

Author's Note: Many thanks to the fans that submitted Voltage Surge, Spark Plug, Gadget, and Crossfire. They were all fun to work with and I enjoyed tweaking them each to have their own individualities and everything so that they could be made more memorable.

*Also! A big welcome to our newest editor addition, **Bigdog117**, who is assisting with grammar and tone. He's been working with us since Chapter Twenty-Six, and we are in the process of going over all previous chapters to correct issues in those as well.*

CRISIS: Equestria

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Invasion

"Urggh... Rarity, when we get home, remind me to make an addendum to that letter I'd planned on writing to the Princess." Twilight grumbled and held the side of her head with her hooves. Her eyes were still slightly bloodshot, and even with her tall, pointed hat in place it could be seen that her mane drooped with sweat. "Scratch that. Remind me to write a treatise."

Rarity smiled lightly and took a sip of her coffee, not a single hair out of place on her own spectacularly-styled mane. "Why certainly, dear. What ever will it say, I wonder?"

Twilight rubbed her temples and grumbled, "I was thinking of starting with, 'Dear Princess Celestia: Drinking is fun, but hangovers are the pits'. Does that sound like a good title? I think it sounds like a good title."

Tick Tock patted Twilight gently on the back and helped straighten the other unicorn's hat with her magic. "Don't you worry, Twilight, this will all be over soon enough. There's a first time for everything, they say, and I think your very first hangover should be treated with no small amount of fanfare! Look at it this way: you didn't do anything enormously stupid, and thanks to yours truly, you at least ended up in your proper sleeping place. Why, I fondly remember *my* first hangover. Woke up in my bloody bathtub, covered in toothpaste and shampoo. At least I smelt like lavender and mint for the next three days."

The hotel dining room waiter, a short, gray-coated, blonde-maned unicorn stallion wearing a smart tuxedo, brought over a tray loaded with mugs of complimentary black coffee and one small cup of tea, and set them all out on the table. This happened to be the third tray brought to this table alone, which was strangely the only one in the entire dining room still occupied.

"If that is all, ladies, I believe I must be going," the waiter stated in a cordial tone, "I've got to beat the rush. Best of luck to you, don't dilly-dally now. Cheerio."

"Oh... thank you?" Rarity blinked as the stallion hurried past them and out the dining room doors. "Well now, that certainly was odd, and I don't see a replacement waiter either."

“Well if we need any more coffee I’m sure we can get some at the palace,” Twilight mumbled. She eagerly took her newest cup and chugged it down in three very loud gulps, then exhaled loudly and wiped her mouth with her napkin. “Oh thank goodness... thank *goodness* that coffee exists in this universe. I know I say that after every cup, but blast it if I’m not jumping for joy inside right now.”

Tick Tock chuckled, “A real coffee pony, are you? I’m more of a tea pony myself. Haven’t had a good cuppa in a week.” She gingerly took a sip of her cup, smiling in appreciation after she swallowed. “Ah... and they’ve got good stuff here too. Damn fine town, this is. Good beer, good tea, good eating. No wonder everypony wants to come all the way out here, eh? Maybe I should think about finding a flat out here.”

“The coffee ain’t half bad neither,” Applejack noted, drinking hers more slowly and grinning with every sip, “Heckuva lot better’n what they served back in the city. This here tastes like genuine brew, not none o’ that there Dolor stuff. I’ll admit that Miss Cookie Dough did a fine job at makin’ that stuff taste good, but coffee’s somethin’ special. Ain’t nothin’ compares ta what mah Granny Smith makes, but dang if this ain’t almost as good.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Rainbow chuckled, taking another sip of her own mug, “Better than the stuff I’ve got at home, that’s for sure.”

“Then again, you usually drink the Cakes’ stuff,” Pinkie added with a playful grin, “I’ve never heard you complain about *their* coffee.” She took a sip of her own and frowned. “My only complaint is, this needs more sugar.”

Tick Tock looked around the room in curiosity, her mouth quirked as she tried to figure out why they were now literally the only ponies in the room. She turned towards the dining room door expectantly. “Hmm... Briarthorn is running late. Very late. He should’ve been here an hour ago to take us to lunch before we went to see the Queen. I don’t know how much longer those waffles are going to last, good as they were.”

“Speaking of Briarthorn, he’s probably just recovering like the rest of us,” Rainbow chortled, “O! Applejack here drank him straight under the table, like a pro! We still owe you big for that one, AJ. Me and Tick Tock, I mean.” She shuddered a little. “Oh man, just thinking about what that bozo said...”

“T’ain’t nothin’ at all, Dash,” Applejack smiled, “This here headache was worth the look on everypony’s faces, I tell ya. Only thing that would’ve made me happier is if he had ta do a request from y’all ‘n Tick Tock too, seein’ as y’all were on the winnin’ team an’ all. We’d’ve made ‘im take us all ta see the Queen, an’ I think maybe he’d hafta do it while wearin’ a frilly pink dress, an’ he’d hafta talk the rest o’ the day in rhyme, or somethin’. Make him think twice about tryin’ ta get me... ta...” She trailed off and hastily averted her eyes from Flathoof, who was

seated next to her.

“That last one sounds too easy for him. He rhymes half the time anyway,” Tick Tock chuckled, “Maybe he’d have to go a *whole day* without flirting with *anypony*. Period. Though then again, I suppose there would’ve been a rule against asking for impossible tasks like that. May as well ask the bloke to eat the bloody sun.”

Rarity prodded Fluttershy tenderly on the back, as the pegasus was staring off into space with a dreamy smile on her face, her mind miles away from the discussions circling the table. “Fluttershy, darling, you *really* must drink your coffee. It’ll help get rid of that *dreadful* headache, and it’ll wake you up. Hangovers are *certainly* not ladylike, dear. Not in the least.”

Fluttershy shook her head and gave a content sigh. “I’m okay, Rarity, really. I’m just... thinking. My head is fine...”

Rarity smiled knowingly and rubbed Fluttershy’s back again. “Oh really, darling? Because to *me* it appears as if your head was in the clouds. I wonder... if you weren’t thinking about a certain gray-coated pegasus?”

Fluttershy turned pink and giggled under her breath. “Um... w-well... I guess I was, yes...” she said back happily.

Rarity beamed. “Well, darling, you can tell me *all* about it later, if you-”

Fluttershy shook her head. “N-no... if it’s okay, I... I’m fine talking about it. Now, I mean.”

“You’re certain, dear?” Rarity asked.

Fluttershy nodded. “I think... everypony should know.”

“Shoot, t’aint like we don’t know ya like that Lockwood fella,” Applejack chuckled, “Y’all been givin’ ‘im googly-eyes fer days an’ days. Few more days o’ that an’ we’d’ve had another Spike an’ Rarity thing on our hooves.”

“Go on, Fluttershy!” Pinkie cheered, “Spill! Spill! All the juicy details... unless there were some *juicy* details, in which case save that for... not-public discussion.”

Fluttershy giggled again, “I feel a little silly, but... I sort of... um... passed out almost right after I... um... k-k-kissed him...”

Rarity gave a knowing smile to Pinkie Pie. “So you *did*- wait...” She raised an eyebrow. “You... passed out? Darling, what-”

Fluttershy's blush went from pink to red. "W-well, I... I suppose I *did* have too much to drink after all... sorry. I d-don't remember much of what happened after... and some things are kind of fuzzy..."

Rainbow had to resist the urge to spit out her coffee. "I knew it! That jerk-"

"Rainbow Dash, *please*," Rarity snorted, "Nothing of the sort *you're* thinking of could have *possibly* happened." She looked tenderly back at Fluttershy. "Go on darling, you were saying?"

Fluttershy smiled. "W-well, I woke up here, in the hotel. So... n-nothing else happened, as far as I know. Still... I'm really happy, everypony. Really, really happy. I t-told him I liked him... and he said he l-liked me too."

Rarity earnestly returned the contagious smile. "And I'm... *we're* happy for *you*, darling. You *deserve* to have a special somepony..."

"Thank you, Rarity," Fluttershy smiled, "I... I'm sorry about yelling at you the other day. I know you were only looking out for me... b-but..."

"Don't you worry about that, dear," Rarity said softly, "Things worked out, didn't they?"

Fluttershy turned to Flathoof, who sat on her other side between her and Applejack. "Oh... and I wanted to thank you too, Flathoof. For... for carrying me all this way by yourself last night. And for... giving me a chance to be with your brother..."

Flathoof waved a hoof in dismissal. "Not a problem at all, Fluttershy. The least I could do for a friend, and for making my..." He sighed, "*Little brother* happy. Shame the staff wouldn't let you stay there."

"Oh dear, they didn't? Why ever not?" Rarity pouted, "Surely even doctors know that *true love* is the best medicine?"

Fluttershy sighed in mild disappointment, "Flathoof said they told him something about 'post-recovery treatments'. They wouldn't even let *him* stay, and he's family. I hope he's okay... I actually wanted to go visit him this afternoon, but... well, we have to go see Her Highness and all, and I know we all have to be there. I'm sure we'll have time afterwards... right?"

"Well certainly, dear, I don't think they'd make us leave the city without Lockwood," Rarity said sweetly, "Everything will be okay, you'll see. We'll pick him up after we're all done meeting with Her Highness."

The party continued to talk and laugh over what remained of their brunch and coffee for

several more minutes before, at last, Tick Tock pointed out Briarthorn entering the dining room from the far side. "Ah, *finally*. About time he showed up. Bleedin' idiot's late as all get out."

Briarthorn trotted over to them with an odd, almost pensive expression. He didn't bother taking a seat in the chair provided for him, and instead glanced over the table with an almost-apprehensive frown. "Hey, folks. Good sleep? Drinking coffee, eh? Good, good, smart move there. Let me guess. Applejack's idea, or Tick Tock's?"

"Mine, actually. Fixes up a good hangover right as rain back at home. Far as good sleepin', we got as good as we were gonna get after all that happened las' night," Applejack chortled. "How 'bout you, flyboy? Yer head hurtin' or anythin'?"

"Slept like a foal. A log. A log's foal, even," Briarthorn shrugged. "I don't really *get* hangovers. Few of the pilots still do. It's part of what makes us convenient and reliable," he said blandly, making the others look at him in confusion. He exhaled slowly, his voice quiet. "I hate to rush, but we'd better get going soon. Finish up your drinks."

"What, already?" Rainbow groaned.

"Eh? What's the big hurry?" Tick Tock asked.

Flathoof added, "Yeah, I thought we had all day. We'd planned on getting lunch before--"

"No, no. No time for any of that," Briarthorn's interrupted quietly, "Come on everypony, up, up, up. We've gotta get going. Seriously, come on."

The party all looked at one another, shrugged, and finished up their coffees. They stood up and followed him out the door of the dining room, through the hallway of the hotel which they noticed was completely empty even out here in the lobby. There weren't any bellhops, doorstallions, or desk clerks in sight, nor any tourists like they'd seen in droves since the day they'd arrived.

As they left the hotel proper and went out into the streets, they found that the city was a different sight than what they'd seen the past two days. Nearby businesses had been locked up and all displayed "CLOSED" signs. The roads were mostly empty, and the ponies they could see were all hastily making towards the south, where just a few blocks away they knew one of the many underground entrances was located.

"What's up with everypony?" Twilight asked as she watched a small family rush by in a panic, "Where are they all going in such a hurry?"

"Underground," Briarthorn murmured, his face blank, visibly unnerving Tick Tock and Flathoof, "Everypony's scared. No, wrong word. It's not enough. Too fast for dread, or anguish."

It's widespread panic. Everypony's panicked. Yeah, that's the right word."

"Panicked? What? Why?" Rainbow asked.

Briarthorn bowed his head, but lifted a wing to point skyward. "*Those.*"

The others followed where he was pointing, and their jaws collectively dropped at the sight of a massive *thing* floating high above the city. An elongated construct nearly a half-mile long, with a thick, cylindrical shape, all black with the exception of a large emblem emblazoned on the side: a flaming red sword thrust downward through a golden disk. One end of it had a blocky structure attached to it, at the rear of which were a series of small conical attachments that each glowed a dull blue. Several more of these were attached to the bottom of the thing, smaller than the ones at the rear and glowing white. Behind it in the distance, the party could see two more approaching from the north.

"What in the name of all things cinnamon swirl *is* that thing?" Applejack blurted.

"Whatever it is, it's with the NPAF," Flathoof observed, "It's got that big New Pandemonium emblem on it. I'd recognize it anywhere."

"A Gargantuan-class battlecruiser," Briarthorn explained dully, "One of the biggest attack cruisers in the NPAF's arsenal. Those are for the big shows, the *real* shows. Not a family outing. Not one of the street vendors' good days. In a normal, what, a *decade*? We see maybe one if we're lucky. Like a blue moon, or a shooting star. A *really* shooting star, and hey, just like the real thing? Lots of wishes get made. Mostly that the shield won't fail. A very rare sight, usually means they mean *mean* business."

"Yeah. And there are *three* of 'em," Rainbow gulped, "Holy moly... those things are *huge*..."

"That's bad enough, but honest to stars and skies above, that isn't the thing that bothers me," Briarthorn said, his voice starting to shake, "I'm worried because *today* isn't *tomorrow*." He swallowed slowly as everypony began to take in the implication. He pulled out the device he recognized from the day they arrived. He looked at it in disapproval, shaking his head. "We were *expecting* a Phoenix-class. *One* Phoenix. *Tomorrow*. Not *three* *Gargantuan*-class battleships, which are all but officially *flagships* for the NPAF. Not three *today*."

"Seems your information was incorrect then," Twilight gulped, "Um... that makes me nervous. Your informants don't seem the type to get things wrong, or at least not horribly inaccurate. What gives, Briarthorn?"

Briarthorn actually shuddered, causing Twilight's face to scrunch up in confusion. "Twily, that's the thing. We live by *out-thinking* that death-trap-opolis. Somewhere, something went

wrong. Horribly wrong. Ponies might actually die today. I was going to the Queen to get her yelling done early, so she'd be fine talking to you after stomping my face in, but... with the sky filled up with Death From Above up there, I'm going to honor our agreement first, so I can live long enough to feel like I've done you right. Hey, not one of you gets to look at me like that this time. Not this time. I'm seriously worried here. I've told you I hate worry in general. Warts and all, right? You want to know how serious I am about this? I almost regret going drinking last night."

"Well... what exactly is the plan, then?" Tick Tock asked, blinking at Briarthorn's last sentence.

Briarthorn looked down the street where more ponies were flocking from other city blocks nearby, scrambling for the underground entrance. This turned his frown into a very slight smile. "Well, evacuation orders are already in full swing, so there's that bit of relief. Some ponies are lollygagging but most are moving straight away. Not used to actually getting evacuation orders, see?"

"So that's what all this is?" Rarity asked, "Thank goodness this is all organized, not just random panic."

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "Yeah, organized panic is *much* better."

"Why aren't we following the crowds?" Twilight asked.

"The usual way I'd take from here would be Tunnel Twenty-three, but it's making Buns 'n' Stuff's block-wrapping lines look like a damn express runway." Briarthorn pointed ahead with a wing. "We're going to take the pilots' passage, Tunnel One, near the palace. It'll cut down on traffic, but it's a long walk from here." He flexed his wings and increased his pace. "Come on everypony, hustle up."

"If your Queen is so confident in the shield, why is everypony evacuating?" Rainbow asked.

"Easiest way to say it, for uh, Her Majesty," Briarthorn murmured with an almost embarrassed shrug, "Would be, y'know, 'safety measures'. Most ponies here haven't even *seen* Gargantuan-class ships, in case I haven't brought it up, and those that have remember one. Like, they saw an it. Not a *them*. And it was not, to put it politely, worth putting in anypony's scrapbooks. Which you could probably build with real scrap. We all learned, that day, even the Queen, which is a shocker... the NPAF? They're... more than we've given them credit for in the past. They're all on biding time."

"You're acting like they're capable of taking down the shield," Twilight pointed out. Briarthorn's sheepish frown caused her pause. "You're not... serious about that... are you?"

“Hey, for you, Twily, I’d sit down and prattle it out, with all the technical stuff you’d probably blush over, and it’d be a real treat, but really. All this talking is making it harder to keep pace,” Briarthorn said as he shuffled forward, antsy and apologetic all at once, “We’ve still got some town to pass, so let’s get going, yeah?”

As they passed through several blocks of the city, the flow changed directions towards other underground entrances to the east or west, but not once did they ever find themselves following anypony, not until they were almost at the northern edge of the city anyway. Here, they finally found themselves trailing a scant few goggled ponies heading the same direction as them.

The entrance they were looking for came up after several more minutes of walking at a rushed pace, this one quite different from the one they remembered using the day before. It was a large metal door with a very large station next to it that seemed built for the express purpose of holding a much smaller device that looked like a keyhole. One pony that got there ahead of him used his key, opening the door. He got in alongside as many of the other pilots as he could, then the doors closed behind them and the light above the door glowed red. A few minutes later, it flashed green, and the next herd of ponies was able to board.

At last it was their turn. Briarthorn used his key just as the others had done, then led the rest of the party in with him. They followed him and boarded the glass elevator inside, which took them down towards street level at a brisk pace. As they descended, they got a good look at the crowds of ponies coming in from the other entrances nearby, and could even see a crowd forming down below near the gated entrance into the palace grounds. Their elevator came down just on the other side of the large west wall of the exterior of the palace grounds, in a clearing surrounded by ponies decked out in reds and golds. They could see the herd of pilots that had gone before them quickly ascending stairs towards the palace ahead.

As they disembarked, they were greeted by the sight of two barreled weapons pointing straight at them, wielded by a pair of guard ponies. They both had bright blue coats, though the one on the left, an earth pony stallion, was a slightly darker shade the pony on the right, a pegasus mare. They both wore light, metallic armor colored a dark red and accented with golden trims, but no helmets. The pegasus mare also wore an eyepatch over her left eye.

“Halt! Who goes there?!” barked the one on the left.

“Ah-ha-ha, whoa, now, Boltstorm,” Briarthorn attempted a half-hearted chuckle as he pushed the weapon to the side, “How are you and Stardust doing? Any nice evenings? Better be careful with pointy objects. You might end up putting somepony’s... ooh,” he said with real remorse, noticing the glare the pony on the right was giving him. “Ooh. Stardust. Stardust, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. Please believe me. But hey, the patch look on you has always looked *good*, though! Both Boltstorm and I can attest, am I right?”

Boltstorm cleared his throat. “Briarthorn,” he said, lowering his weapon, “I guess you’re here because of the trouble upstairs too, eh? What’s with the ponies behind you? I don’t recognize any of them. Look, there’s a big pilot meeting starting in only a few minutes, to see about what’s going on upstairs. Didn’t Twister get word to you? You’ll be late!”

“He did, but I’m going to the Queen first,” Briarthorn clarified, “I’ve got some ponies with me that need to see her *muy pronto*, *comprende*? Very official royal business and all that jazz.”

“You’re kidding,” the pegasus mare balked, “You’re gonna try and get in to see Her Highness *now*? With all that’s going on? She’s got more important things to deal with without you bringing a party upstairs. You have a lot of nerve. This better not be you up to your usual antics again.”

Briarthorn looked softly at the pegasus guard. “Stardust, dear. I’m sorry. I really am sorry that your instinct calls to ‘usual antics’. But sweetheart, there are three death machines above us. I’m not going to make the day worse by insisting on ‘end-of-the-world’ sex, when it might not even *be* the end of the world.” His smile and voice were still quiet, but he wiggled his eyebrows just a little bit at the guards as he continued, “Besides, those ‘usual antics’ helped you and Boltstorm here finally have an excuse to stop avoiding yourselves and-”

Stardust quickly cut him off, “Hey! That is a *private* matter between Boltstorm and me-”

“Aaand *me* and my ‘usual antics’. That is, if I am thinking about the same *absolutely lovely, lovely, lovely* night?” Briarthorn’s voice was still quiet, making what was his normally typical candor sound more subdued, almost compassionate, “I think I was almost jealous, even being right there with you, Stardust. I might not have even *needed* to help after that first push, you know. You *handled* Boltstorm like a champ-”

Boltstorm cleared his throat again, his face immensely red. “Yes! Right! Um... Stardust dear, would you please check the logs and double-check that Briarthorn has a scheduled meeting with Her Highness? Standard procedure, Briarthorn, otherwise we’ve gotta send all your friends back upstairs.”

