unfortunately for him.

I would be sorry about this, but you deserve worse.

One of her dirks stabbed upward, piercing through his jaw, the roof of his mouth, and into his brain. She withdrew it, shaking her telekinetic field a bit to fling off the streaks of blood. She quickly cut the straps holding the tank to the stallion's body, lifting it and the wand ahead of her as she approached a fallen tree, behind which three guards were hiding, taking potshots at the dueling pegasi. A smaller glow enveloped the lever on the handle of the wand, cloaking the armored ponies in a fog of liquid fire. Sharp crackles started up; fat burning in the intense heat. Softhooves cut her telekinetic grip on the flamethrower, dropping it in revulsion.

Killing is wrong, but some things are just evil. Th-this is horrible. They don't deserve justice for this. They deserve death. Killing somepony who is evil is almost like doing something good, right?

Right?

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Bluebottle hovered over the last remaining flamethrower-wielding Fillydelphian, watching as the mare jumped, trying to give enough of a boost to the jet of flame to reach the little pegasus. Lingering anger clawed at the edges of her mind, mixing with fresh rage as she glanced back at the burning building, thinking of the dead and dying who were still within. She drew a small vial from her vest, aimed carefully, and dropped it. The glass shattered against the round metal of the fuel tank, the acid eating through the steel as though it were flesh, releasing the pressurized liquid in a spray that arced up, coming into contact with the jet of flame. The fire raced down along the new path, igniting the tank. After the drop in pressure, there was no explosion. Rather, the burning fuel continued to leak out onto the mare, setting her coat alight as she scrambled to remove the harness. The mare felt a sudden prick in her foreleg, which disappeared under the wave of numbness that swept through her body. She collapsed to the ground, unable to support her weight with unresponsive limbs as the fire continued to spread. Bluebottle tucked the blowpipe back into its pocket as she watched the Fillydelphian burn.

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Blaze watched the pegasus fall, limp from blood loss, the body crashing down onto the mossy pavement with a sickening crunch. Turning away, she noticed a small shape rapidly accelerating away: the other Fillydelphian pegasus. Gliding down to the others, who had gathered between the wagons and the burning building, she shouted, "We need to move, everypony, and fast! One of them got away!"

Bluebottle responded, "We should head west, try to lose ourselves in the jungle."

Bright noted something, and interjected, "It may be too late to run. Look to the north, everypony."

Each of the four stared at the bizarre sight skimming over the rooftops; a wooden construction, held aloft by canvas sails and propelled by rotating wooden blades. It resembled some of the smaller sailing ships that were common along the coasts, save that its sails were horizontal rather than vertical, and spread along three pairs of wings which sprouted from the vessel's sides. At the moment, the whole ship was enveloped by a blue glow, akin to that of a unicorn's telekinetic field, but on a much larger scale, moving it forward at high speeds. In the distance, a quartet of pegasi was visible,

following it. As it neared, the ponies on the ground backed toward each other, readying weapons.

A head poked over the side, hollering down at them, "You ponies wouldn't happen to be looking for work, would you? We're willing to offer you a very nice contract, with bonus, and transport out of here. Interested?"

The four shared a dubious look, and Blaze began, "I don't like the looks of this, but we don't have a whole lot of choice. Those pegasi are wearing Fillydelphian colors. They might just be here coincidentally, but even so, that one that got away will have them sending out patrols inside the hour."

Bluebottle added, "I concur, and if by chance conditions should degrade, we can always, ah, "jump ship", though I am not entirely certain if that phrase would be appropriate here," suiting actions to words as she hooked her forelegs around Softhooves', lifting her toward the hovering airship.

Blaze quickly lifted Bright, hoping that her wings would be able to support the both of them for the short vertical flight. As she landed on the smooth deck, she glanced up, looking over the stallion that had called to them. He was a unicorn, with an amber coat and white mane, rather sloppily groomed. On his flank was a crystalline cog, flanked by a hammer and wrench. She met his orange eyes as he launched into a rapid delivery of conditions.

"We're prepared to offer, ah, 150 bits per week for the duration of employment, which is to say, oh, until we find what we're looking for. Additional bonus of, hmm, ten percent of any and all treasures, lost artifacts, historical documents and, oh, ancient ruins discovered in the course of employment. Duties are quite, ah, simple: you four will be assisting us in exploration, fending off hostile ponies and, ah, wildlife, and- say, do you gamble," he inquired, turning to Bright as he noticed his cutie mark.

"Ha, no. I learned that at a very young age, thankfully."

"Oh, that *is* unfortunate, so to speak. I was prepared to offer a 50 bit bonus per week to anypony who would dice with me. What a shame."