Stardust quickly turned away, but not before the group noted that her face was also turning red. Briarthorn turned back to the group at large with that same brief and gentle smile... just as he slowed the infuriating eyebrow wiggle to a stop. She grumbled, and proceeded to fiddle with a datapad she procured from a strap at her side, glancing through it briefly.

With a roll of her eyes, she announced, “Yeah, he’s on here. Totally legit and everything, like he said.”

As she spoke, Briarthorn’s smile dropped off and he faintly sighed with dismay. He slid

his wings along both guards' backs as he passed between them. "See? All squared away. Stay safe, you two." He tilted his head back to the group. "Remember, don't say I didn't warn you. She's going to probably break a few of my legs, and *I* honestly care about her, and she *knows* that. You guys? Total, total, *total* strangers? We're just gonna have to chance it. Hopefully you're all in one piece when we're all done."

The two guards stepped aside and let those following the pilot through, sending the elevator back up at last to collect the next set of pilots coming down. The group moved forward towards the grand stairway that led up to the palace proper, ascending the great silver steps one at a time despite their hurry, simply because of how large the steps were. They continued following him through the giant, gem-encrusted golden doors that marked the main entrance, then through the banner-strewn and elegantly-carpeted main hall to the central stairwell, then up the stairs towards the east wing of the palace.

All the while, they got the opportunity to view the interior of the palace and get a feel for how different it really was from the Royal Palace back in Canterlot, despite the short amount of time they'd actually be here. While the main hall and entrance and all that certainly appeared similar, the east wing was certainly not decorated to give off a regal air. It seemed more to them like a military base of some kind, loaded with techno-magic displays and machinery of all shapes, sizes, and styles rather than decorative banners, fancy paintings, and lavish carpets and rugs. Ponies of all kinds frantically passed through the halls, most of them carrying either datapads or techno-magic devices similar to the ones they'd had pointed at them just moments earlier. Lines of armored guards wearing the same colors as the two they'd met outside streamed past them through the halls on their way to the Queen's chambers, only these ones were also wearing helmets that hid most of their faces.

"They're definitely preparing for something big," Flathoof observed, "I've never seen anything like this before."

"This place is hectic," Rainbow agreed, "And all of this because of those three cruisers outside? What are all these armored guys supposed to be doing against *those*? I can understand you all having a pilot meeting, but this?"

"The Hope's Point Militia," Briarthorn explained, "Let me make a long story short - I know, shocking, right? - and say that the larger cruisers tend to employ ground forces. Of... sorts. The Queen is preparing for the worst case scenario: anything making it through. At all."

"I certainly hope this won't put a kibosh on our attempts to leave," Rarity frowned.

"Oh Rarity, it will. But you won't hate it when it does," Briarthorn said piteously, patting her cheek with the tip of his wing gently. She looked at the appendage with dismay, not for him but for what he was saying. "Considering that you'd be leaving the city with those things gunning for you, sticking around just a bit longer may just be the better idea. There's only one pilot

around here crazy enough to try that and actually succeed.”

“And let me guess: it’s you?” Rainbow scoffed, “No offense, Briarthorn, but even though I’ve never seen you fly, I can’t say I’m confident.”

Briarthorn looked almost sad, even sheepish as he smiled at Rainbow, “Ahhh, hoo... well! *Maybe* under different circumstances, Dash. You’d be right that I *might* be able to fly a *good* ship out, but *my* ship? It’s not exactly supersonic. Those cruisers’ firepower, though? Yeah, I’d blow up, to your satisfaction I suppose, though since you’d all be with me I doubt it’d be a *lengthily-appreciated* satisfaction. No, no, no, I’m talking about somepony else entirely.”

They came to another hall that ended at a large door. Unlike the rest of the east wing, this hall and door resembled the main parts of the palace in its decorations, with great banners along the walls and the door itself covered in emblems made of jewels of all colors. Briarthorn led them to it, hanging his head low as he tapped the door one time, so light they could barely hear it over the noise of the halls behind them. They only waited but a second before the door opened just a crack.

Briarthorn sighed, “Well... here we go.”

As he spoke, a small, pale pink unicorn mare, barely tall enough to touch her horn to Briarthorn’s neck, pushed her way out of the doorway. Her magic held a smaller techno-magic device than the ones the party had seen before. She lifted it until it was almost touching Briarthorn’s nose. Her long mane and tail were bright orange, and her mane was kept out of her face by a large pair of safety goggles with metallic blue frames. She wore a dark purple jumpsuit covered in black and green grease stains over a simple white shirt. Affixed to her face was a small device attached to her ear that carried what looked like a piece of colored glass, adjusted such that it wasn’t in front of her face.

“Oh, it’s *you*,” the unicorn said icily.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Briarthorn murmured, trying to sound enthusiastic. The little unicorn cocked the techno-magic gun and pressed it against his forehead. “Hey, new gun. Nice, Gadget. What’s this one do? You’ve been doing a lot of zappy stuff lately. At least, that’s the buzz. Got it shooting lightning? If it does, I bet you’re happy to see me.”

“As a matter of fact, yes, my new Hyperstatic Penetrator prototype *does* shoot lightning! At least, it should,” Gadget said with a wide grin, “Technically, it fires off a precisely-charged burst of electromagnetic energy that *looks* like lightning and works like lightning, but for all intents and purposes isn’t *actually* lightning, but if you want to *call it* lightning that’s just fine with me!” She cleared her throat and waved a hoof dismissively. “But I digress! I was just putting on the finishing touches this morning and was hoping for some target practice all the way until we got ourselves a very unfriendly wakeup call.

“Soooo,” she said with a shrug, “Target practice is going to have to wait, and it’s not gonna be you... well, not just yet. Her Majesty gets first dibs on your keister, mister, and *golly*, lemme tell ya, she isn’t gonna be glad to see *you*. She’s got a lot on her mind, Briarthorn. You *really* should’ve given her an extra day. But since you came all this way, maybe she’ll give me a chance to test my new toy! I’ve been looking for a chance to try out my Target Painter 5000 too. I’ll put a biiiiiig ol’ bullseye right on your *butt*.”

Briarthorn deflated a bit, slowly pressing his head down onto the barrel of the gun and leaning his weight into it. He rolled his eyes straight up like he was looking for a miracle. “I know... I know. She’s mad at me. I’m going to lose something for at *least* a month. My ship, my apartment, hell, maybe she’ll give me a *height* limit for flying, just to make me feel *literally* low for this one. Let’s just get my ass-kicking done, everypony,” he said, addressing the mares, and Flathoof, behind him, “I’m going to get it first, you know, so take mental notes as fast as you can. She’ll take more about you faster regardless, but any little bit that helps you stay on your hooves helps you in the long run. If I still have my wings after this is all done, we might just get you flying out of here tomorrow.”

The others warily looked at one another and followed him and Gadget into the Queen’s observation chamber. The room was incredibly dark, and amounted to one long hallway with its most prominent feature being a large, circular hub in the middle of the room, from which they could see the figure of a pegasus watching dozens of small television screens at once. The figure was mostly obscured by the glare of the screens and only appeared as a silhouette, but it was easy enough to see the figure’s head tilting ever so slightly as it changed its focus to screens on opposite sides of the panel. Mounted above the hub on a mantle and plaque was the distinctly recognizable shape of a young Gargantuan’s head.

All around the room were more, smaller monitoring stations manned by multiple ponies, all hustling about in a frenzied state and delivering datapads to and fro between the stations. They couldn’t quite make out what was on any of the screens, but it was easy enough to see that they were observing the city outside and above, especially the trio of ships in the sky. If anything happened in the city right now, somepony in this room would know about it.

Just beside the hub looking in at the screens, was Lockwood. Fluttershy was barely able to contain her surprise and elation as Gadget led the group of ponies to stand before the hub in a row, with Briarthorn at one end and Fluttershy at the other. Gadget approached the hub itself, giving Lockwood a small nod that he returned before turning to the others and giving a small wave. He was fully clothed again, sporting a white button-up dress shirt, a brand new brown fedora, and a simple black eyepatch over his right eye. As he caught sight of Fluttershy, his smile fell ever-so-slightly, and his wave became less enthusiastic, almost apologetic.

Gadget bowed to the metal floor first, with Briarthorn doing the same soon after. Twilight and Rarity hastily bowed as well, as they remembered doing before Princesses Celestia, Luna,

and Cadence on formal occasions, even when often asked specifically not to do so; Tick Tock bowed with them in unison, for the same reasons though not the same experiences. Flathoof, Applejack, and Fluttershy followed the two unicorns' lead, followed by Rainbow and Pinkie, who'd been distracted looking about the room.

"Your Majesty," Gadget announced, "Your guests are-"

The Queen turned her head ever so slightly and interrupted, "Early. Door opened, ten hoof-patterns. First, you, Gadget. Following: three with even steps, even weight, one with slightly wider gait. Unicorns. Followed by light steps, low sound. Three pegasi. Three thumps, three earth ponies, one wearing some sort of metal on their hooves. Of the pegasi, one slightly heavier. A pilot. Only *one* pilot with that particular entourage: '*Captain*' Briarthorn. Ah, *excellent*, he's walking slowly. *Good*. No resistance. Will keep this quick. Too occupied with potential *occupation*," she hissed through her teeth.

"Cruisers just overhead... things *could* go well. Monitors on full. No current movement. The city is moving right. The cruisers, so far, are not. Tolerable. Tolerable, wasting time with my very best *moron* here. The city can allow it. Worth it to browbeat him a bit. Broke my stress-press yesterday. More money to replace that, too. Hmm. The cruisers... circling. Blockading. Siege positions. No primary weapon systems engaged. None even visible. No reason not to, as usual, *test shield polarity*. Thus, *unusual*. Waiting for a signal. No aircraft reports from the cruisers... hmm. Crossfire's evacuations done. Gadget: you will confirm?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Gadget quickly agreed, "Phase One-"

"Not my question. It is not complete, even if divisions are ahead of schedule. Appreciate your work, Gadget," the Queen's voice changed subtly as her silhouette shifted, regarding Gadget fondly for a moment through her spitfire, "For now, focus on comprising preparations for Phase Two."

Gadget nodded and took a small datapad out of the front pocket of her jumpsuit, which she started to read from. "Right... yes, that's on schedule as well. We did a count of evacuees, but-"

The Queen's voice resumed its harsh timbre. "The '*glitch*'."

"The...? Oh!" Gadget blinked, "Golly, we only got the population report a minute ago. Just finished going over it, myself. Apparently there was a misreading-"

Blackburn interrupted again, her voice even, as she turned slowly. She tapped her hooves in front of her, and several monitors changed views with clicks of confirmation. "'*Misreading*'? No. Tomorrow, one battleship? No. *Today, three cruisers*. This is no *misreading*. There *are* two new ponies in the city, illegally. No visuals; no chances. Bolster the shield guard,

triplicate. Choice squads: four-two-nine, three-seven-two, eight-oh-four. They handle the tight corridors best. Send the order *now*. Infiltrators attempting a shield break.” Her voice, already hard, became steel. “*That does not happen*. Keep sweeping the exterior levels, too. Faster: ten minute intervals, no coverage gaps. Earth pony squads *only*. Can’t trust unicorns nor pegasi to keep pace: no stamina for pursuit in the former, no patience in the latter. Keep squads moving before we seal the exterior. I do not. *You will not*, consider Phase One complete until the exits are sealed. Tell squad leaders when the two minute warning is given, they go below ground. Any stragglers volunteer to stay outside. Move double-time until the seal. Seal closes, you submit the datapad for Phase Two logistics. Then. *Only* then. Dismissed.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Gadget said timidly with a deep bow, almost touching her face to the floor, before fiddling rapidly with her datapad again.

Queen Blackburn stepped out of the glare of the hub station and into full view of the ponies in a row before her. Her coat was an smoky black color that didn’t change much from the shadow of the monitors’ glare. Her mane and tail were a brilliant almost-neon turquoise, which she wore in a long, erratic style; her mane fell past her side nearly to her hooves, and her tail was still in the raised hub platform despite being about two feet away. She loosely wore a white, high-collared jacket that covered almost all of her torso, a tight brown skirt that covered her flank, and a long gold and green striped scarf that rested over a small saddle bag at her side. Starting at the top left of her face all the way across her nose to her right cheek was a deep scar; it just narrowly missed the underside of her right eye by an inch. She stared at them, her blue-gray eyes locking with each of theirs in turn for a brief instant.

She turned in Briarthorn’s direction and stepped over to him briskly. He sighed and sank down on his back legs before she was even halfway to him. “I know, Queenie. Your tab. As ‘*tolerable*’ as it is to ‘*waste time*’ on me, you said you wanted this over quick, right?”

Blackburn’s tilted her head when Lockwood started to speak. “Please, don’t be-”

Blackburn grabbed Briarthorn by the collar, and flapped once, flaunting her impressive wingspan. Not as outright long as Briarthorn’s wings, which were tucked tightly to his sides, but heavier, and much thicker. They were clearly built for power. With this one gesture, she pulled him just off the ground, shaking him so roughly that he couldn’t help but let out short, throttled gasps. She *threw* him the few inches to the ground, causing him to grunt on impact, and then stamped the floor heavily next to him he almost bounced again from the vibrations.

“Too hard on him...” Lockwood finished with a sigh.

“Half-right, *idiot*,” Blackburn spat, raising her head and letting her eyes move across the group.

Some of the group, Rainbow and Tick Tock in particular, were trying not to watch the

display for fear of showing amusement at Briarthorn's apparent plight. Rarity and Fluttershy kept their eyes on Blackburn herself, worried about what she was going to do to them and their friends. Twilight bore a look of honest concern for Briarthorn's well-being. He remained unmoving on the ground apart from his slow breathing. The Queen's gaze remained even as she continued to revile the pegasus on the ground in front of her.

"Half-right. I wanted it *quick*, yes, Briar. Not *over* quick. You... you... *colossal, intolerable, asinine...*" She paused, breathing harshly for a moment. "Like you don't *want* to learn. Like you are before the city." She inhaled sharply. "Third time, Briar. *Third.*"

Briarthorn didn't even move his head from the floor, still breathing raggedly as he croaked out his reply. "N-not second, huh? I... I wondered about that, Queenie. I almost thought I'd actually got it past you. Three hours with-

"One 'Jackpot' at one 'Lucky Dice Room', One month, three days, seven hours ago," Blackburn said with a scowl, "Rather disgusted with the itemized receipt."

Briarthorn coughed, but still didn't get up from the ground. "Why... why didn't you say anything, Queenie? Why didn't you get mad on strike two, huh?" He rolled his head back, and slid the eye facing the group around, noticing the half-lidded, disgruntled looks he was getting from everypony to his left, apart from Twilight, who was looking at him with simple concern. He almost smiled. "I knew I didn't, wouldn't, couldn't get away with it. I never can."

Blackburn rolled her eyes. "You'd just finished getting a crucial shipment of mana batteries. Necessary component for the main generator, current battery coming close to half-life. Risked life and wing. Only one who could have, only one who did. Figured you needed a good celebration. Let it slide, for *once*. Now? Inexcusable. Punishable. If you weren't *you*, you'd get the honor of *emissary*. Let you go talk to the nice ponies in the cruisers out in our skies right now, *personally*. But they would just kill you. Waste of a perfectly good pilot, perfectly good and *only* single-pony flight team. *Friend*, when not 'accidentally' abusing my *lenience*. New 'friends' here?" She quickly swept her gaze back across the group. "You don't usually have a taste for unicorns. Which is it? Purple? White? Hmm... same time maybe?"

"That mean I can get up without you hitting me again?" Briarthorn murmured, eyes looking up at the ceiling for a miracle again.

"Until you start *visibly* bleeding? *Maybe*. A little hemorrhage. Perhaps two. Wouldn't keep you from flying. Keep it in mind. Tell me about this little party, Briar. Now, if your bruises are done forming."

Briarthorn pulled himself upright, but still sat on the ground, his wings sliding down from his sides and splaying purposelessly on the ground. "Queenie, I'm not *that* lucky. No 'jackpots' this time." Briarthorn rolled his eyes and pursed his lips at Blackburn's fierce gaze. "Your Grace,

nothing interesting happened. Sorry. I'd give you all the details unintentionally, anyway. Why even ask the question?"

"To make your some of your new friends hate you *less*. You're *welcome*. Why help, then?"

"I did everything for-"

"Lockwood's sake," Blackburn interrupted, "Only natural. Good business partner, valuable asset. Not the point. You didn't ask for permission. Tried to be sneaky, just like last time." She turned away from him to look at the monitors again with a sigh.

Lockwood hastily looked towards the monitors. "Are the cruisers moving? Do we need to leave?"

"No. Not yet. No response from patrols, infiltrators not moving. Didn't need this today, Briar. You should have asked, *Briar*. You should have *asked*. Expected denial? For Lockwood? Idiot. Moron. Fool. Foal-brained. Irresponsible. Reckless. *Typical*. Need a different punishment this time."

Briarthorn nodded dejectedly. "I should have asked. You're *busy*, though, Queenie. Always so busy. I'm sorry, okay? I didn't want to keep bothering you. I'm double-super-sorry. I really wish at some point I'd be trusted to do the right thing when I'm not actively risking my life for once... but then I'd have to not be me, right? So, hey. Until it resonates with you and your clockwork brain: I'm sorry. I'm sorry *for being me*. The gate was an emergency. I went too far there *first*, and it's *that* I want to make sure you get that I'm sor-"

She turned and jabbed a hoof into his chest, making him wince. "Had to waste time finding a new hiding place for Hundred-Year Burgandy. You *should* be sorry. Not worth the risk leaving it where it was. *Definitely* adding that to your list of transgressions. Appropriate punishment fits the crime, after all. Hmm. Your bar privileges, revoked. One month."

Briarthorn looked down at the ground. "That's what I get. A lack of booze for a threat of booze. I'm sorry, Queenie. I'm not trying to get out of this, by the way, but you keep looking at me like you don't believe me. I'm sorry. I thought you'd figured it out at the gate."

"Was *busy*, Briar," Blackburn said with an unpleasant, tight-lipped smile. "Was *busy*. Seem to think you know *how* busy. Am threatened something that is effectively one of grandfather's last gifts? **Am busy**. If you'd been in the room... your wings would've been broken."

"I'm sorry."

“Shut up about being sorry. Wastes *even more time*.”

Lockwood coughed and very suddenly drew Blackburn’s attention to him. “I think you might be-”

“Never can be too hard on him,” Blackburn replied shortly, “Does stupid things. All the time. Needs to learn a lesson.”

Briarthorn sighed, “So I’m on public, floor-one booze for the month, right? Even if I-”

“Need it for ‘work-related’ recovery; regularly in *your case, progress*. So, scraps,” Blackburn tutted, “‘Work-related’ applies only if you actually *work*. You want to drink; you use the pilot stash; you know the rules. Thirty days. Starting now.”

Briarthorn still hadn’t stood up, and leaned his head down again. “Right, right, right. The cheap crap. The barely-above Dolor Brown-quality stuff. Great.” He sighed. “Guess I’ve gotta go and outdo everyone again,” he said with the tiniest smirk, making Blackburn turn sharply to look at him again. They glared at each other for a moment. When he spoke again, Briarthorn said it fiercely. “I’m *sor-*”

“You’re *sorry*. You’re **sorry**. You’re **so sorry**. Tired of hearing it. Already believe you. Apology keeps you honest. Also,” Blackburn added with another hard poke to his chest, “You wasted time. Effort. *Hate* wasting time, *hate* wasting effort. Lockwood would have been enough to get you here. He already took effort to arrange it. No need to throw that drinking contest.”

Briarthorn winced and his eyes darted quickly back and forth between Blackburn and Applejack, the latter of which was glaring at him. “Queenie, look, she... that Utopian powerhouse over there, she straight up *clocked* me. It was all fair!”

“If I may-” Lockwood interjected.

Blackburn’s reply was short, curt, but not angry. “No.”

“But-”

“*No*.”

Lockwood shrugged and sighed, “Sorry, Briar. I tried. You know how she gets when she’s upset.”

Briarthorn looked at Lockwood sadly. They exchanged looks of deep sympathy. “Right... yeah.”

Briarthorn quickly leaned in and whispered something to Blackburn, causing her to shake her head in disappointment. “Why bother? Trying to be Lockwood *again*? Almost like you’ve forgotten who **we** are. Forty rounds of Gargantuan Venom?” She laughed mirthlessly, a harsh single note of derision. “Needed more than that to be ‘Drunk of the Year’ five years running. Seen better out of lesser drunks. Lost on my sixty-eighth to you, three years ago. Forget that? ‘All hail King of the Sixty-Nine?’ Forty rounds. Out? Don’t *keep* insulting me. Always end up regretting it, don’t you?”

Briarthorn’s face actually turned red as she went on about drinking, from looking like a blush to looking like he was as drunk as she was explaining, but as the last syllable left her mouth, he nearly exploded, making her smile cruelly at him. “**Damnit, Queenie!** Why do you want to make these ponies feel *worse*? I do a favor for Lockwood and his new friends, but at the same time threatened your Burgundy. That’s worth making them have another loss etched in their heads? They beat the sleazeball, he stops being a jerk, backs scratched all around-”

“Following, they lay on theirs for you? Not the first time you worked a favor for a rodeo. Wouldn’t be the last, *horndog*. Is *quite* clear Applejack doesn’t appreciate lying by now, Briar. Personally don’t either, if unclear,” she added acidly. She walked a few paces away from him and gazed out through the group again, not really focusing on anypony in particular, letting her eyes drift above them. “How many times did you feel them up before their feast?”

Briarthorn curled his lip as the group’s sour looks came his way again. “Queenie, come on... come on. Come on, you can’t just put it like that. You’re-”

“Upsetting them. Rather, enlightening them. Probably said you weren’t subtle at all. Maybe they even *believed* you, too. Your *typical* response: subtlety to obviousness. A little hard to pick up on for ponies you’ve known a *day*. Called-out on it, then. Not at the feast... too early, too distracted by food. Not at the hotel, long day, tired, eager to rest. Would guess Couture’s shop then. Probably the stallion. Perhaps the rainbow mare. Stop playing games, Briar. You’re subtle when you want to be. *How many times? Now.*”

Briarthorn sighed weakly. “Like I keep track of every feel... oh, great, Queenie, you’re looking at me like that, and I can *feel* the *rest* of them looking too. Okay, okay. Okay! I dunno, like, a solid six-pack of taps. Their story checked out *physically*. They felt like they hadn’t eaten in days upon days. Their joints were all stiff, their coats were matted, dusty. Their *duds*, or what was left of them, had about the same amount of dirt. Bags under their eyes that made me feel really bad every... what? *Fourth* sex joke? Unless that was some really fancy illusion magic or something, but Twily here certainly seemed really out of it. They couldn’t fake that unless they knew we knew that Twily was a master magician, which we didn’t know until we did... which was after.”

“A *little* more detail? Something not *at all* on the cameras?” Blackburn said quickly, after a brief facehoof.

“Uh...” Briarthorn muttered dejectedly as he scratched the back of his head, “Well, they smelt like sand, not the nice beaches, either. Stagnant, like a sort of wetness. Weird for sand, so I would figure that means-”

Blackburn nodded, satisfied. “The Bonesands. Wonderful. Most likely direction for *real* travelers.” She beckoned Briarthorn to follow her, and her voice became less callous instantly as she looked at his tired face. The vice dropped from her voice was small, but compared to her previous frozen fury, it seemed almost *gentle*. She even nodded at him. “Very well. Punishment delivered. You’ll carry out your sentence. Briar. Briar, look at me. All forgiven. Come along, *captain*. Need confirmation on things. Speak up if you hear contradictions.”

Briarthorn nodded, but his his face still gloomy as he followed Blackburn, getting to his hooves unsteadily if quickly, but his wings dragged for a long moment before he picked them up. The two of them walked over to Twilight Sparkle first. Twilight gulped nervously but remained bowed low, quickly turning her eyes firmly to the ground until Blackburn gestured for her to rise, as she remembered from her encounters with Princess Celestia upon their first meeting. Once Twilight had risen, Blackburn briefly circled around her and nodded her head in silent approval. She used her wing to readjust Twilight’s hat so that it was straight, as it had gone lopsided during the bow.

“Twilight Sparkle,” Blackburn said, though by now she was back to facing the monitors, “In the flesh. Well met. Talent around here recognized. Built up reputation already. Well-versed... no. More accurately, naturally apt in not merely magical discipline, but magic itself. Strikingly powerful spellcaster. At this point, common knowledge.” She took a short breath. “So an uncommon question, Twilight Sparkle. Thundercracker the Prodigious, or Skyfall the Wanderer?”

“I... I... beg your pardon, Your Majesty?” Twilight blinked at what she could only see as a non-sequitur.

“The cloak. The whole outfit. Distinct feel of both figures in its appearance. Which of the two do you prefer?”

Twilight hesitated for half a second, and began to chance a glance sideways towards Tick Tock.

“Eyes forward, Twilight Sparkle,” Blackburn quickly said. Twilight nearly jumped, snapping her head back to look straight ahead, where Blackburn was still very much glued to the monitors. “Your friends? Not here for you for such a question. Not our policy. Not *my* policy. Not for a simple question only you could, *should* be able to answer. So, answer.”

Twilight gulped and played along, “Um... well, I’m a big fan of them both. I guess if I had

to pick which of the two I prefer... I'd go with Skyfall the Wanderer. He was a very... influential mage." Tick Tock subtly slid a hoof to her face in her bow.

Blackburn nodded, and tilted her head to look at Briarthorn, who was using his wingtips to massage his temples in distress. Another tight-lipped smile, eyes cold, but not malevolent. Almost clinical. "Wise answer. Old vest was tacky. Surprised the gate surveillance cameras didn't break. Brought to mind a stage magician, and an arrogant one at that. Underwhelming. Ill-suited for real talent. Which court in Utopia do you serve?"

Twilight visibly trembled as she stammered, "Which... court, Your Highness?"

"Breath, tone, heartbeat. All fast, Twilight Sparkle. Not to be picked up and dropped like your 'tour guide'. Speak plainly. Calmly. Your ensemble. Court mage garb. Precise knowledge of etiquette when addressing and presenting oneself to dignitaries. Which court in Utopia do you serve? Several noble houses, no outward distinctions on you."

Twilight half-lied, "Oh... right yes. Which court. I... I serve House... Celestia."

Blackburn nodded subtly and turned to face Twilight again, taking a step towards her. Twilight was put-off by how the Queen didn't seem to look at her, but through her. "No knowledge of the Red Death curse. Your court would be a small one. No cares about ancient plagues half a world away. Understandable. Never had to deal with it, never bothered to learn about it. Competent about curses regardless. Impressive. Such silly things, curses, you would agree?"

Twilight nodded carefully. "Well... until recently, I had little need to study them. I've come to realize my folly-

"Vowed to make amends for it. Wise decision," Blackburn said fondly, this time letting her lips, and more importantly her eyes, relax. In turn, Twilight's breathing became less harsh as the Queen continued, "Despite admitted lack of experience, treated Lockwood's injury. Been told that you did 'exemplary work', even without formal Restomancy training." Twilight didn't make to speak, but her eyes drooped considerably. Blackburn's small smile grew a fraction. "Don't worry about getting all the credit. Am just ensuring accurate portrayal of events. Exaggerations, misinterpretations come about when one pony speaks highly of another," she added, glancing briefly in Lockwood's direction and making Briarthorn start, as he'd winced on the sentence, clearly expecting to be the example used. "Such gratitude owed for what you did, Twilight Sparkle. Never had opportunity in the emergency room. You have anxiety issues when under pressure."

Blackburn snapped out a hoof and offered it for Twilight to shake. Twilight took it gingerly, and was immediately yanked close in the midst of the hoofshake, much to her surprise. Blackburn leaned in and whispered into her ear, "Your group considers you their de facto leader.

Yes? Do not panic.”

“How did you...?” Twilight said immediately, her voice considerably less scared, but still clearly and insatiably curious.

Blackburn grimaced, making Twilight gulp audibly. “Everyone always asks ‘how’. Simple: you don’t just watch. You see. Entering into this room, you put yourself at the front. Near Briar, who walked with execution pace... yet nopony argued it. Likely two choices? You and Briar are intimate-” Twilight raised an eyebrow and looked at Briarthorn, who had a surprisingly faraway look in his eyes. “Or, you naturally fall to organization. In meeting *a queen*, you felt organized. You led. Literally. A leader. What your group needs, by if nothing else their poise. Small looks to you. Deference, perhaps?”

Twilight shook her head. “Leader...? Well... yes. Yes, I suppose they do look... uh, to me. At times. Though I’m-”

Blackburn looked at her with an expression that was a strange mixture of pity, understanding, and deadly seriousness bordering on her previous irritation that made Twilight’s heart leap into her throat. “*Not sure?* Twilight Sparkle. Trust in yourself. Your friends? Clearly, they have seen what you can do. Anxiety issues won’t suit you. They trust you. Trust you to lead them. Prove you are capable. Lockwood has faith, so I share that faith.”

Twilight nodded, feeling briefly a glimmer of familiarity in the laconic “lecture” she was receiving. She had to resist looking up, where Celestia’s face would be. “I... yes, I understand. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Blackburn broke the shake, and Twilight bowed deeply to her. Blackburn then stepped over to Tick Tock, motioning for her to rise. She gave her a quick scrutinous look, sizing her up, then stepped away from her and back towards Twilight and Briarthorn, adjusting her collar slightly as she did so.

“A uniform. Very prim and proper. Neat. Tidy. Hmm...” She chanced a half-lidded look at Briarthorn, making him look away. “Almost... posh.” Briarthorn’s surprised, tiny smile made Tick Tock’s eyebrow twitch, and this made Blackburn sharply turn her head back, eye-to-eye with the unicorn. “Almost. Not posh. Bow tie is misleading. Foul-mouthed alcohol enthusiasts are hardly ‘posh’.” She turned towards the monitors again. “Appreciate the sense of duty that comes with uniforms. You wear it well. Proud. Do you often brave the Wastelands?”

Tick Tock blinked. “Do I... w-well, yes, certainly, Your Majesty. But... how did you know-”

Blackburn ground her teeth for a moment. “Always ‘how’. *Always*. Fine, the easiest piece first. Your gait. It suggests you’re used to endurance when you run. Not often enough to be a hobby. Not enough definition in your muscles to be a calling for running. Often enough to be a

job. Can't be a postal worker. Different uniform. No military rigidity, no pragmatism to avoid bad steps like your typical police officer, corrupt or not. You still venture out of New Pandemonium regularly. No, frequently. Maybe you would tell me about 'Chronomancy'?"

Tick Tock's jaw dropped. "I... what are you - *how* are you - talking about?"

"*What and how are clear.* Chronomancy is obscure, but it is clear you know *something*," Blackburn said, "You had a hoof in Lockwood's recovery. Not called in to assist Twilight Sparkle? You don't know much Restomancy. Perhaps you know none at all. Twilight was also an amateur. Her aptitude was Lockwood's understanding, so she was his request. So, two schools of magic left. Considering the Red Death? Chronomancy most likely candidate, slows down infection of Red Death. A few others, but none really worth investigating given the curse. Implies time spell, or jerry-rigged Barrier spell. Latter, unlikely. Too strenuous. Imprecise. Unreliable."

Tick Tock nodded shakily. "Yes... that's... exactly. But, still... how, *how*?"

Blackburn inhaled, closing her eyes briefly. "'How.' Again. *Again.* Alright. *Six*-day journey from Blood Mire to Hope's Point. Five? Four? Fully-rested, perhaps. You were starving and had many injured. Red Death curse kills in two or three without proper treatment. Only possible options were Restomancy, Chronomancy, or complex Barrier magicks. Lockwood should be dead." She suddenly offered her hoof to shake. "He's not. As with Twilight, gratitude owed. Sizeable gratitude."

"Oh... well..." Tick Tock meekly mumbled.

Tick Tock took Blackburn's hoof and shook it and, as with Twilight, Blackburn leaned in and whispered, "Congratulations in order. You brought new information. *Very hard* to surprise me." At Tick Tock's confusion, Blackburn smirked. "Obsidian's son, Pewter. Didn't know about him."

Tick Tock nodded lightly. "Oh...?"

"Your story at Wyrms Head. Briar's habits. An interesting little trick. A ruse well appreciated. Smart thinking, decent observation."

Tick Tock looked warily at Briarthorn, making sure he wasn't able to hear them. "How do you know for sure I'm-"

Blackburn matched Tick Tock's volume, shaking her head lightly. "Briar is not the only pony who comprehends intimacy needs, Tick Tock. Attitude and speaking habits suggest you haven't had a good lay in years."

Tick Tock turned bright red and stammered, "I... *excuse me?!*"

“If you’re not careful, you’ll confirm it now, realize that. *Lid it*. Go off? Your dignity will be, through solely your own actions, rather *diminished*. Understand? Good. *Quiet*. Recognize, not attempting to insult you. Perfectly understandable. Travel the Wastelands often... don’t get to be at home much. Not in the proper position to find a nice bedmate.” Tick Tock visibly flustered again. “Pewter is convenient. Middle of Wastelands. Few visitors. Plenty of ‘alone time’. Always liked Obsidian, confident his son is a good stallion.”

Tick Tock nodded subtly, still blushing madly. “He’s... a very close friend.”

“When all this is done, would make for some peace. You won’t regret it. Middle of Wastelands. Few visitors. Had he a ‘good friend’ be a mare with his father’s tastes? Very-” Blackburn murmured quietly, “*Sweet*. Though right now, must have balls bluer than your hair.”

“I... he... no... *what*,” Tick Tock said flatly.

Blackburn pulled away and left Tick Tock in a stupor, patting her gently on the shoulder as she walked away, then kept moving down the line to Pinkie Pie, who didn’t wait for the signal to rise. Blackburn didn’t waste time either. “Pinkie Pie,” she said, turning towards the monitors again.

“Yep! Hiya, Queenie-” Pinkie started happily.

“Keep quiet,” Blackburn interrupted. As an afterthought, she added, “Please.”

Pinkie’s mouth scrunched up, and her eyes grew big. Rainbow grit her teeth.

Blackburn sighed. “Another ‘how’, though you’re calling it a ‘why’. Heard enough out of you already from Briar. He likes you, he’s like you. By your similar natures, good at what you do. Partially infuriating, though necessary. Credit given, you possess at least some degree of tact where private matters are concerned in the minutes you’ve been here. Keep quiet. You’ll prove yourself better by every word you leave unsaid.”

Pinkie raised a hoof silently.

Blackburn rolled her eyes and turned to face Pinkie. “Go ahead.”

Pinkie started frantically miming out various actions in quick succession, causing Rainbow and Tick Tock, who could get a very clear view, to both look on in awed confusion. Briarthorn chanced another smile, and gestured to Blackburn; she merely nodded a moment, and held her hoof to her chin until Pinkie was finished. Then, she shook her head.

“Respectful of you. Was clever the first time Briar did it. Got irritating.”

Pinkie's eyes grew bigger, and Rainbow snorted.

Blackburn rolled her eyes. "Alright. Alright. Actually seeing it again as a genuinely new attempt? Appreciated. However, not really interested," she shrugged, "Armor's fine as-is. Stick with it. Crossfire might like you. No offense intended. Thank you for keeping quiet."

Pinkie beamed.

"The *hell* did I just see?" Tick Tock muttered.

Pinkie started to repeat her previous mime. Wordlessly, Blackburn approached, and tapped her hoof to stop her. "Unnecessary, thank you."

"Something about her armor?" Briarthorn suggested, "And... stuff with pirates? Really, Queenie? Not interested? I thought you'd want Gadget all over that kind of stuff."

"Gadget prefers ground-up puzzles. Regardless, all that was asked was if she needed to demonstrate," Blackburn frowned, "Have always hated charades. Annoying game. Rainbow Dash," Blackburn added sharply, not bothering to turn her head, "Death glares don't work. Not intimidated. You can stop anytime."

Rainbow stood tall, despite Briarthorn frantically signalling for her to stop. "Yeah? Well, *you* can stop giving Pinkie a hard time for no reason like that, *Your Highness*. She didn't do squat to *you*, you've got no reason to be a jerk to *her*."

Blackburn faced Rainbow down, giving her a brief once over as she did so, then dismissively waved a hoof and turned back towards Pinkie Pie, addressing her instead of Rainbow. "The goggles. Practical for a flyer. Your girlfriend's jacket fits well. It's an old jacket, too. Only reason Cutlass and Barnacle let her try to guess the password. She looked just a little bit like one of us. Irritating that the password is getting an overhaul, because of her 'almost'. Disappointing that she didn't make it the whole way, personally. A real shame."

Finally she turned to Rainbow, with a rather dark smile on her face that made Lockwood and Briarthorn cringe, "By the way, Rainbow, why do you hate stallions?"

Rainbow was seething, and narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me?"

"Your reaction to Cutlass's proposition. You weren't just disgusted by the idea. You were disgusted by who was giving it. Cutlass is not handsome. Not ugly, either. He's not intolerable. He might have been kind, had you considered. A mare from the dark pit of Pandemonium, down on her luck, desperate for help? Might have taken the time to consider his offer. You dismissed without hesitation."

“What’s she talking about, Dashie?” Pinkie asked quietly.

“Horseapples I’d do anything like that!” Rainbow blurted, giving Pinkie an apologetic look, “I might’ve been desperate for help, but-”

“You’ve got your pride,” Blackburn interrupted. Rainbow stared at her in disbelief, causing Blackburn to smile. “Didn’t answer the question. Why do you hate stallions?”

Rainbow glared. “Like I’d really tell *you-*”

“Your friends don’t know either, then. Fascinating,” Blackburn said with a slight nod, “Pinkie looks particularly expectant of an answer. You won’t tell your lover or your friends. It runs deep. Almost sorry for you... am fairly certain of the answer, of course. Won’t tell them. You don’t need to worry. Won’t tell them what happened here, or what happened first.”

Blackburn then immediately started heading down the rest of the line. Rainbow spat, “Hey! That’s it? Huh?! You just gonna walk away like that, after treating-”

“Admirable, defending the pony you love so much. ‘Cool’, right, Briar?” Blackburn said simply without turning around, but flicking her tail once. “Heart full of passion, head full of fire. ‘Radical’. Not ‘awesome’. Nomenclature accurate?” She turned her head to Briarthorn.

He only nodded, looking almost embarrassed, and she went on.

“Your reactions to those who slight her are hostile. You’re overprotective. Indignant. That’s not ‘awesome’. That’s... dangerous.”

Rainbow snorted, “Is that a threat?” Despite Briarthorn’s gestures for her to stop, as well as the worried looks Twilight and Pinkie were giving her, she continued, “If you’re looking to get into it with me, *Your Majesty-*”

“Rainbow, *STOP! Right now,*” said Briarthorn, of all ponies.

But as Rainbow continued moving, her right hoof, just a step forward, Blackburn turned sharply towards her, and looked, not at Rainbow Dash, but at the floor. Rainbow impulsively followed her head, and saw a tiny red dot appear just inches away from her. Both her and Blackburn’s gaze followed it as it began to move. It crawled its way up her leg slowly, and she lost sight of it as it moved to her forehead, making Rainbow lock eyes with the Queen. Blackburn held up one hoof, holding the unseen guncolt.