"Oh, I'm not opposed to it, so long as there are no wagers involved... I'm sorry; we haven't been introduced, have we?"

“Ah, of course, how rude of me. I am, ah, Rusty Bolt, the best mechanic in, ah, all of Equestria. And, ah, the owner, so to speak, of this flying barn. Not to criticize my own work, but I didn’t, ah, have much time to add any charm to the thing. It works though, I was right about that. And those, ah, talentless hacks decided that we should only get half of the commission. So we raided their treasury and stole this beauty of mine back from them, with the unfortunate, yet entirely, ah, predictable effect of attracting the attention of the city watch. This is, ah, where you come in. I am, ah, not exactly what one would call a pony of violence, and Safflower is far too busy in her capacity as captain and crew to fight them off. So what do you say?”

Bluebottle quickly responded with a simple statement, “250 bits.”

“Excuse me, filly, but, ah, that seems a bit much. 175.”

“You just emptied the treasury of what sounds very much like a branch of the Manehattan Central Bank, therefore you have bits to spare. 240.”

“You’re going to be protecting us, not saving the world from some unspeakable evil. 190.”

“It looks like your friends are getting closer, and something tells me that they’ll be much more interested in you. 225.”

“We have much swifter wings than you. I think they would be more likely to pursue prey they are capable of catching. 210.”

“Deal.”

The two nodded in agreement with hints of mutual respect. While Bright and Softhooves watched the proceedings with amused expressions, Blaze turned her attention to the pegasus mare on the raised deck aft of where they stood, who was busily working levers and wheels within a small, windowed room. As she moved, the wings shifted, tilting to follow the invisible currents in the air, while the propellers continued to spin at incredible speed. The telekinetic glow, however, had begun to fluctuate, and the mare tapped impatiently on the frame of her control room, startling their new employer, who suddenly turned, shouting a hasty apology as he headed below the deck.

Blaze hurried up the steps to the raised deck, watching from the doorway as the bright red mare continued to work the controls, her short mane following her swift movements

almost like a contrail.

“Mhdda nmt,” she asked, through a mouthful of wood and rubber, as she cranked a small wheel through a quarter turn.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“I said, what do ye want? If that scatterbrain hired ye, then get bows and warn off those fools that’re following us.”

“Wher-“

“Aft cabin, just below us. Check the cabinet to the left o’ the door.”

“Thank y-“

“Get going, then, I don’t have time for ye right now.”

As Blaze hovered down to the main deck, she beckoned to the others, opening the small door into the cabin, turning to the cabinet. It was already ajar, and she could see a number of crossbows of different sizes, one of which had a sort of clamp attached to the underside of the main shaft. For herself, she removed a medium-sized single shot bow to compliment her own. As she trotted out of the room, she noticed Bright remove the heavy bow, hoisting it over his shoulder to help support the weight. She flew to the edge of the aft deck and put her forehoof into the brace bolted to the front of the bow as she worked the crank with her mouth, drawing the string. She opened the satchel which had been looped around the stock of the bow, slotted a bolt into place, and braced herself against the railing. A heavy thud shook the railing as Bright dropped his own selection into place, steadying it with his forehooves as Softhooves focused on the clamp, loosening it to allow the arms to drop around the sides of the railing, and then quickly tightening them to secure it in place. Bright removed a clip of bolts from a similar satchel, and slotted it into the heavy bow’s integrated magazine. In some ways, it was similar to Blaze’s own, albeit much larger.

Softhooves stood next to Bright, concentrating her magic on the crank, while he shifted his aim with both hooves. Bluebottle was further to the left, busily dipping the tips of her bolts into a beaker filled with some sort of thick, brown ooze. The four pegasi continued to approach, perhaps three minutes away at their current pace. Another, larger group was visible on the horizon, moving much more rapidly.

Blaze noted, "Looks like the new arrivals stripped their armor to catch up. They might reach us before we can get rid of these four. Look, I know I don't like killing other ponies much. By the Goddesses, I don't think *any* of us do. But this is us or them, and we all saw what they were capable of back on the ground. I'm not judging, per se, but I'd rather we don't find out if they've all become that bad."

Bluebottle snorted derisively, "Blaze, you may still have charitable feelings for murderers, but I don't intend to let these monsters anywhere Sof- uh, us."

Bright concurred, "I agree. Normally I'd agree with you, Blaze, but at this point we have absolutely no reason to go easy on these ponies. Let's just disable them as quickly as possible. If they die, I'm not going to feel particularly bad, if the soldiers of New Fillydelphia have reduced themselves to burning ponies alive."