Rainbow turned her head very slowly towards Pinkie. She was beginning to sweat. The beads glistened under the red dot. Pinkie visibly paled, and waved her hands wildly.

Otherwise, the room froze. Ponies on the monitors briefly and covertly turned their gazes towards the situation. Rainbow's Ponyville friends all stood like statues, pupils shrunk in shock and slowly growing terror.

Lockwood spoke very rapidly. "Hold on, look- don't, don't- she's trying to- she's not a threat, she's just- she doesn't mean anything-"

Blackburn looked sharply at him, very briefly, then back to Rainbow. Her hoof slowly settled back down on the floor; the tiny red dot disappeared.

"Felt a little heat? Lockwood's warnings... very pleasant. You owe him even more, now. Him not acting before you... perhaps would have been *unpleasant*. Might end with a messy stain in *my* room," Blackburn snorted, "Clean-up assuredly *unpleasant*. Additionally, you need work on your death glare. Pay attention."

Blackburn waved Rainbow's gaze back from Pinkie slowly and almost comfortably, and then narrowed her eyes, unleashing a sudden tension. Rainbow Dash took more than two steps back in a second, sudden shock. The harshness in Blackburn's eyes was easily in league with Fluttershy's Stare. Rainbow shakily returned to her original position. Pinkie exhaled, and practically leapt onto Dash.

"*Please*, D-Dashie. Don't w-worry about me," Pinkie said unsteadily, but sweetly, right in Dash's dilating eyes. "S-some ponies don't like my... *me*-ness, you know that. Just now... that wasn't fun. Remember the Gryphon Ruins, Dashie..." Pinkie murmured it sadly. Dash said nothing, rubbing a hoof on her forehead, breathing harshly, but she did nod, and Pinkie hugged her tightly.

"Pinkie Pie," Blackburn said, staring at the outburst dubiously, "You're being imprecise. Here's another how for you. That dot? Was not, *is not*, consequence of Rainbow Dash protecting you from... 'not liking your *you-ness*'. More exactly: matter of principle. Tiny pink Briar isn't *much* more bearable than big gold Briar, thus far. Keep your tone down. You're overcompensating. The Wastelands opened your eyes to danger? Relax. Your friends, your *Dashie*, they are all safe now... provided *my* discretion, and *adherence* to that discretion. Also... Gryphon Ruins? Intriguing. Needs explanation, gives explanation."

Pinkie stared at Blackburn for all of a second, looking for all the world like she would cry, then nodded and smiled. Blackburn returned her smile, the least aggressive and angry yet. "Gadget."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Have Pinpoint return to his position. He is no longer needed here."

“Right away.” Gadget tapped a button on her datapad, then stood back at attention.

Blackburn continued down the line to Rarity, who remained low until Blackburn gestured for her to rise. Blackburn then tediously scrutinized Rarity’s ensemble, humming all the while, before finally coming around full circle and turning to face the screens again.

When Blackburn used the word, it was almost pejorative. “*Lady... Rarity... acceptable.*”

Rarity’s jaw dropped. “Acc... *acceptable?! Y-Your Highness, p-p-please, reconsider!*”

Briarthorn chanced a deep, doleful sigh, and Blackburn actually grinned for a fraction of a second as he went on mournfully, “I warned you! That was me. That wasn’t Lockwood. I said ‘acceptable’. What a cad. What a loudmouth, idiot pervert.”

Blackburn snorted, and Briarthorn shrugged his wings. “She was all,” and everypony, even Blackburn started - if in her case very slightly - at the precise inflection and almost perfect imitation, “*“Oh, Briarthorn, you devilishly handsome rascalion, you might be gorgeous beyond all belief, but I think I have an idea about taste, you charming if uncouth ruffian, so I think I can handle my fashion, thank you very much, darling.”* She was doing so well up until that little idea.”

“He’s got your number there,” Applejack whispered, “Best dang Rarity impression I ever heard.”

“Oh *please*, I do *not* sound like *that* at *all!*” Rarity scoffed, “And I *certainly* don’t remember saying anything of *that* sort, either. *Hmph*. Your Highness,” she pleaded, “Why is this only just... just... *acceptable?*”

Blackburn tilted her head, and murmured, “‘How’, not ‘why’, again.” She sighed and continued, “Outfit is a perfect fit. Your ideal ensemble. You like the fancy things in life. Self-indulgent, vain, self-conscious. Like a princess. Perhaps *queen*,” she said with plain irony, “That look has been captured precisely. An admirable effort at attempting to impress a fellow *queen*. Of which court are you a member, *Lady Rarity?*”

Rarity tried not to look in Twilight’s direction. “I am with... House Celestia as well, Your Majesty. But-”

“Manners of a high-class upbringing. At the very least an attempt to emulate it, with clean results. Outfit choice an attempt to fit in with high society. Too many quirks, design influences, choices of flair. No, not royal, not high-class. Social climber. Your parents? Tourists with cameras. Tacky shirts. Embarrassed. How to cope? Extensive knowledge of fashion sense, especially a sense appropriate for typical dignitaries. *Inappropriate* for the *atypical*. Is your fashion sense giving you a ‘typical’, *Lady Rarity?*” she asked, flaring her wings and displaying

her own outfit.

Rarity shook off her stupor, and evaluated Blackburn's outfit with the same intense scrutiny she'd had hers examined with, minus the pacing. "No... no, I suppose not, Your Highness. This outfit looks more like one of those 'adventurous' princesses that I've read about in some of my more... 'candid' novels." She sighed, "And with the way this city looks, the way this whole *continent* looks and feels, I suppose I didn't think you *would* be of the fancy persuasion either, but-

"You wanted to look your best. An improvement over the tattered rags. What inspired you to use your old dress as a bandage?"

Rarity nodded. "Yes... well... it was a necessary evil. Lockwood's life was on the line, and I needed to help Twilight. No pony else had clothing long enough to make a suitable bandage. He's very dear to us all... some more than others," she added, chancing a quick glance over to Fluttershy.

"Lucky that you are knowledgeable about fashion, then," Blackburn added, "Dress was torn precisely right to work for your intended purpose. Didn't expose body unnecessarily. Briar? All over you, otherwise. More than he had. You're an attractive mare, after all. Wouldn't blame any pony for... looking."

"Pardon?" Rarity asked, tilting her head.

Blackburn nodded. "Your answer earlier? Good, until the end. However, not your fault. Stressing it now, when... the time is right. Never hurts to ask general questions rather than specifics, Lady Rarity," Blackburn said it for the first time without a trace of depreciation. "Hope things work out. Again: not your fault. You couldn't know."

Rarity blinked in confusion as Blackburn walked away. "Couldn't know... what?"

Blackburn came next to Applejack. Applejack eyed Blackburn warily as the pegasus circled her and nodded in approval all the while. At last, she took a step or two away from Applejack and looked at Rarity again, then back to Applejack, then back to Rarity, then back to Applejack, who she motioned for to rise.

"Lady Rarity, you designed these outfits," she observed. Rarity made to speak, but Blackburn just kept talking. "With assistance, of course. Two designers, experts. Despite this, you missed a critical piece of Applejack's ensemble."

Applejack spoke up, her voice solemn. "Briarthorn said the same thing, Yer Highness. Mah-

“Hat. Yes,” Blackburn interjected. She looked at Applejack for all of a second, then spoke again. “Hairstyle suggests you’re accustomed to wearing one. Don’t have one now, didn’t get one at shop. Attached to original. Sentimental item. Gift from a loved one. Remaining ensemble... suggests a stetson. Body tone of a hard worker. Utopian accent... hmm. Are your parents alive?” Applejack’s jaw dropped. This was all it took for Blackburn to continue. “My condolences. Family business, then. Took up the mantle, hardest worker in family. Beautiful place, Utopia. Friend of mine from the westside. Perhaps you are acquainted. Dialect suggests similar upbringing. Farm country?”

Applejack nodded. “Yeah... that’s right, I’m... from the farm country,” she answered, “Farmin’s in mah blood, y’see? Like ya said: family business.”

Blackburn nodded again. “Don’t know many ponies from the farm country. Vast territory, few settlements. You moved elsewhere. From same town as your friends. Very rare, country folk moving. Exceptions allowed. You tried the city proper, first, yes? Much more common. Didn’t like it, moved elsewhere. Relatives in the city?”

“Y-yup, that’s right, Yer Highness,” Applejack said warily, “I tried livin’ in the city wit’ mah aunt an’ uncle after...” She shook her head. “Didn’t much like it, went back ta farmin’. Thought I’d try mah hoof at some other crops though... like apples. How’d y’all figure-”

“Like Twilight Sparkle and Lady Rarity, you possess some knowledge of formal etiquette. Other crops, you say. These ‘apples’?” Blackburn smiled, “Curious. Never heard of one before. Another surprise. If there were no ships prepared to kill us, would go drinking with all of you soon. Even and perhaps especially you, Rainbow Dash. Apples... Rare commodity. Would be nice to try something truly new. Applejack. Consider shipping here. Excellent business venture. Head of family business suggests good business sense.”

“Yeah... yeah,” Applejack smiled, “I’ll see what I can do... Yer Highness.”

“Forgive Briar,” Blackburn said firmly, holding out a hoof to shake. Applejack warily took it, and was greeted with a very strong, firm shake in return. “Pseudo-sleaze. Most of the time. Image helps get him ignored. Useful persona. The drinking contest: disgusting terms of contract, correct? Wouldn’t have done any- well, *most* anything he may have said.” Briarthorn’s wings sagged to the ground again. Blackburn’s split-second grin once more reared and disappeared. “You were safe. Not in his character to force anypony. Hard to believe, yes. Intimidation tactic, nothing more. Think nothing of it. Not too terrible when he’s not trying to... un-win hearts and minds.”

Applejack nodded. “Right... I guess if anythin’, it’s mah pride that’s wounded. I actually thought I’d beat the jerk...”

“You had no chance. Best smuggler in the city. Drinking integral part of that. If no

drinking were involved, might have a chance at being the best *pilot*," she said with no small smirk in Briarthorn's direction, who shook his head tolerantly, smiling but clearly in defeat.

Blackburn moved over to Flathoof next, and looked over him with a firm, scrutinous gaze. Flathoof kept his own eyes on her the entire time he was able, and whenever she was out of his line of sight he'd glance over at Lockwood expectantly. Lockwood just stood there, a thin smile on his face. After a round or two, Blackburn gestured for Flathoof to rise and, for once, stayed focused on her quarry rather than looking elsewhere.

"Claim one: Lockwood's adopted brother," she said with an eerie calm.

"Yes, that's right, Your Highness," Flathoof nodded politely.

Blackburn's mouth curled in a very slight sneer. "Claim two: career criminal. Petty theft, nothing serious, all pointless. 'Filching tellies'. That *is* what your friend told Briar."

Flathoof gulped, "Yes, that's right."

Blackburn snorted and turned briefly towards Lockwood, then back to Flathoof. "One claim a lie. Lockwood doesn't associate with *pointless* type. Impossible to believe. Which claim is the lie?"

Flathoof nervously looked between Lockwood and Blackburn, sweat trickling down his forehead. "Well... Your Highness, you've got to understand-

"Answer the question," Blackburn snapped, getting right in Flathoof's face.

Flathoof calmly answered, "I'm... not a crook. That was a lie."

"Good answer," Blackburn said equally calmly, drawing away from Flathoof and using her wing to wipe off some spittle she'd gotten on his face, "Lockwood's adopted brother indeed. Polite. Well-spoken. Well-mannered. Dedicated to family, even adopted members. You typically live with your family?"

Flathoof nodded tentatively. "Yes... we're very close. Still live with them and everything, Your Majesty. If I may ask..." He waited. She watched him for a moment, then nodded. "Did... Lockwood tell any of this to you? If he did, he was just-

"Trying to keep you out of trouble," Blackburn interrupted, "Something he does. Hasn't divulged anything. Told him to divulge nothing. More to ponder myself. You, Flathoof. You. Acknowledges authority figures. Cool-headed under fire. Suggests formal training of some sort. Old shirt standard issue undergarment for city workers. Not NPAF, minimal knowledge of NPAF Navy." Flathoof gulped, just before Blackburn finished, "Is it *Officer* Flathoof, then?"

Flathoof let out a breath, and nodded. "Yes... that's right, Your Highness."

Blackburn nodded back. "Not one of the corrupt cops, either. Build suggests patrol officer. Firm voice and gaze suggests position of authority. Rank is... hmm. Higher than Sergeant. Either Lieutenant or Captain."

Flathoof nodded again. "Captain, Your Highness."

He was surprised when she offered her hoof for him to shake, and took it firmly, giving her the same strong shake she was giving him. She pulled him close to her with the shake and whispered in his ear, "Not many good cops out there. Rare commodity. Looking forward to knowing you better."

She broke the shake and moved on down the line, leaving Flathoof to scratch his head. "Knowing me better?"

Blackburn turned to the monitors and took steps towards them. "Cruisers remain unmoved. Still no signals to them, from them. Gadget!"

Gadget perked up. "Yes, Your Highness?"

"Any updates from generators?"

"No, Your Majesty," Gadget confirmed. "No reports of any kind."

"Curious..." Blackburn mused.

Blackburn walked next to Fluttershy and, to everypony's confusion, seemed to rush through her once-over with her and quickly gestured for her to rise. First, she reached out and grabbed Fluttershy's hoof and lifted it up so that she could get a good look at the Bonding Bracelet. Fluttershy was nervous about the odd attention being given, which caused Ophanim's orb within to bounce around haphazardly, ready to burst out and pounce.

"An odd relic," Blackburn observed, "Markings are Runic in origin. Suggests affiliation with either gryphons or Harmony Guard. Physique and mannerisms do not hint towards either. Too frail and timid to be archaeologist or soldier. Presentation of jewelry resembles an engagement ring. Pretty. Stolen from the Gryphon Ruins, perhaps?"

Fluttershy meekly nodded. "W-well, Your-"

Blackburn continued moving as if she hadn't even heard Fluttershy speak. She grabbed the collar of Lockwood's jacket that Fluttershy was still proudly wearing, straightening it so that

the jacket looked more presentable. "Lockwood's... no, *your* jacket. Given as a gift, treated with care. Been cleaned, repaired." She leaned her face in ever so slightly to the jacket's collar, then frowned very slightly, then released her grip on the jacket. "No more traces of him. Keep it."

Fluttershy looked at Lockwood for a moment, but suddenly Blackburn spread her wing, blocking Lockwood from view. Fluttershy very briefly appeared very annoyed and looked at Blackburn as the source of her annoyance, causing Blackburn to sneer at her. Blackburn then tucked the wing around so that she and Fluttershy's faces were obscured from everypony's view, and leaned in very close to Fluttershy's ear. No pony quite made out what was said, but when Blackburn tucked her wing back in and walked away, her stride strong and proud, she left a very bewildered Fluttershy in her wake.

Blackburn stepped onto the platform and turned to the group, gesturing for Gadget to approach her. Gadget passed her datapad from before to the Queen, bowing slightly as she did so and then rapidly backing away. Blackburn poked at the device a few times, and without even looking up at the group, began addressing them. Her tone was stern and condescending.

"This device contains all eight background checks performed on you," she said, holding the datapad up just a little before bringing it back down. She read it again, then tossed it over to Gadget, who caught it with her magic and replaced it in her pocket. "Not exactly interesting, at first. Flathoof, a bit. Tick Tock, mildly engaging. You six, a departure. *Very* interesting. Suspicious, even without background checks.

"Six ponies all with same background information. Short, simple. Recently registered in New Pandemonium database. Stories collaborate, suggests interrelations. Possible conspiracy against Pandemonium government. Yet, all six leave city within days of arriving. Not suspicious to New Pandemonium, cover story bought hook, line, and sinker. New Pandemonium red tape often appears *intentional*. All six ponies from same town in Utopia. Ponyville. Very unusual name for a town. Curious. Doesn't fit Utopian standards. At all. Utopian settlements: Utopia itself, capital city; Newhaven, shipping harbor; Deepgrove, mining town; Agora Gardens, agricultural center. All very concise, but lovely names. Ponyville. Blatant and bland. Uncreative. Should have tried... Stalliongrad? No. Too masculine. Perhaps Fillydelphia."

Twilight and Rarity shared very nervous looks with one another, knowing full well those were real cities in their world. Twilight coughed, "Um... r-right. Yes, well... we were under pressure to think of a name quickly, and it was the first thing to come to mind. We realized our folly too late, but we were desperate. We sort of ended up in New Pandemonium rather suddenly and without any idea what to do. We're not from around there at all, and never planned on going."

"Brings to question why you would have even gone then," Blackburn said with a shrug. "Don't believe in miracles, but your story. Believed? Comes closest to miraculous as have ever *seen*. Never explained to anypony in the city how you ended up in New Pandemonium in the

first place though. Not on your profiles. Curious. Might have cleared up some suspicions.”

Tick Tock cleared her throat. “Ah... well, Your Majesty, you see-”

Blackburn interrupted her, “A ‘teleportation accident’. Listen carefully, Twilight Sparkle: / *know* how you unicorns’ teleportation works. You? Even you? Can’t teleport across the Belt of Tranquility. Wonderfully ironic for what amounts to a magic nullification field. Requires very precise and delicate magic to get through. Teleportation not one of them, regardless of power. Very difficult to believe the one unicorn that could do it comes from some backwater village. Even more difficult to believe said unicorn had never been to New Pandemonium before. Same with unicorn’s other friends, barring one earth pony.”

Tick Tock gulped. “Oh... w-whatever do you mean, Your Highness?”

“Speech patterns.” Blackburn pointed first at Rarity. “Rarity - Inner District accent, Whiteworth Heights. Some cultural traits from Moonlight Hills leads to misinterpretation, but distinct Whiteworth Heights dialect.” Blackburn imitated Rarity, nearly as well as Briarthorn had, “Puts too much *emphasis* on certain *words*.”

She pointed next at Rainbow. “Rainbow Dash - Outer District, northside. Slight use of westside slang. Bizarre coloration suggests influence of Mid-East culture, but no Mid-East slang in use.”

Next, Pinkie. “Pinkie Pie - Mid-West, North Plaza... hmm. Perhaps West Plaza. Very similar, only separated by usage of slang. Haven’t heard anything to make proper distinction.”

Next, Twilight. “Twilight Sparkle - Inner District, Arcadia. Tone of voice suggests high education, minimal interaction with outsiders. Only other option Mid-South, Central Plaza, but formal etiquette suggests Inner District upbringing. Not much contact, yet multiple potential locales? Conspicuous.”

She pointed at Fluttershy, and her eyes narrowed. “You. Outer District, eastside. Unremarkable. Dull.”

Tick Tock again attempted to speak. “Y-Your Highness, I’m certain... amnesia!” She pointed briskly at Twilight. “Yes, they all suffer from... terrible, *terrible* amnesia. Poor dears may be from where you suggested but-” Blackburn’s half-lidded stare made Tick Tock chuckle nervously. “Perhaps... not. Um...”

Blackburn resumed speaking after a very slow roll of her eyes. “Yes. Perhaps not. Other oddities stand out. Suspicious answers. Twilight Sparkle,” she said, pointing a hoof at Twilight, “Thundercracker the Prodigious? Well-known as a fraud. Being a fan at all: highly unlikely. Your outfit, despite this, similar in design. Coloration is reminiscent of Skyfall the Wanderer.

Incidentally a pegasus. Not a mage. Could still be a fan, though. Good guess, nice try.”

Twilight sheepishly rubbed her head, “Oh... um... eh heh, r-right...”

“Pinkie Pie’s gun,” Blackburn pointed next, causing Pinkie to excitedly reach for the mentioned weapon and twirl it about.

Gadget immediately pointed her own weapon straight at Pinkie’s face, having sprinted in front of her the second Pinkie had reached for her weapon. “Hey hey whoa! The heck do you think you’re doing, nutball? Don’t make me test out the ‘Disintegration’ setting on this baby! You wanna end up as a little scorch mark here or what?”

“You’re threatening the wrong mare there, kiddo,” Rainbow sneered, taking a step forward.

Gadget whipped around and the gun was now pointing right at Rainbow Dash. “You just try it! This baby can generate one-point-two-one gigawatts of electromagnetic energy in a concentrated burst. Imagine being struck by lightning twice at the same time.”

“Oh, I know allll about getting struck by lightning,” Rainbow taunted back, “How about you? Because I’d be more than willing to show you.”

“Hotheads,” Blackburn sighed, “Gadget. Calm down. Nothing to worry about. Neither would attempt anything unless provoked.”

“Yeah, c’mon, I’m not a bad mare,” Pinkie said with a bat of her eyelashes, “You don’t have to worry about me going all Killing Spree on you guys. It’s tempting though, since it *would* be my first Killionaire.” She giggled loudly at the confused looks both Rainbow and Gadget were giving her. “Actually, you *really* shouldn’t be worried because I made sure I turned ‘Friendly Fire’ to ‘OFF’. Because, well, sometimes I get an itchy trigger hoof and-”

In her focus on talking instead of on hanging onto her twirling gun, she suddenly lost grip on her rifle. It flew a few feet away, landed on the floor with a thud, and fired a spray of bullets directly at Rarity. Rarity screamed as the bullets careened into her, continued screaming as they harmlessly plinked against her body without a shred of force behind them, and continued screaming far after the threat had passed. The silence of everypony staring at her alerted her to the absence of danger, and she sheepishly chuckled in embarrassment. That didn’t stop her from frantically running her hooves all over herself to check for holes in her body and, just as importantly, her flowing cape.

A bright red dot suddenly appeared on the floor and started frantically snapping to everything that moved in the line. Blackburn rolled her eyes. “Gadget. Thought you told Pinpoint to return to post? Tell him: calm down.”

“On it, Your Majesty.” Gadget growled and rapidly tapped her datapad.

The red light stopped on Pinkie’s face, then disappeared. Everypony took a breath of relief.

“Um... oops?” Pinkie nervously laughed as everypony glared at her. “Well... like I was saying, sometimes I get an itchy trigger hoof, *and* I’ve got total butterhooves. I’m used to melee weapons, see? Still adjusting! I’m no team-killing bucktard, I swear! Well... not on purpose anyway. Heh heh...”

Blackburn blinked once, twice, three times. “Most... unusual.” She took a deep breath. “This at least returns to the matter of Pinkie’s gun, given this... demonstration of ‘Friendly Fire’. Pinkie Pie. Your weapon resembles techno-magic. Despite this, not of any make or model on any record in our databases. Not a prototype, from either New Pandemonium, or Hope’s Point. Our city primarily still armed with projectile weaponry at individual level. Ship weapon systems basis for prototypical, individual use.” She briefly smiled at Gadget before continuing. “Prototype protocols for replacement by personnel-equippable energy weapons *ongoing*. Real projectiles currently relegated to use by A.M.P Troopers, Militia, and... ‘enthusiasts’. You are not an A.M.P. drone,” she said with a tone bordering on amusement, “Nor are you Militia. Also, not an enthusiast if you are a... ‘butterhooves’. Pinkie Pie. Your weapon? Not a relic: gryphon techno-magic never designed for direct combat, much less precision weapon. No techno-magic in Utopia at all. Said weapon thus defies all current standards. As if... impossible. But-”

“Whoa whoa whoa!” Pinkie suddenly shouted, “Ix-nay on the possible-impay!”

It was too late. As soon as the words had left Blackburn’s mouth, Pinkie’s rifle disappeared in a puff of logic.

“Weapon relies on inspiration. Magic. A school of magic. On *belief*? More *surprises*.” Blackburn smiled distantly. “As if an issue of imagination. Still. Keep your ‘Friendly Fire’ settings constant, Pinkie Pie. If manifested too obviously, too easily removed. Might consult with you on methodology. As it stands, unreliable. For now, only opinion? Bizarre,” Blackburn finished flatly.

Pinkie groaned and dropped her hooves in show of a dramatic letdown. “Aw shoot... well, guess I’m gonna hafta pick a new loadout. This one was kind of redundant anyway. Hang on a sec.”

Pinkie collapsed to the ground and stopped moving for several seconds. The other ponies nearby all looked on with intense curiosity, completely unsure what was happening, what was going to happen, or why they were even bothering wondering in the first place.

“Um...” Rainbow gulped nervously, “Pinks? Pinks, you okay?” She poked Pinkie’s body,

causing her to roll a little. Rainbow leapt back in surprise at seeing Pinkie's white eyes. "Pinkie? *Pinkie?*" She rushed forward and grabbed Pinkie's lifeless body and shook it violently. "Pinkie! Get up!"

"Calm down Dashie, holy cow," Pinkie said from the entrance to the chamber.

She wandered over and kicked her corpse out of the way until it vanished. Her friends all looked at her with some relief, letting out their breaths all at once. They all, Blackburn and Gadget included, watched in confusion as Pinkie was now carrying two completely new weapons on her back: one, a rifle with a thinner barrel than the one she'd been carrying before, but still short and stocky. She also had a very small one strapped to her right flank, just by where her Cutie Mark would be if not under all that armor.

"There we go," Pinkie chirped as she double-checked herself. "Sorry about the wait everypony: suicide delay. You know how it is. Figured I'd go for a more 'long-range' loadout this time. It should work better since we've already got so many 'close-range' fighters, like AJ and Dashie. Balance and teamwork win rounds, baby!" she cheered.

Blackburn blinked rapidly, then shook her head. "Won't question: is the point, correct, Pinkie Pie?"

"Absotively Posolutely!" Pinkie saluted.

"Thank you. *Quiet*. Please." Blackburn snorted, whipping her head to her next target "Moving on. Applejack?" she continued, "If not previously clear from city dialect discussion? Farm country ponies also maintain distinct accents. Yours, not even close to *farm country*. Close to Crossfire's. That part most definitely true. Newhaven accent, west *coast* of Utopian continent. If attempting to pass off as pony from there? Best bet would be labor worker. More generic. Would encompass farming too, no lying involved. Honesty: best policy. You would agree?"

Applejack sighed, "Yeah... I would. An', well, ta be honest, Yer Highness... what I said really *was* the truth, in a manner of speakin'. I really *am* a farmer. I wasn't lyin' 'bout that... I just ain't from Utopia." Applejack shot a look at the disapproving Tick Tock. "Aw don't look at me like that, Tick Tock, y'all knew we were gonna be found out sooner or later. I'm gettin' tired o' all this here lyin' 'bout everythin'. Puts an uneasy feelin' in mah gut."

Blackburn nodded and addressed the group as a whole, "All of you? Learn from Applejack's example. Truth is not merely important. *Paramount*. Lies cloud vision, lead to trouble. No more lies. No more half-truths. Permission to leave only granted if you explain *exactly* what is going on. Not from around here. Stories inconsistent. Appearance spontaneous. You're from parts unknown. When the whole world is well-known, only leaves one option: you're not of *'this world'*."

“That’s a... pretty sharp jump,” Tick Tock nervously chuckled, “What, like... aliens? You think they’re aliens? That’s simply bonkers. Heh heh... w-why would you-”

Blackburn stared at Tick Tock, her expression unchanging. “Possibility. When the impossible is eliminated, only leaves improbable. When only improbable is left, must be truth, no matter *how* improbable. Determination to keep the secret suggests obvious involvement and investment. Journey to send them ‘*home*’, your idea. Seeking help from ponies willing offer it. Knowledge of Chronomancy... hmm. Thought ‘Chronomancers’ were only legends.”

Tick Tock’s jaw dropped. “What... what did *he* tell you?” she asked hesitantly, referring to Lockwood.

“Nothing. Wanted to tell me. Told him to say nothing. Easy enough to see through the deceit,” Blackburn insisted, “Lockwood would agree. Honesty? Best policy.”

Lockwood nodded. “Believe me everypony, it would be in your best interests to just come clean. Speaking of which-”

Blackburn shot him a very quick, almost pleading look. “Irrelevant. Not an option. Stop suggesting it.”

Lockwood sighed, “Really now, do you *want* to sound-”

Blackburn huffed, “*Not* hypocritical either. Irrelevant. Not an option. Discussion over.” She snapped her head to glare at Briarthorn, who tried to discreetly pretend he hadn’t been watching with interest. She turned back to the others. “The full story. Back to front. No omissions.”

Twilight took a step forward. “If I could, Your Majesty? I have a way that can save us all the time and give you the full story, back to front, no omissions. Exactly how you want it, right? I suppose if we’re going to come clean, we may as well give you the whole story with as much detail as possible. I know a little spell I learned from a very wise creature that he taught me specifically for this sort of situation. I’ve been waiting for a chance to use it, if you don’t mind?”

Blackburn paused for a few moments, then nodded. “A ‘memory’ spell. Complicated magic. Gryphon origin. Curious to see; curious to *experience*.”

Briarthorn cracked a grin on one side of his face. “Couldn’t agree more, Queenie. I’ve been looking forward to actually *seeing* our Twily here *use* some fancy magic instead of just seeing the admittedly impressive aftermath. Pop those pretty peepers of yours, Gadget, you might learn a thing or two from our wizard here.”

“Oh har har,” Gadget snorted.

Twilight stood firmly in the center of the group and channeled her magic through her horn, causing it to glow a brilliant white. It glowed and glowed until at last, a great burst of light came from it and enshrouded the ponies all in a sheath of light. Seconds later the bright aura subsided, and all the ponies swayed slightly as the spells' effects wore off. A few of them blinked their eyes open warily, others rubbed them to clear them of light.

Briarthorn spoke first, his voice calm and collected as he looked out at the ponies not from Hope's Point with sincere compassion. "Stars and skies above, ladies. And Flathoof. And Lockwood. I mean, I knew you were in the Wastelands. I understand that place is terrible. A real hellscape, but... but... geez, I just couldn't have *imagined* that. Holy horse-*crapples*, I am sorry."

Gadget shook her head in disbelief, especially at Rainbow, "*Golly*, no wonder you weren't worried about a little electromagnetic discharge."

Blackburn stood like a statue, eyes closed. The groaning and murmuring around the group wore off as they stared at her, unmoving. After several long moments, Briarthorn leaned over and reached out with a wing tip. As his wing neared her ear, he immediately jumped back, startled, as she cleared her throat, opening her eyes slowly, letting her gaze drift back and forth across the group.

"Enlightening. Fascinating. Almost... wondrous. Answered questions, provided new ones. So many surprises. Not even my birthday. Six ponies. Alternate dimension. Trying to save their world. Affecting ours. Trying to save ours too. Full story. Back to front. No omissions. As asked. You need my help."

"That's the long and short of it," Tick Tock nodded, "We truly are sorry for the deception but-"

Blackburn dismissed her with a wave of her hoof. "Part of your job. Acceptable excuse. Tolerable. Should have been forthcoming sooner, would have saved time. Cruisers overhead will make... trouble." She looked back towards the screens and shook her head. "Still no movement. Still waiting for signal... or something else. Something... *worse*. All makes sense now... hmm. Need to move quickly. Twilight Sparkle, prepare yourself and your friends for departure."

Twilight beamed, "Oh! So, you're going to grant us passage right *now*? Oh, thank you Your Highness! We were worried we'd have to wait until the danger had passed."

Blackburn shook her head subtly. "Danger not over until... hmm." She took a deep breath, then began frantically pacing back and forth in front of the hub station, muttering to herself all the while with only Lockwood and Gadget paying her any heed.

“Twily, it’s only logic, and Queenie loves her logic. Saving the world is, when you get right down to it, probably one of the most logical things you can do. Especially if the world is terrible!” Briarthorn beamed at her and drifted sideways, wrapping a wing around Twilight with his typical light tone restored, despite visible bruises forming on his face. “We’d be pretty *stupid* to not try and help you. Not only do you get to save your world, but we get to save ours. That’s two worlds for the price of one! And hey, if her Royal Rough and Tumble is ready to give you the clear, how could I say no to a bunch of pretty faces?”

“Since I’m still vouching, I suppose I’m up for a tour of my ship. Gimme an hour, and we can blow this snowglobe. I figure it’ll be tough, but I figure her Worshipfulness here’s got a bang-up plan to stop us from getting banged up. And before you start with the looks again, have you noticed how many innuendos I’ve been skipping? That’s how exciting this is gonna be! I always love a good obstacle course.”

Tick Tock rolled her eyes. “And here I thought we’d be seeing the last of him. Fantastic.”

“Oh don’t be such a worrywart, Tick Tock,” Twilight smiled, “I’m sure we’ll all be okay. Briarthorn said he’s a good pilot, you don’t have to worry about this being the last we ever see of him.” Tick Tock blinked rapidly, then put a hoof to her face.

Briarthorn uncurled his wing from Twilight and started moving past the group and towards the door, Blackburn suddenly said, her voice low but strikingly clear as it crossed the room, “Briar. No order was given to *you* to prepare for flight.”

Briarthorn instantly stopped dead in his tracks, and raised an eyebrow. “Oh. Uh. Yes. You’re right, Highness. But... I am their voucher, right? I was the in. Now I’m not the out, huh?”

“‘Twilight Sparkle, prepare yourself and your friends for departure’. Exact words. Don’t recall saying, ‘Briar, prepare Twilight Sparkle and her friends to depart’. Wouldn’t advise it, the Thunder...” She smirked at Briarthorn, who took another eye-roll to the ceiling for a miracle that wouldn’t come. “Not exactly recommended. Not capable of an *errand* of simple *magnitude*. Requires a more suitable ship.”

Briarthorn’s eyes went from a doleful drift upward to a sudden dart to Blackburn. Her face was almost blank. The smile was almost invisible. Briarthorn’s mouth split sideways in a huge grin as she continued. “Requires a more suitable *pilot*. More dangerous than you realize. Diffusion system must be optimal.”

Rarity spoke, “Your Highness, if you don’t my asking...” Blackburn nodded in allowance. “Well, if Briarthorn isn’t taking us, then-”.

“Who is? Should be obvious.” She turned to Gadget. “Notify Crossfire of change in plans. Inform of rendezvous at main elevator.”

“Already on it, Your Highness,” Gadget confirmed, taking out her datapad and hastily tapping away at it. “Done. He is already en route. Shall I-”

“Inform the hangar bay? Yes. Make preparations for the Wyvern to leave. Triple-time it, want to leave as soon as we arrive.”

Briarthorn reared back on both hind legs, and pumped both his forehooves and wings all together. “Oh, *hell* yes. *You’re* taking them. And I get to run Diffusion on the *Wyvern*. It’s been *years!* Like old times, Queenie, like old times.”

Everypony’s jaw dropped slightly, except Lockwood’s and Gadget’s, though Lockwood did raise an eyebrow. “You are?” he asked, “This is... unexpected. Why?”

“You made a promise to these mares,” Blackburn replied simply, “Means you’re going along to ensure smooth transition. Would try to talk you out of it...” She took a sharp breath. “Waste of time. Wouldn’t have it any other way. Too nice for your own good. Nearly got you killed already,” she added, shooting a very sharp glare at Fluttershy. Fluttershy, to her own surprise, found herself returning the glare in earnest. “Need to-”

“Make sure I’m safe...” Lockwood sighed, completing her sentence to everypony’s surprise, again except for Gadget. Briarthorn settled back on all four hooves, and looked at them intently, narrowing his eyes even as he kept grinning. “So that’s why, is it? You’re taking us because *I’m* going? What if I-”

“Stuck around? Wouldn’t force issue. Know you wouldn’t do that. Can’t risk putting in you in others’ hooves again.” She looked sharply at Briarthorn, who was look an odd mix of intent curiosity, enthusiasm, and a brief pang of hurt as she’d emphasized the word “others”. “Briar. Were this any other precious cargo, would be your assignment. Different scenario. So you run Diffusion. Ideal. You would agree?”

Briarthorn stood silent for a long moment, his grin fading as he began to very visibly think, tapping his chin and rolling his eyebrows. When at last he spoke, he pointed a hoof at her in an almost accusing gesture. “Your Majesty,” he said hesitantly, “‘Different’ is the word, I think. Ideal? Not yet. Something *weird* has been rolling around in my head these past few days- Hey! At this point, I’m beginning to suspect it’s you guys with the gutter minds, giving me those looks. I’m talking about Lockwood- HEY! That’s all on you, ladies. Women! ‘Men like two girls all the time, we don’t like two men!’ What a load of horsesh-” Blackburn leaned her head forward, making Briarthorn jump. “Aha-ha! Whoa, okay, no death glare. Right, on point: ‘precious cargo’? I’m not sure you’re talking just about our girls, and Flathoof, here, what with Lockwood talking like it’s him. And you know what? I don’t usually see you go to such lengths for a ‘business partner’...”

Gadget sharply interjected, "It's none of your business, Briarthorn! Her Majesty can do as she pleases, don't question her decisions! Must you *always* be so dang nosey?!"

"Oh, yes, Gadget, sweetie. I must, I must!" Briarthorn said through a new cracked grin on the side of his face. "That's my typical job, isn't it? I get to sniff out leads on jobs that make a stink? Wouldn't want to find out I'm accidentally carrying a load of cargo with some sort of Pandemonium spy equipment. Or some new A.M.P. Trooper that can reassemble itself on a timer. Remember what happened to Crimson Sky? Remember that? Rest the poor guy's soul, but we almost had a security breach big enough to drive my presumed ego through it. I'm just being *respectfully* cautious, and rightfully so, in the face of... some very *suspicious* turns of this little event. I've known Her Grace long enough to have picked up at least *some* of her fun little detective habits. She's acting *funny*. Our Worshipful Majesty, Hope's Point's Shepherd, Her Highness Queen Blackburn doesn't *do* 'funny'."

"Issue resolved," Blackburn stated clearly, stamping a hoof, "Discrepancies should be directed elsewhere. Not interested in hearing them. You're dismissed."

"Whoa. Whoa, whoa. Now. Hey. I got my punishment. Am I breaking a new rule where I can't make inquiry on debriefing? Are you amending my punishment? I'll take it, if you want to add on to my *disgrace*, Highness. I'm not going to rally against your decision, Blackburn."

As he said her name without title or nickname, her lip curled, but her eyes were far from angry. Through her steel, there was the barest trace of something else. Briarthorn blinked at her, and now spoke with compassion, as he had after the memory induction spell.

"Easy, easy, easy. I'm not trying to put you on the spot, Queenie. You know that. I just... I think it's *weird*. What's gotten your tail in a knot, huh? Besides the cruisers- and hey, seriously, the cruisers? This kind of threat? Right above our heads, wouldn't you want to... y'know, be *here*?"

Lockwood sighed loudly enough that Blackburn turned to look straight at him. Her eyes widened and she grit her teeth when he tipped his hat at her. Without a word, she frantically gestured with one of her wings at him, then the other, before using one to discreetly point at Briarthorn, then back to her. Lockwood rolled his eyes and attempted to gesture with his damaged wing, then audibly winced. Blackburn's eyes widened again and she bit her lip. He shrugged sheepishly at her, then tipped his hat again and smiled. She grumbled wordlessly and dismissively waved a hoof, which just caused him to fluster again and point rapidly at her, then again at Briarthorn, then at Rarity, then at Flathoof; the last in the chain he pointed at, Fluttershy, made Blackburn scowl again.

All of this caused the entire party present, sans Gadget, to watch them in utter confusion, and even more so that Gadget seemed completely nonplussed about the whole thing. Even Briarthorn was watching them with curiosity, nodding his head, slowly and intently every other

second.