Character Profiles:

+ Evening Blaze, known as Blaze (or Eve, to Bright Horizon). She is a pegasus mare, approximately 19 years old. She has a cyan coat and royal blue mane. Her cutie mark is a twisting flame in orange and yellow. Literally, this represents her ability with fire and light. If she lived in a time where pegasi possessed their normal range of control over the environment, she would be able to affect forest fires and lava flows to a greater degree than normal, but under current conditions this basically means that she is adept at starting fires, even with materials she is not familiar with. Metaphorically, it is representative of her optimistic nature: she is willing to see sparks of good will and kindness in everypony, and, although she is not a pacifist by any means, regrets harming others, as she believes that nopony is entirely beyond redemption. She has lived with Bright Horizon for a little over six years, and the two are close friends.

+ Bright Horizon, known as Bright (or Bri, to Evening Blaze). He is an earth pony stallion, approximately 25 years old. He has a dark green coat and yellow mane. His cutie mark is a trio of yellow dice tumbling in the air. Initially, he believed that this indicated a talent for gambling, but was swiftly cured of that misconception upon attempting to dice with a merchant and losing what little saving he had as a colt. In fact, this is an indicator of his ability to succeed in risky situations by acting without planning. He is at his finest in an unpredictable scenario, rolling with events as they occur. In

short, his talent is risk-taking. He has lived with Evening Blaze for a little over six years, and the two are close friends.

+ Softhooves (known as Softy to Bluebottle) is a unicorn filly, approximately 15 years old. She has a light grey coat and a dark grey mane. Her cutie mark is a small blue cone with a blue sphere balanced on the tip, orbited by a trio of smaller spheres in purple. This indicates her exceptional control and precision, over her body, mind, and magic. She can move silently, and has perfected a combination of original and rarely used illusions to make herself into a perfect thief, spy, or assassin. Her remarkable control over her telekinesis allows her to control dozens of small objects at once, and to maintain heightened control over objects in her magical grasp. However, she only possesses an average level of magical strength, and is unable to lift heavy objects or perform great feats of magical strength, relying instead upon dexterity and efficient use of her magic to accomplish goals. She is shy, and somewhat emotionally detached, particularly in combat, as she detests killing, and only does so to please Bluebottle or protect herself and her friends.

+ Bluebottle is a pegasus filly, approximately 14 years old. She has a blue coat and light green mane. Her cutie mark is a pair of crossed vials, one filled with a yellow fluid, the other with a pink fluid. She originally gained her cutie mark while studying herblore under her mother, but quickly put her talent to use devising poisons, acids, and stimulants after leaving home. She occasionally shifts in manner of speech, body language, and action to cope with extreme levels of stress. Despite being somewhat domineering, she was well-raised and deeply caring towards Softhooves.

+ Rusty Bolt is a unicorn stallion, approximately 23 years old. He has an amber coat and white mane. His cutie mark is a crystalline cog flanked by a hammer and wrench. This is representative both of his talents as an engineer and of his unusual talent for enchantment, particularly in relation to inanimate objects. He is the designer of the prototype airship *Goddesses' Grace*, and constructed the engine and control system himself, while the hull was assembled by a team of carpenters hired for the task. Despite his sloppy personal habits and seemingly carefree attitude, he is a driven businesspony, with little regard for convention, and decided that the appropriate response to his fee for constructing the *Grace* being halved was to empty the vaults of the contractee, making off with hundreds of thousands of bits and the completed airship. He and Safflower have worked as business partners and friends for five years, and the two trust each other completely.

+ Safflower is a pegasus mare, approximately 31 years old. She has an indigo coat and

light green mane. Her cutie mark is a white feather encircled by multiple yellow and black arrows. She has an incredible sense for air currents, to such a degree that she can sense and manipulate them to a greater degree in the current age than many pegasi could before the loss of their environmental control. However this is still temporary, and shifts she effects in local airflow tend to revert after several seconds. Nevertheless, this gives her exceptional personal agility, and allows her to fly the *Grace* by feel, without the need for spotters to identify ideal vectors. She and Rusty Bolt have worked as business partners and friends for five years, and the two trust each other completely.

A/N: I'd like to apologize for how long it took to get this out, but I had some issues with the later part of Chapter III. However, I've decided to put aside any possible edits to that until after the conclusion of the fiction proper. I've been busy with several other things as well, and I'll attempt to get back into a more reasonable writing schedule.

That said, we're drawing very near to the exposition chapter, and the start of the plot proper. Oh, and there are your flamethrowers. One promise down, several more to go.
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