“You know pegasus wing language, don’t you? I only know a few very basic gestures, mostly... uh... not-socially-acceptable ones from Rainbow Dash,” Twilight whispered, “What was all that about? Please tell me you understood all that.” His disappointed grin made her frown. “Oh dear. Um... *any* of that?”

“I’ve had to *wing* it, now and again, yeah. Wing language is good for some of the older pilots. Your hearing goes bad when you’re next to an engine for like thirty years. This is... this is a little precise, though. I’m not up to terms on a *secret code* version. This is something Her Majesty made up on her own... and told Lockwood. It’s an argument. I mean, you can kinda tell, right? But we just saw what happens when you argue with Queenie- well, *you* saw. I *felt*. It goes nowhere, right? The weirdness is cropping up again, because... if they’re arguing... She-” Briarthorn’s eyes suddenly got wide. “She looks like... she’s *listening to him*? *But-*” He suddenly stopped, mid-sentence. Then he made a quiet sound, a breath of a laugh. “No. No way. *No. Way.*”

“What is it?” Twilight asked in worry.

Briarthorn shook his head, like he was reeling. “Wow. Twily, I’m... I’m sorry, wow, okay... wow. Okay... I’m sorry, just. I need a minute here... oh. Wow. Man. Dude. Dude man. World upside down... just... just need a minute...” He sagged, and leaned heavily onto Twilight

“Oof.” Twilight looked at him worriedly as he fanned himself with one of his wings.

“Just tell them, please?” Lockwood asked sincerely, breaking the tense silence and surprising Blackburn with the sudden noise. “A lot of things could be made a lot easier if we just came clean. I’m in enough hot water as it is because *I* didn’t say anything. Even if it is because-”

“Asked you not too!” Blackburn hissed quietly, “Expected you to keep up your end, not surprised you did. Agreed that-”

“Until we were ready, we’d keep it under wraps. I know... I know, but... I think now’s as good a time as any,” Lockwood said firmly, “After all, I’m not going back to Pandemonium. Kind of a wanted criminal there now and all. Just tell them already. At the very least Briarthorn, Flathoof and... Fluttershy-”

“Deserve to know?!” Blackburn blurted, “Flathoof, yes. Family. Sensible. Briar, maybe. Looks like he’s figured it out now *anyway*. *Thank you for that*. Fluttershy? *No*. Illogical. Besides, she’d just-”

“Be mad at me... I know...” he sighed. He looked in Fluttershy’s direction apologetically again, then desperately hid his face behind the brim of his hat again when she gave him that

expectant, hurt look. "But... I'd rather she be mad at me than leave this world thinking a lie. It's not-"

"Fair? Fair?!" Blackburn spat, "No! Not fair! Not ready to tell anypony. Planned special occasion for unveiling. Final answer! No more-"

Lockwood spread his wings, both of them, with a great deal of strain, and tucked them forward in a sort of prayer-like gesture, bowing on the floor as he did so. He then offered one wing out towards her while tucking the other over his heart.

Blackburn's eyes widened and her face reddened, and she flustered, "Y-You... but... b-but..." She looked hesitantly at Briarthorn, who suddenly looked *very* interested, then at Gadget, who just looked at her with a soft smile. She sighed, defeated, "Gesture always works. Fine. Will tell them, but only because I-"

She interrupted herself and turned to the others, but addressed Briarthorn specifically as it had been his question. "Briar. Lockwood shows up at city doorstep half-dead, half-undead; loses ability to fly; can't see out one eye, eye is... unpleasant to see; doesn't tell me he's coming; circumstances, i.e. *three giant battleships*, prevent giving proper welcome; also learned *how* this happened, learned especially *who* to blame," she sneered, again glaring at Fluttershy. "Want answers for my behavior?"

Briarthorn curled a wing around Twilight again, leaning into her even further, pulling his head into his forehooves, visibly shaking on his back legs "Oh, no. No, no. You were right. I got it. I mean. I get it. I *totally* get it. Wow. I mean... just wow. I... I just need some *time* to let my mind wrap around this for a second. It's like, you're staring at a puzzle on a wall for five years and it made no sense, and then, *kerpow!*"

"What puzzle? What do you get? What *kerpow*? Wrap your head around *what?!?*" Twilight blurted, her confusion reaching critical mass.

Blackburn snorted, "Lockwood is my *fiancé*."

The entire room, from the ponies standing before the monitoring hub to even the ponies spread all around the room, went totally silent. Some ponies had stopped whatever it was they were doing mid-action, dropping datapads or running into things in a stupor, completely taken aback by the words they'd just heard. Blackburn looked not at all perturbed by all the reactions, and in fact, after a moment of tilting her head back and forth, eyes closed, opened them again and looked surprisingly proud and relieved to have finally said them. Only Briarthorn and Fluttershy did not look on in wonder and confusion. The latter's eyes had widened, her bottom lip began to quiver, and she began to shake in place, shaking her head in utter disbelief. Caught up in his puzzle wall metaphor, Briarthorn could only nod sagely.

Rarity finally broke the silence. "I... I b-b-beg your pardon?" she flustered.

"Didn't stutter, not repeating self. Should not come as surprise. Did everything possible for him under pretense he was Briar's friend. Easy to keep true intentions hidden... hmm. Hadn't planned on Lockwood wanting to tell everypony," she admitted, looking behind her with a sigh, "Did you honestly believe it was *all* because he was Briar's friend? Giant feasts. Shopping sprees. Lavish hotels. Free drinks. Complicated, expensive surgery, required a unicorn without medical license, vetoed ethics board's decision to let her do what nopony else could? If that were the case, you might inspire extreme worry for the fate of your world. *Captain Briarthorn?* Influential, popular around city. Not *that* popular."

"Well... we assumed that Lockwood had everything to do with it, so I guess we were right on that one, in a manner of speaking," Twilight said nervously, "He's shown us just how resourceful he is in calling in favors, so we assumed that Briarthorn, as Lockwood's friend, would just tell somepony what happened and they'd take care of things."

"His reputation certainly makes me believe that," Tick Tock agreed, "I was somewhat hesitant at first, because you're right. *Briarthorn*. But Lockwood really played up the idea that they were close friends."

"This all makes a lot sense..." Twilight nodded, "That's why you got me into that operation room, and why you wanted to observe the surgery, isn't it? Even Doctor Sugarcane thought that was odd. I feel bad for not noticing it sooner..."

"And it would explain why he didn't use her as his voucher, why she pretended not to know him even to Briarthorn," Rainbow Dash pointed out, "If they were keeping it that secret, nopony would've believed him, least of all the gate guards. Hmph... I just *knew* he was keeping something like this from everypony," she added with a glare, "Figures."

"This certainly is *quite* an unexpected turn," Rarity sighed, "I should've guessed why a cute mare like Keeneye wouldn't interest you. The excuse Applejack gave me via Flathoof's depiction of your tastes seemed *odd*... and now it certainly seems... ahem, *odder*. This is quite eventful, if I do say so myself."

"Eventful?" Flathoof balked, "This is *more* than eventful! Lockwood... why didn't you ever tell me? I mean okay, you didn't need to say you were engaged to the Queen of Hope's Point, but you never even told me you *had* a special somepony. My mom was trying to set you up with Pattycake for years, and here I thought the only reason you didn't go with it was because it made the three of us feel really awkward. You really should have said *something*."

"Yes, telling us the truth *would* have avoided certain..." Rarity trailed off, trying not to look at the Fluttershy, "Complications."

"I didn't lie to you, Rarity," Lockwood sighed. "You... asked if I had a girlfriend. I said no. Which was true. I didn't have a girlfriend, I had a *fiancée*. Two completely different things."

"How long have you known her that you're actually *engaged*, Lockwood?" Flathoof asked.

"Seven years," Lockwood smiled.

Flathoof's jaw dropped. "*What?! You've... you've been seeing her since I was in the academy?*" He shook his head despondently. "Now some things are starting to put themselves together. When did you-"

Lockwood sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. "*She* popped the question, actually, five years ago. Look Flathoof, I'm sorry I never told you... or anypony, really, but she asked me not to and frankly, she had a point. If somepony in Pandemonium knew I was in a relationship with Queen Blackburn of Hope's Point... well, technically she was Princess Blackburn at the time. But anyway, if anypony knew I was together with her, they'd probably do something to me to get to her, and she didn't want that. Even then, they might do something to *my* family to get to *me*, knowing that *I* could be used to get to *her*. Word travels fast, so she had to keep it secret from ponies she knew too. Not worth an accidental leak."

Pinkie swooned, "Just like in the fairy tales. A forbidden love, kept secret from everypony out of fear for the safety of one another. At least you two made it work... how romantic." She twirled around in a circle until she caught sight of Fluttershy giving her a very nasty glare, causing her to instantly stop, squeak, and get back in line behind Rainbow Dash.

"I can't believe that all this time..." Flathoof grumbled.

"I'm sorry, Flathoof," Lockwood said sincerely, "It took a lot of convincing for me to agree to it, but... she made her point. It feels good to be able to say it now..." And he looked hesitantly at Fluttershy, who was glaring at him, her teeth still clenched. He sighed, "Even if I should've hinted at it sooner. I'm sorry..."

"Sorry? *Sorry?!*" Fluttershy blurted, "All this time, you... you *lied* to me! You told me you I-I-liked me too!"

"I *do* like you Fluttershy, just..." Lockwood trailed off, "Just not... like that. It's my fault... I didn't pick up the signals. I figured everything you were saying and doing this past week was... because you blamed yourself for what happened to me. I told you to stop doing it... I didn't think you weren't stopping because you felt that way about me. I've... never been good at reading signals from the opposite sex."

Fluttershy glared at Blackburn. "You sure picked up *her* signals."

Blackburn snorted, "Wasn't afraid to tell him outright. Direct. To the point. Avoids constant wondering of other pony's feelings. Wallflowers deserve to stay wallflowers. Assertiveness came too late. Claimed him before you met."

Fluttershy glared back at Lockwood. "And you... you let me go through with all of it..."

"I tried to talk you out of it..." Lockwood sighed, "Fluttershy... I really am sorry, I-"

"Words wasted, Lockwood," Blackburn said simply. She looked sternly at Fluttershy. "Rarely repeat things. Your case? *Will* make exception. *Stay away from him*. Enough time wasted," she said quickly and dismissively, "Amusing to waste more. However, need to leave immediately, can discuss topic later. When *past* the Belt of Tranquility."

Blackburn stepped down from the hub and, with Gadget and Lockwood at either side, stepped towards Briarthorn. The gold pegasus was staring straight ahead, shaking his head. "Briar. Enough wasting time, need to move. Need an escort, you're it. Sentencing over, stop being an idiot."

Briarthorn snapped his head to Blackburn on the word idiot, and looked angry. Almost as angry as Blackburn. But then he withered, and sighed in defeat. "Idiot. Yeah. Blackburn," he said, making the named freeze like a statue, obviously preparing a death glare, before he continued, "I really wish you hadn't kept this under the table from me. Of all the ponies."

Blackburn cut off Gadget, who had opened her mouth to interrupt, her expression stern. "Lockwood wanted to tell. Disagreed." She tilted her head towards Gadget. "For Gadget and Crossfire, only knew because always with me. Grandfather entrusted my life to them. Swore them to secrecy."

Briarthorn continued to shake his head. "Not my point," he said weakly, "All these years? Years I've spent whiling at you? I spent them trying to make you feel better, with one of the the only ways I've ever *really* known how. So now I find out you were feeling just fine and dandy on a regular basis. I'd have liked to know you were happy at least once in a while, Your Majesty. It is my duty to serve, after all." He looked dolefully at Gadget, who noticeably didn't follow up with a comment on his personality.

A flicker of guilt passed through Blackburn's eyes, but with a short breath, she pushed through. "Briar, you understand. No offense meant. Practical decision," she explained, "Did not think you would be able to follow same request for long. Mouth too big, sometimes says things when too drunk. Still remember confession of attraction to Crossfire."

"Always back to me saying *bad* things. Not like it wasn't obvious. Huge surprise, right? What was it you said? 'I can be subtle if I try'? Something like that," Briarthorn grimaced. He let

his head drift back and forth between Lockwood and Blackburn for a long moment, the cruisers on the monitors still stock-still. He breathed in, the mannerism distinctly Blackburn's own, and finally shrugged, with his whole body. "Yeah, Crossfire's a fine trunk of hunk. But I've been searched before when on the job, and you never had a problem with me blabbing there. Those kinds of life and death situations are pretty similar, you know? Smuggling, and trying to get in your bed. I steal and cheat and lie for a living, and you trust me to do that, but stars forbid I know who your *sweetie-poo* is."

Lockwood's look of despondence caught Blackburn's eye, and she looked down. She looked up sharply, about to speak, when Briarthorn cut her off with a half-hearted smile, and let his enthusiasm build, near breaking eye contact with her as he spoke, his voice intentionally bombastic and indignant, despite the sad look in his eyes. "The worst thing is? All this time, I've known you two and been trying to get with you two individually, when I should've been trying for a *threesome?!?*" he exclaimed, "Years, wasted! Remember? No propositioning individuals within a relationship without both present. You two've got some 'splainin' to do." His eyes now locked onto Blackburn with a look that seemed almost like a challenge. "Mostly your favorite positions, and how I snuggle into them."

Blackburn stared at Briarthorn. It wasn't a death glare; she was tracing the patterns of the bruises she'd given him. Finally, she turned and looked at Lockwood, who gave a conspiratorial wiggle of his uninjured wing in plain view to Briarthorn, and the Queen sighed dramatically. "And... back to normalcy, Briar? Not sure if situation improved," she said almost fondly. With a half-lidded stare, Briarthorn actually gave her a formal salute with his wings, and stood at attention.

The sudden display of legitimate protocol from Briarthorn seemed to reignite Blackburn's ire: the Queen snorted, and stamped a hoof. "Alright, then! Expressed desire not to waste time; ended up wasting time anyway. Come, Crossfire waiting at elevator, preparations being made to depart. Time of the essence... hmm. Still nothing. More curious..."

Blackburn pushed through the row of ponies with Gadget and Lockwood firmly in tow, Briarthorn right behind them. Twilight started off after them next, and Tick Tock followed suit, then Applejack and Flathoof, then Rainbow and Pinkie, then Rarity, who waited up only for a moment before Fluttershy snorted loudly and followed as well, though she made a visible effort not to catch up to Rarity in the least.

The dozen ponies wound their way through hall after hall, stairwell after stairwell, passing by dozens upon dozens of ponies that all instantly stopped whatever they were doing to bow before Blackburn, who nodded in approval as they went along.

More and more of the ponies they saw were decked out in full suits of red and gold armor, a color scheme they felt more and more was Blackburn's way of delivering a jab of sorts to Pandemonium, as the city's emblem bore the same colors. The soldiers were represented by

all three races of pony, each equipped differently and divvied up between formations of troops to keep either an even balance, or to compose entire squads of the same type. Earth ponies had large packs on their backs that were not only attached but seemed part of their armor, and to their sides they bore large, cylindrical attachments whose purpose was not quite evident. The pegasus wore techno-magic weapons on their fore hooves, one on each, and were able to walk while wearing them thanks to the flattened barrels. Unicorns, of course, kept their weapons strapped at their sides, ready to draw them with their magic and wield them with.

Fluttershy noticeably trailed behind the rest of the group by several dozen paces, only just barely close enough to be considered following. Rarity noticed this before they'd even gotten through the second hallway, slowing her pace enough to fall in step with Fluttershy while the pegasus was distracted and looking at the decorated walls.

"Fluttershy?" Rarity interjected. Fluttershy looked at Rarity for all of a second, then snorted quietly, turned her head to avoid looking at the offending pony, and slowed her pace to fall out of step. Rarity slowed her own pace again to stay with her. "Fluttershy... please... oh, I *know* it hurts darling, I *know*. But please, you mustn't-"

"Just get away from me," Fluttershy hissed, "I don't want to talk to you. I should've *never* listened to you..."

Rarity frowned, but didn't look offended, just sad. She sighed, "I know, dear... I... I *should* have found out more. But how could I have known? He wouldn't have told me. I thought when I asked him about that Keeneye mare, his answer meant he was available. I just wanted to-"

"I said, '*get away from me*'," Fluttershy hissed again, glaring right at Rarity this time, "Lesson twelve! Your enemies must be *insane*, if they think you'll repeat yourself *again!*"

"Enemy..." Rarity echoed, "I... Fluttershy dear, please, I didn't know he-"

"And you never *asked* either, before you got these little delusions that I *needed* or *wanted* your help. Just keep your nose out of my business, Rarity. Go ahead and ruin somepony else's love life, just keep out of mine." Fluttershy stamped forward to stay out of Rarity's reach.

Rarity sighed and trotted ahead, past Fluttershy, to catch the others, while muttering sadly to herself, "*Wonderful* job, Rarity. You thought you were giving your friend somepony to help bring her out of her shell, but all it did was give her a broken heart. Stupid, stupid, stupid..."

They marched down the last hallway towards a large, rust-colored metal door flanked by two rigid lines of guards on either side. The guards all stood at firm attention as soon as Queen Blackburn and her entourage rounded the corner, placing their weapons, if need be, someplace to their side in a salute.

A light brown earth pony stallion paced in front of the door. His shoulder-length dark brown mane and tail had no distinct style to them other than “messy”, but he at least kept his mane mostly out of his eyes. He wore a heavy suit of bronze armor that covered him from neck to flank, only exposing his head just above a thick neck guard. The armor bore very large shoulder plates that connected to long cylinders at his sides, much like the earth pony soldiers they’d seen before, but much thicker and obviously heavier if his gait was any indication. Just behind his head, a plate of armor connected to the thick neck guard, with a thin green visor near his shoulder. As the Queen and her entourage approached, he immediately dropped to his knees in a deep bow before her.

“Yer Highness,” he drawled in a deep voice, “I got yer message, came as soon as ya called. The Wyvern’s rarin’ ta go, an’ I got the hangar bay all finished evacuatin’. Y’all jus’ give the word, and we’ll be ready ta get outta here. Jus’ waitin’ on th’ elevator ta get back up here - had ta make some stops to get evacuees out.”

“Crossfire. Always punctual,” Blackburn nodded appreciatively, “Already suited up as asked. Never can be too careful. Here,” she added, pushing Pinkie Pie forward hard enough that Crossfire had to catch her rather brusquely, “This one has skill with techno-magic weaponry. Still using projectile rounds. May yet be of some use. Sync up.”

“You got, Yer Majesty, always good ta have one o’ them there... prota... faberge...?” He tapped the side of his head in thought.

“*Protégé*,” Gadget said, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah, one o’ them,” Crossfire agreed. He cleared his throat. “Ahem. Right, down ta business. Well howdy there lil’ pink mare! Mah name’s Crossfire, what’s yers?”

“Hi! I’m Pinkie Pie!” Pinkie chirped. She then tapped herself in the head as if she’d forgotten something, then dramatically cleared her throat and sprung away, reaching back and donning her helmet. Her voice instantly became distorted. “I mean, my callsign is Pinkie-245, sir! Reporting for duty, Crossfire, sir!”

Crossfire laughed and flipped his own helmet on. Like her, his voice became distorted behind it. “Aw shucks, ain’t that cute? What kinda weapon know-how y’all got there? Them’s some awful small toys, if I may so bold as ta say so.”

“Welp, my current loadout is designed for long-range combat and support,” Pinkie said very seriously, “Equipped with one Designated Marksmare Rifle-” Here, she presented her bigger gun, holding it firmly for Crossfire to see before returning it to her back. “And one Personal Defense Weapon System.” And here, she removed the smaller device from her flank and showed it off to him with one hoof before returning that as well. “Expert Marksmare Pinkie, all locked and loaded, Crossfire sir!”

"Pinks, when did *you* decide to get all serious?" Rainbow barked.

"Well, if my Pinkie Sense is right," she said worriedly, "I think we're going to be getting into some pretty scary stuff pretty soon. Not the same stuff like with Red Velvet and those other wackos, but like... really real danger. Not that those weirdos weren't really real danger, but they said like, eighty billion times that they weren't going to kill you or me or Twilight or Applejack or Fluttershy *or* Rarity. I dunno... just got a feeling is all."

"Well, Her Majesty may not have this 'Pinkie Sense', Miss Pie," Crossfire said reassuringly, "But she sure as shootin' is preparin' fer anythin'. She wouldn't've had me get all suited up if'n she thought this were some joke or drill or whathaveya."

The elevator gave hissed as it finally docked with the boarding platform, and the great door opened wide to let the ponies in. Blackburn entered first and everypony else followed in, each taking seats around the edges of the elevator car.

"What exactly *are* you preparing for, Your Highness?" Twilight asked as the elevator doors began closing, "I thought the shield was impregnable? Briarthorn told us that if something should happen, you're expecting-

"Ground forces... Hm. Always a possibility. Through gateways, though. Shield? Impregnable. Pride of Hope's Point techno-magic engineers." Blackburn took a deep breath. "Unless disabled: then useless. City open to attack. Invasion. Security measures taken, primary shield generator rarely disabled. Happens occasionally. NPAF developed remote system four years ago. Before I became Queen. Wasn't in city at the time. *Lucky*," and she said the word balefully, "that I wasn't. Too many deaths that day.. Became Queen after that, began developing countermeasures. No Gargantuan-class cruisers since then, until today. Still no activity... hmm. Not bothering with remote system. Saboteurs for certain."

"Didn't Briarthorn say that they have to go through all sorts of hoops and hurdles just to send these things down here?" Rainbow asked, not taking her eyes off of Pinkie and Crossfire examining Pinkie's rifles. "If that's the case, then how'd they get the jump on you all so dang well?"

With a rolling, uneasy shrug, Briarthorn nodded. "Well, yeah, of course there's a paper trail, in a manner of speaking. It's nerve-wracking. Somehow, Queenie's long list of intel got screwed somewhere along the line. I'm constantly prodding into their com sets when I'm scouring. That's what's got us all so tense." He leaned into Twilight again, and dropped a wing over her. "Now that we know what you've gotta do, Twily, well... it helps and hurts. We know we've got to get something pretty amazing done, but I'm not going to lie. I'm being warty right now. Downright Athelete's Hoof worry. Not now that knowing losing any of you is going to make..." He actually grinned, through his concern, "...*saving the world* that much harder."

“Oh... there there, Briarthorn,” Twilight reassured him, patting one hoof on his, “It’ll all be okay, you’ll see. Like you said, your Queen is a certifiable master of preparations and planning. I’m actually sort of jealous you’ve known her so long.”

“Jealous? Over another mare, over me? Fancy that!” He wiggled his eyebrows not at Twilight, but at Tick Tock, who was giving him a poisonous glare.

“Crossfire,” Blackburn said warily as she looked up towards the ceiling.

“Yes, Yer Highness?” Crossfire saluted.

“Begin priming weapons. May need to use them soon... hmm. Bad feeling about this...”

The elevator continued to descend. All the while, Blackburn stared at the ceiling with a heavy scowl. Despite the pace being rather quick, certainly faster than the elevator at the cliffs had been, the anxiety in the air made it feel agonizingly slow to everypony inside. Unlike the cliff elevator, there was no window to the outside world. The only light came from the light fixtures along the walls in the corners.

Only the small dial above the door told the passengers how far along they were. It clicked and gave a cheery *BING* sound as they passed the second underground level several minutes after departure, followed by the same sound several minutes later once they had passed the third underground level.

Twilight looked at the dial and hummed in thought. “Ten underground levels... and we’re heading to the bottom, I assume?”

“Correct,” Blackburn said simply.

“At the rate of descent, with that many floors it would mean the hangar bay is below sea level, right?”

“Also correct,” Blackburn confirmed again. “Observant. Curious. Good qualities to have, especially with understated capacity for leadership, despite lack of confidence- Gadget. No word from generator patrols yet on suspicious activity, reports still being received?” She turned her head as she spoke.

Gadget double-checked her datapad, then shook her head. “Reports coming in, but, like you said, nothing out of the ordinary, Your Highness. Quiet as mice. There’s been no sign of forced entry or foul play of any kind, almost like nopony’s there at all except the guards and the technicians.”

Blackburn hummed. "Infiltrator *would* need to avoid detection. Avoiding patrols and moving without leaving trail. Not typical infiltrator. Something else. Cruisers waiting for shield to come down, no wave-spectral transmissions of any kind... hmm. Infiltrator and cruisers not working in tandem."

"Not working in tandem?" Gadget asked.

"If those cruisers had an idea as to when shield was coming down... they would be priming weapons. No weapons primed. Infiltrator an independent agent, no *direct* connection with NPAF. NPAF still notified of sabotage, two infiltrators. Second infiltrator not saboteur. Informant? Spying on other infiltrator, but not certain on plans. Competitors? Or worse. Suspect that first saboteur working independently, second saboteur relaying progress to fleet. Gadget, any unicorn magic detected in vicinity of generators? Communication methodologies, specifically."

Gadget rapidly tapped her datapad, then shook her head in frustration. "Yes, Your Majesty, a *lot*. The cruisers must have activated their jamming signal to throw off our security detectors. Either that, or we've got two thousand unicorns having a rave down at the power generator. I can't pinpoint anything useful."

Blackburn exhaled harshly. "Any possibility of increasing power to this elevator?"

"Negative, Your Majesty. The power relay is at the top of the shaft. If I could get up to it, maybe, but that might take a while. We're better off--"

"Disembarking on fourth floor," Blackburn sighed. "Acceptable. Will take maintenance stairwell the rest of the way. Being in elevator during power failure: dangerous."

The elevator continued to rumble its way down the shaft at its snail pace. A few of the ponies in the car shifted anxiously, nervous about whatever was going to happen next and not at all reassured by Blackburn's own misgivings about the situation. It was the reactions of her three most-trusted subjects that worried them the most: Crossfire and Gadget, in particular, looked at one another in anticipation. Briarthorn, to his credit, remained mostly quiet and simply waited with the rest of them, occasionally flitting his wingtips, fidgety but otherwise silent. Lockwood was noticeably the only pony staying at all calm apart from Blackburn herself, and in fact seemed calmer now than he'd ever been.

Just as the dial slowly slid past the halfway mark between the third level and the fourth, the elevator shook and ground to a halt. All the lights went out, leaving the elevator car in total blackness, with the only light coming from the quickly-activated glows of three unicorn horns; Gadget hadn't bothered to light up her own.

"This isn't good..." Twilight gulped, "R-right?"

“Oh no... oh no oh no oh *no*...” Rarity panicked, grabbing hold of Tick Tock, who sat beside her.

Tick Tock grabbed hold of Rarity right back. “Not again... oh stars, *why me?*”

“Relax. All of you. Everypony,” Blackburn said, holding out a hoof in a gesture of calm, “Nothing to panic about.”

“Nothing to panic about?!” Rarity blurted, “We’re stuck! In a dark elevator car! There must be miles between us and the bottom!”

Then, the lights flickered back to life and the elevator began to move again, though at a slower pace than before. Apart from Blackburn, Gadget, Crossfire, and Briarthorn, everypony breathed a sigh of relief. Those four simply gave each other knowing looks, then settled back into their seats, redirecting their attention to the dial above.

“Phew...” Twilight breathed.

“Shucks... what in Equestria jus’ happened?” Applejack asked.

Rarity gulped, “Oh my goodness... I thought we were *goners* for a moment there.”

Rainbow struggled against the harness that was keeping her in her seat. “This is stupid, why do I have to wear this dumb thing? If we’d started to fall-”

“Harness would deploy safety measures,” Blackburn interrupted, “All safety protocols observed, spared no expense. No chances taken.”

“What gives, anyway?” Tick Tock asked, “I really was worried for a second there. What just happened?”

“Original assumption, Barrier Breaker. NPAF developed remote system, disables shields, disables city’s power. Very complicated techno-magicks. Hope’s Point has developed countermeasures. Primary countermeasure obvious: backup generator. Activates in seconds, too small a window for bombardment. Not as powerful, city runs on minimal power to keep shield at maximum. Hence slower elevator speed. Though... this shutdown not via external means. Remote system shutdown would be progressive, not simultaneous. Confirms sabotage. Saboteur still in vicinity. Gadget. Teams are still in place?”

Gadget tapped her datapad rapidly, then nodded. “Affirmative. All teams are still in ready positions. Corridors are being heavily enforced, as as per protocol they’ve stepped up patrols since the shutdown. However, zero reports on movement or suspicious activity. Squad leaders

are puzzled and requesting additional orders.”

Blackburn snorted, “Can’t post soldiers directly by generator panels. Draws attention to vulnerable targets. Tighten patrols. Divide efforts.”

“What sort of magicks can pass through that shield?” Twilight asked warily, “As soon as my magic started working again, I could feel the amount of force coming from it. Briarthorn mentioned that the shield should be able to withstand just about anything. I’ve seen shields like this before even back at home. As far as this world is concerned, it’s kind of like the force field back at the-”

“Gryphon Ruins, yes. And the Gate of New Pandemonium. Developed from the same central magical theme when implemented into devices designed. Very potent techno-magic,” Blackburn pursed her lips, looking down for a moment in confession. “Personally, am not quite intimately familiar with unicorn magicks, being a pegasus. The history establishes the link well enough. However,” she sighed, “Am not sure how it works *precisely*. Am correct in the assertion that it functions on related principles, Gadget?”

“Of course, Majesty. Barrier work is all similar. That’s how we can confirm it’s a Dispel device. However, I can tell you that the readings show that it isn’t a one,” Gadget said matter-of-factly. “Like the Gate’s shield, our shield is consistently being reapplied every microsecond, which requires astronomical amounts of magical energy. Pandemonium itself produces that by the sheer magnitude of power plants they’ve got. We’ve got *one* power plant, but it’s enough. The Dispel device functions on the same concept. It fires a Dispel every microsecond, which isn’t strong enough to pierce the whole shield mind you, but that’s not the intent. They direct it at the main power grid, and eventually one of the Dispels gets through and shorts it out, albeit temporarily. It requires massive amounts of power to use though, hence why only Gargantuan-class cruisers are equipped with it.”

“But that’s not what happened here, is it? None of the cruisers *used* something to disable the shields from the outside. They’re saving their power for when the shield drops.” Twilight gulped audibly.

“The shield will not drop, but you are correct, Twilight Sparkle. Entirely the work of an infiltrator. Cruisers would have used device upon arrival. Saving power for assault. Saboteurs more efficient.” Blackburn hummed. “Saboteur is skilled. Perhaps... hmm.”

“Now it makes sense why you go to such trouble to keep them out,” Rainbow acknowledged, “Huh... but what happens if-”

The elevator suddenly lurched again and stopped once more. Panic set in again amongst the ponies not in the know.

"Keep. Calm," Blackburn said firmly, "Unexpected, but not unprepared."

The elevator lights came back on again, extremely dim but definitely powered, and the elevator car began to slowly continue its descent. More breaths of relief all around.

"Now what happened?" Applejack asked.

"To put faith in a single backup generator? Foolhardy," Blackburn said with a confident grin, "Erected second backup. Small, minimal power output. Keeps shield up, can't run city for more than an hour. Gives time for engineers to repair other generators."

"Well..." Rainbow gulped, "What happens if-"

"Dashie!" Pinkie blurted, "Would you *stop* tempting fate?! You keep asking questions like that, something's bound to-"

"Worry not," Blackburn nodded. "Third generator under careful safeguards. Location only known to self, top engineers. Requires three security codes to access. Never been activated, not factored into saboteur's plans- has absolutely no way to procure position or decryption algorithms," She took a short breath. "May take time to reach hangar, even using next available stairwell. Elevator running on extreme minimum power now, floor still minutes away at current pace. Patience is key."

The dial above the door barely crept towards the fourth floor, moving the tiniest fraction of an inch every few seconds. Before the dial even got to the next notch, the elevator gave another lurch and the lights shut off for the third time.

"Oh... uh... I... don't think that was supposed to happen," Gadget nervously peeped, this time lighting up her horn to illuminate the car. Twilight, Tick Tock, and Rarity followed suit

They all turned expectantly to Blackburn, and cold horror passed through them as they saw her pupils had shrunk. She began to shake. There were no more active generators.

"No..." Blackburn whispered. She snapped off her harness roughly and bolted over to the door, giving it a fierce slam with her hooves. "No! *No! No!*"

Blackburn continued to slam her hooves against the elevator door, causing the unstable elevator to shake slightly. Crossfire, Gadget, and Briarthorn removed their harnesses too in an attempt to calm down Blackburn. Suddenly, a great rumble was heard far above then, and the elevator shook violently; one side of the elevator dipped, slanting the floor sharply.

"Whoa nelly!" Crossfire exclaimed as he lost his footing.

Briarthorn took on the look of nausea he had at the bar near the end of the drinking contest, and began muttering to himself. "Bad. Bad. Bad. This is bad."

"**NO!**" Blackburn shouted, slamming a hoof into the door again. The elevator shifted further off-balance, and Lockwood, who'd also been trying to take off his harness, was sent bouncing across the elevator car into the wall.

"Hey now!" Rainbow snapped, "You nutjob! Watch what you're-"

"Watch your mouth! You don't talk to the Queen that way!" Gadget spat. She turned worriedly to Blackburn, "Your Highness... please, calm down, you're-"

"You want me to calm down?! Our tertiary generator down. The shield must be down. Power out. Power out completely. I... I couldn't... always irritated when people ask me how, now reaping what I've sown. How? *How? How?* Unforeseen... this wasn't supposed to happen. Couldn't be. Shouldn't be. All my preparations have failed..." She grit her teeth and slammed her hoof on the floor of the elevator car. "No, *no, no, no, NO!* Preparations... I made them infallible, can't be happening, not real, not real, wake up. This situation!? *Impossible! DREAM!*" She exclaimed it suddenly and desperately, and began to shudder. Tears started pouring down her face as she went on raving. "Just a dream. *Dreaming. Asleep. Just a nightmare. Just a nightmare. Wake up... must wake up.*"

"Yer Highness..." Crossfire said softly as he came over, "Yer Highness, what are we gonna-"

Blackburn trembled, even as the elevator continued to shake violently from further above-ground explosions. "Not waking up... *not waking up... not a dream!*" She began to wail, all traces of her steely composure completely evaporated. "This is *real!* My failure is *real!* Not *impossible*, not even *improbable!* When impossibilities eliminated, only improbable is left. However unlikely, *must be true. They'll kill everyone! Kill Hope's Point, kill us all!* Pandemonium will slaughter us and leave us to *suffer and rot* in the ***Blood Mire!***" She slammed her hooves on the door again. "I'm.... I'm just like my *father...*"

Gadget spoke up, "Your Highness, please, you need to-"

"Calm down? *Calm down?* I've condemned you all to *death*, and you want me ***calm?***" Blackburn shouted, her voice completely unhinged, swatting Gadget's hoof away like it was a filthy bug, sliding down and nearly lying on her side against the door in despair.

Briarthorn held his forehooves to his head, and said very quietly, "Queenie, this isn't helping. It's just getting-"

She heard him just the same, despite her screams, "Worse?!" Blackburn snarled,

“Making it worse?! We’re *dead*, Briar! Dead, *dead*, **dead**, all my fault!”

“Yer Highness, please!” Crossfire pleaded, “We need ta get outta here, and this ain’t the way ta-”

Lockwood sighed and placed himself between the door and Blackburn. She stared at him, and he stared right back. “Blackburn, you need to-”

She hesitated for a second, then glared at him. “*Don’t!* Don’t tell me to *calm down*-”

Lockwood forcefully interrupted, his voice louder than the Ponyville ponies had yet heard him, outright yelling in Blackburn’s face, pulling her head up to his. “**Focus**. You need to *focus*. See? You’re a wreck right now, you couldn’t even finish for me. ‘Calm’ isn’t you, and I won’t tell you to be something you’re not. But, you’re also not a delirious wreck. Right now, that’s what you’re acting like. You’re not focused, you’re not *thinking*. Your citizens are *safe*, B.B. They’re safe. They won’t die. You are not your father. You finished the-”

“Evacuation...” Blackburn said softly. For a few moments, she stared at Lockwood, breathing heavily, even as more explosions from at least a mile up rocked the elevator. Lockwood pressed his forehead to Blackburn’s, tilting his head so that she could see his good eye from both of her own. She closed her eyes, shuddered one final time, and then, slowly, she stood up. She opened her eyes.

“Yes... yes, citizens safe. Bunkers constructed of triple-thick Obidium-Darksteel alloy, nigh-impenetrable to even strongest weaponry in known NPAF arsenal. Militia trained for combat, scrambled to prepare for invasion force. Will hold off enemy until shield repaired...”

Lockwood smiled. “See? Focus on what’s really happening here. You know everypony is safe, but what happened? It’s not impossible, it’s just improbable. Go on... take your time.”

Blackburn stared at him for another long moment, then took in an exaggeratedly deep breath and began speaking rapidly. “Saboteur in city. Unaffiliated with cruisers. Disabled primary generator. Basic knowledge. Disabled secondary generator. Implies research, foresight. Disabled tertiary generator... hmm. Implies intricate knowledge of system. Got information from individual in possession of said information. Hostage. No. Hostages. Three codes, would need three hostages. No signs of entry, no suspicious activity... very strange. Would need hostages present to access tertiary generator controls. Need to contact Chief Engineer Spark Plug. Require status report. Gadget.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?” Gadget saluted.

“Message relays online?”

Gadget fumbled with her datapad for a few moments, then shook her head dejectedly. "Negative. The communication matrix was powered down along with everything else. Probably needs a hard reboot. I can do it from any stationary relay station, once we get to one. There's one-"

"Fourth floor, third hallway east. Two minutes from elevator dock," Blackburn hummed.

She leaned her head back and fumbled with her saddle bag, using her wing to steady the flap as she tugged a large techno-magic device out of it. She unhesitatingly slipped it onto her hoof all the way up to the joint of her foreleg, clicking it in place. She lifted it up to her mouth and adjusted one of the dials on it slightly, then set it back down on the floor with a grunt, then took a deep breath, cracked her neck, fluttered her wings, and stretched her other legs.

"Um... Your Majesty," Gadget gulped, "I know you're a big, big, *big* fan of my Force Amplifier 5500, and I'm glad to see you keep the customized version I built just for you, with you, but... uh... I don't know if that's a-"

"Good idea? Correct. Not good; perfect. Scan the door. Haven't yet reached fourth floor dock. Need accurate positioning. Where are we? Can we get down there? Important questions."

Gadget nodded in confusion, but did exactly as asked. She adjusted the device at the side of her head to flip to glass down in front of her eye, and stared through it at the door. The device glowed a dull blue and, to the surprise of several of the ponies in the room, it generated a series of light beams that perfectly positioned themselves at the corners of the door, traced lines between themselves to form a large rectangle, then filled the rectangle with what appeared to be a grid. The image lasted for all of a few seconds before dying out when Gadget removed her hoof from the device.

"Scanning complete," she announced, "Analyzing data. Elevator car is nearly five yards above nearest docking station. Lopsided position has damaged upper cables on left side, lower cables on right side. Manually moving the elevator via cable system would be ill-advised."

"Improvisation our speciality. Scan ceiling for structural integrity," Blackburn ordered. She turned to Crossfire. "Crossfire, arm grappling cannon, switch to bracing function. Attach rear brace to elevator floor. Keep forward brace on standby."

"O' course, Yer Majesty," Crossfire nodded.

He settled himself in position, and the shoulder plates on his armor made a whirring noise. Then, hatches on the front and the rear opened up with loud clicks. He turned his head slightly to look over his right shoulder, and adjusted his weight slightly again before settling his hooves once more. A loud bang resounded throughout the elevator car as the rear of the cylinders fired claw-like attachments that ripped into the elevator floor and gripped it tightly. The

elevator gave an unsettling creak, jostled by the impact and causing it to tilt even more off-balance.

Gadget, in the meantime, pressed the side of her headgear again, this time firing the light beams at the ceiling. As before, this lasted seconds before the light disappeared. She gave a slight hum and pressed the device again. This time, three beams of light fired at a single point on the ceiling, then began expanding outwards in a rotating circular pattern. The area between the three points glowed a bright yellow, and the lights continued spinning until at last they retreated back into the device, leaving behind an irregular patch of the yellow glow.

Gadget pointed at the glowing area on the ceiling. "Structural integrity in marked area is weakest at seventy-five percent integrity due to wear and tear from years of use. It is still within ideal safety parameters, thus has not been reinforced or resurfaced. Accounting for area... calculations complete. Darksteel plating would require just under three hundred thousand psi to puncture, recommend no more than three hundred ten thousand psi for energy conservation purposes."

"Noted," Blackburn said simply.

She brought her boot device back to her mouth and adjusted a dial on the side, causing the device to begin emitting a humming noise while the white metal that made up the bottom began to glow a very bright blue. She warily held it out and kept it still for a few seconds until the blue glow dimmed to a very faint glow, then very slowly and gently placed her hoof back on the floor.

"Crossfire, deploy main brace on my mark... hmm. Six feet from wall, accounting for drop... set firing angle at seventy-six degrees, maximum velocity. Should impact just above docking bay." She turned from Crossfire towards the other ponies in the elevator car. "Rest, return to seats. May be bumpy." The other ponies all looked at one another warily, and did as asked. "Crossfire?"

"Ready, Yer Highness," he nodded, steadying himself and cracking his neck.

Blackburn fluttered up to the ceiling, and reared her hoof back. As she swung her hoof upwards- "Mark!" -the device she was wearing flashed a bright blue. The incredible impact ripped into the ceiling, tearing a gaping hole straight into it as if she'd swung her hoof through wet paper. The elevator violently shook from the impact, and chunks of the roof and ceiling ripped into the cables above the car. Crossfire fired another set of claws out of the front of his shoulder plates, which shot upwards under and past Blackburn and through the hole she'd made. The elevator dropped for a few seconds at a very rapid pace. There was a very loud clink above them. Cords attached to the claws snapped taut as the elevator violently stopped moving, causing the harnesses to flash a bright pink and enshroud their passengers with a soft glow of light.

“What in the hay was that?” Applejack asked as the glow subsided around her.

“Interesting...” Twilight hummed, “A Cushion spell. It’s typically used for makeshift pillows, and has some basis in fact with how pegasi build houses out of clouds. These harnesses utilize a rapidly-deployed version that cushioned a sharp impact. Amazingly practical. How exactly do these things-”

“No time for studying,” Blackburn said quickly, “Crossfire. Reel us in.”

“Yes, Yer Majesty,” Crossfire nodded.

He settled his hooves into the floor, and the cable whined as it slowly but surely pulled the entire elevator car with it. Blackburn hovered just over the heads of the rest of the ponies, and signaled for Crossfire to stop when the elevator door was nearly aligned with the fourth floor dock; the claw attachments he’d fired had impacted with the rocky cliff wall just inches above the metallic frame that made up the dock. Blackburn fluttered down into the elevator car and slammed her hoof into the door, sending both the elevator’s door and the docking station’s door flying out into the hallway beyond.

“Fourth floor. Everypony off: Now!” Blackburn called.

Everypony disembarked from the elevator, leaving Crossfire for last to keep the car steady. Once the last of them had gotten off, Gadget lit up her horn and enshrouded Crossfire with a soft blue glow. He dropped his cables and reeled them in, causing the car to plummet down the elevator shaft until it was out of sight. Gadget lifted Crossfire over the gap and safely into the docking bay, giving him a solid pat on the shoulder as he landed.

“Follow close, relay station not far,” Blackburn commanded as she took off down the hall.

“That’s the Queen we know and love!” Briarthorn cheered as he took wing and followed after Blackburn.

Everypony else followed behind, moving down the metal-laden hallways across cold metal floors. The ceiling above them was low, about a yard above their heads, not opening up as the great domed ceiling of the first underground level had. They passed by a first set of hallways diverging from the main path, one heading east and the other heading west, as told by the “E” and “W” symbols above them. They passed by a second set and then finally reached a third, where Blackburn made a sudden turn onto the east passage. After almost exactly two minutes of running, they reached a large terminal covering the entire wall of the hallway’s end, blanketed in so many switches, buttons, dials, knobs, and levers that it was just plain daunting to look at. A blank screen covered the majority of the terminal. Blackburn approached it first and fiddled with a switch on the side, then grumbled when nothing happened.

“As expected,” Blackburn observed glumly, “Communication matrix down. Gadget!”

Gadget stepped forward and placed her goggles over her face. “I’ll start work right away, Your Highness!”

Gadget lit up her horn and lifted the flaps of several pouches on her belt, then pulled a few tools out, lifting them with her over to a panel on the terminal’s side. She unscrewed the bolts on the corners and pried it open, then thrust her head inside along with a screwdriver and a pair of pliers, leaving her other tools suspended beside her. As she fiddled around inside, she’d occasionally take another tool in with her, use it briefly, then replace it back outside. This continued for a few minutes before she finally pulled her head out, wiped her brow with a grease-stained towel from her flank pocket, and saluted to Blackburn with a wide grin.

“Great news, my Queen!” she chirped, “The communication matrix is down, but it didn’t sustain any damage during any of the shorts. I can hard reboot it from here as anticipated, and get the whole system back online.”

“How are ya gonna hard reboot the system without any power?” Crossfire huffed.

“A little bit of unicorn ingenuity!” Gadget excitedly nodded, “Miss Sparkle!”

Twilight pointed at herself. “Wha? Me?”

Gadget stamped a hoof dramatically. “Front and center! I require your expertise!”

Twilight stepped forward warily and nervously offered a tiny salute. “Um... I don’t know how I can help. I don’t know anything about techno-”

“Oh pshaw, that’s where I come in! I’m the real expert here, you’re just going to be my lab assistant, only without the lab,” Gadget beamed, “Just hold still while I get this all ready.”

Gadget snapped some wires out of the inside of the station and affixed a tiny ring-shaped device to them, which she then connected to the tip of Twilight’s horn. She took her screwdriver and delicately tightened it in place. Twilight shuddered at the sudden feeling of her magic reacting with the electrical energy of the machine.

“Okay... uh, so... w-what exactly am I doing?” Twilight asked as Gadget continued to fiddle with other little devices inside.

“Holding still, like I asked. You’re doing great, by the way,” Gadget said matter-of-factly, “I don’t require your direct input, just your magic. No offense. You don’t need to do anything but stand there and look pretty. Right now, you’re going to function as a battery for this here terminal

so that I can get enough juice going to complete a hard reboot. Should only take a few seconds.”

“Are y’all sure this is safe?” Applejack asked, “There’s a... lotta wires and stuff there.”

“Here, bite into this,” Gadget said, pushing a small disk towards Twilight’s mouth.

Twilight warily bit into it. “Uh...”

“Hey, you listenin’?” Applejack huffed, “I asked ya if this was safe. That’s our friend there you’re decoratin’ with all them fancy doohickies.”

Gadget bit her tongue and adjusted her safety goggles, then twisted something inside the panel until the insides began to glow a dull white. “Huh? Oh! Safe. Oh *stars* no. Golly, one little crossed wire and there’ll be enough of an electricity feedback that it’d kill her! Safe... ha ha! Don’t worry though, this *should* work just fine.”

“*Should?!?*” Twilight blurted.

Twilight didn’t have time to do much else other than voice her disagreement with the whole thing before the soft white glow from inside the maintenance panel turned a very bright blue and began flickering erratically. Twilight’s horn shimmered a bright gold and within the space of half of a second, she began chattering her teeth violently and shaking in place. Her horn flashed white, creating a brilliant explosion of light and sound.

Seconds later, the light dimmed and the smoke cleared. It took a few moments for everypony to be able to see again through the splotches of light and color, and before they could stop coughing from all the smoke. Twilight stumbled dumbly away from the console, which was now glowing a shining neon blue.

“And... success!” Gadget declared happily as carefully she removed the device from Twilight’s horn, “More than enough power for a system reboot. Starting it now; we’ll have communications back up in just a minute. Then we just hope we can get somepony on the other end.”

“Excellent,” Blackburn said as she stepped forward, “Attempt contact with anypony else on grid. Need status reports.”

“*Excellent?!?*” Tick Tock sputtered angrily, “She could have just killed-”

“Twilight Sparkle was never in danger,” Blackburn interrupted.

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say ‘never’, Your Majesty. There was a roughly twenty-seven

percent chance of massive feedback with lethal capacity,” Gadget shrugged, “Much better odds than any simulations I ran on the process. I’m just glad it worked. First time for everything, I suppose.”

“You all are crazy,” Tick Tock blurted, “Bonkers, every last one of you!”

“Well, ya kinda *have* ta be jus’ a lil’ crazy ta live ‘round these parts,” Crossfire chuckled, “No sane pony raspberries the NPAF on a daily basis jus’ ‘cause they can.”

“Amen to that,” Briarthorn agreed with a sagely nod. He pat Twilight on the shoulder. “Hey now, Twily, don’t look so worried. Gadget’s just another sort of crazy. You’ve got your Pinkie crazy, you’ve got your Me crazy, you’ve got your Majesty’s crazy. From what your memories told us, you know what it’s like for someone to call you crazy. *Stark raving mad*. I’m mad, you’re mad, we’re all mad here. But Gadget’s mad gets her some techno-magical *genius*! She wouldn’t have done that if she wasn’t sure it would work. She trusts herself. Queenie’s right, Twily. You’ve gotta trust yourself before anyone else will.”

Twilight meekly nodded, and smiled nervously. “R-right...”

Briarthorn let out a high-pitched laugh just short of a giggle, and briefly wing-hugged Twilight again. “That’s the spirit!”

The relay terminal lit up as all the switches, buttons, dials, knobs, and levers started to glow with dim blues, greens, reds, and yellows. Blackburn lifted her hooves and wings and began to rapidly push buttons, flip switches, turn dials, and adjust knobs and levers, directing the relay terminal instruments as a conductor for an orchestra. The screen hummed and gave a soft popping sound, then flickered to life. The image was grainy at first, but as Blackburn continued to operate, the image cleared and the ponies nearby could hear sound coming from the terminal’s large speakers. They were now looking at the main generator room, which was alive with activity as ponies clad in blue rubber jumpsuits ran back and forth between very large turbines.

“Shield Station Main. Respond. Status report,” Blackburn called. No reply came. She addressed it again. “Shield Station Main, come in.”

A loud static noise popped through the terminal’s speakers. Suddenly, a pony rushed onto the screen from the side, out of breath and hastily adjusting a headset on her head. A pegasus mare wearing, like all the ponies rushing around behind her, a dark blue rubber jumpsuit with a safety vest over it; hers was colored a dull yellow, like many of theirs were too. She flustered and saluted into the screen when she saw who was on the other end.

“S-Shield Station Main, rep-p-porting! Y-Your Majesty! T-thank goodness you’re okay! We heard y-you were on the freight elevator when-”

“The generator went down,” Blackburn interrupted, “That is the purpose of this communication. Need to speak to Chief Engineer Spark Plug. Bring him forth. Immediately.”

The mare saluted. “Yes, Your Highness! At once!” She loudly called out to her side, “Chief Engineer! Communication transmission for you! It’s urgent!”

A few seconds later, another pony came onto the screen from the same side the pegasus had, hurriedly pushing her out of the way. He was an orange earth pony with a stocky build that filled out his same dark blue jumpsuit and dark purple safety vest. His mane and tail were a bright neon blue, and each and every hair seemed to go in a different direction in an attempt to get away from his body. His face, jumpsuit, vest, mane, and tail were all covered in fresh grease stains, and grease coated the screwdriver he had tucked in his left ear, getting more grease on his head.

“I heard ye, I heard ye, keep yer knickers on!” he snapped as he came into view, “I’m busy, can’t ye see that? I don’t have time ta be-” The pegasus mare quickly gestured with her hooves and passed her headset to him. “What’s with the bleedin’ silent treatment, lassie? Would ye quit fidgetin’-” She grabbed his head and pointed it towards the screen. His eyes widened dramatically. “Y-Y-Yer Highness! Thank bloody *hell*. Where in Equestria are ye? Is everythin’ okay? How can I-”

“Status report, Spark Plug.”

Spark Plug sheepishly ran a hoof through his mane, accidentally knocking the screwdriver out of his ear and spreading grease everywhere. “Right, right. Well ye see, Yer Majesty, we’ve been tryin’ ta figure it out, and I don’t know how exactly it happened... especially the tertiary generator... but there’s no signs of forced entry. Whoever hit the systems knew just where ta hit ‘em and got out of here like there was no tomorrow. We can’t find any trace of the bloody rotten-”

“Keep trying, but focus on repairs,” Blackburn commanded, “How long until shield power restored? Shield is priority.”

Spark Plug gulped. “Um... w-well, Yer Highness, we’re workin’ as fast as we can go. Shield power should be back within the hour, so long as we don’t hit any more complications. Most other systems are startin’ ta come back online, but at minimal power. It’s a slow process.”

“Double-time, Spark Plug. Triple, if you can manage it. Bombardment stopped. Ground forces deployed. Will continue to deploy until depleted. Then, will resume bombardment. Get shield power online before then. Stopped ten minutes ago... average deployment speed suggests forty-five minutes. Gives you roughly thirty.”

“Aye, Yer Majesty!” Spark Plug saluted, “We’ll do our best!”

“Additional orders,” Blackburn interjected, “Was en route to hangar bay when power went out. Elevators down, means most lower-level systems down. Need hangar bay systems operational. Don’t want time wasted from your end. Only need bare essentials, individual hangars only. Need technician with remote override paraphernalia, immediately. Select volunteer, send to rendezvous point.” She looked briefly at Gadget. “Unless Gadget thought to bring the remote override paraphernalia herself?”

“Oh, golly. I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” Gadget sheepishly muttered, “Didn’t plan on coming down here today. I could jerry-rig one if I had the right parts, but I know we don’t keep that kind of stuff lying around down there.”

“No matter,” Blackburn dismissed, “You heard her, Spark Plug. Acquire a technician.”

Spark Plug saluted again. “Aye, Yer Majesty. I’ll send one of my top technicians down ta meet ye. I can’t spare much, but I have just the pony in mind. He’ll take good care of ye, Yer Majesty.”

“Any help appreciated,” Blackburn nodded, “Dismissed, Spark Plug. Remember - double-to-triple-time.” The monitor shut off abruptly, and Blackburn turned to the others. “Nearest stairwell just down the adjacent hallway. Easiest route to hangar bay, closer than emergency elevator. Climbing freight shaft too risky. Possibility of further bombardments too high.”

“Speaking of which,” Tick Tock pointed out, “If they’re trying to destroy the city, why wouldn’t they have wiped out the ground level before deploying troops?”

“Not after city at all. Original assessment incorrect, new information brought to light,” Blackburn said simply, “Siege positions suggest attempt to blockade escape routes. Ground deployment suggests search for a target, early deployment suggests target underground. Bombardment weapons can’t pierce through so much rock quickly enough.”

“What exactly *are* they looking for?” Twilight asked.

Blackburn closed her eyes and hummed. “Logical assumption would be myself. City depends on my leadership. Surprise assault suggests attempt to capture target not in evacuation bunkers. Again, implies myself. However, lack of bombardment suggests otherwise. If target was myself, would sustain bombardment. Attempt to invoke surrender. Not after-”

A loud static burst through the hall. Briarthorn, Gadget, Crossfire, and Blackburn all held their hooves to their ears and removed their earpieces as quickly as they could, tossing them to the ground. The earpieces buzzed once they were taken out into open air, and Blackburn glared

at hers as if the little device was an unsavory insect. Then, the static cleared, and to everypony's surprise, a voice began to speak through it.

"Attention, denizens of Hope's Point!" the voice on the other end called. It was a deep, gruff stallion's voice, and despite the circumstances, was surprisingly cordial and charismatic. "This is Admiral Hotstreak of the New Pandemonium Armed Forces, Superior Air Division. Your city is surrounded, and any attempt to escape will be met with open hostility. Our ground forces have begun their entry into the underground levels, and they will continue to seek out and destroy any and all who offer opposition. So long as you do not interfere with them, they will not antagonize you."

Blackburn queued up the terminal again, fiddling with knobs and dials on the sides faster than before. The voice continued, but now it could be heard through the terminal's speakers so that it was clear enough for them all to hear. "This is an ultimatum, that I am presenting to your 'Queen', Blackburn."

"Trying to blame it on me, naturally," Blackburn laughed, "Attempt to get citizenry to revolt. Weak tactic. Ruse."

Admiral Hotstreak's voice continued, "Surrender yourself to the New Pandemonium Armed Forces immediately. Failure to comply will be met with further, increased hostility against your 'subjects'. You have one hour to respond, before-"

Blackburn grinned as she reached the frequency she wanted, and the admiral's voice was as loud and clear as if he were standing beside them. When she spoke, her voice came out of the speakers as well. "You continue to bombard the city, Hotstreak? An idle threat. Citizenry already evacuated. Surface level superfluous, easily repaired. More ground troops then? Hope's Point Militia better equipped, trained to fight against A.M.P. Troopers."

"Ah, 'Queen' Blackburn," Hotstreak acknowledged, "Such a quick response! Rather unexpected. Your technicians managed to get the communication matrix back online, then? And would you look at that, you even tapped into my frequency. Wanted your citizens to hear your response, did you? I take it that with this sort of response, you are choosing to-"

"Ignore your ultimatum? Unintended. Granted: understandable assumption," Blackburn chuckled, "No, not ignoring. Responding with conditions. Instead, offering a challenge: you want the Queen of Hope's Point? Have to catch her first."

Hotstreak chuckled, "If that's your game, Blackburn, then let the records show that it is now afoot. However, as any good hunter would attest, the game is *a/ways* on, even before the hunted knows she is being hunted. If you can even make it to the hangar bay, then you shall have your chase. Take care."

The static abruptly ceased, and the four Hope's Point ponies replaced their earpieces. Blackburn wordlessly began heading down the nearest hallway with an unflinching, quick pace, and everypony followed nervously in her wake. The west hallway led straight to a door that Blackburn opened, which then led to a stairwell that led down into darkness. The lights were barely glowing in the hallway itself, but in the stairwell they were completely out. Gadget led the way, using her horn to illuminate the path precisely; Twilight took up the rear and did the same, and together they were able to keep the entire stairwell relatively well-lit.

Briarthorn spoke slowly and carefully after several moments once they'd descended a few flights. "Queenie, just curious, you're not going to, say-"

"Sacrifice myself, Briar?" Blackburn said calmly, "No. No, they're not after me. If targeting me, would not have issued ultimatum. Would have continued assault instead. Attempt to invoke surrender. After something else, something he wants to get without further hassle. Assuming our new guests are the target."

Twilight balked, "W-what? *Us?*"

"Y'all sound like you're accusin' us o' somethin'," Applejack snorted, "We didn't do nothin' ta no pony ta deserve whatever it is this here Hotstreak fella is doin'."

"Yeah, this isn't-" Rainbow started.

"Your fault? Of course not," Blackburn interjected, her voice sincere, "You are instrumental pieces on the world stage. Idea is flattering, personally. Take no offense; make no mistake. They're after you. Assuredly. Timing too coincidental, too convenient. NPAF covered in so much red tape, hard to tell where the bureaucracy ends and the bloodshed begins. Deployment of three flagship-grade cruisers would send up appropriately red flags from miles away. Logical, given who the assault leader is."

"Admiral Hotstreak?" Flathoof blinked, "He's famous around the city, sure. Most decorated soldier in the NPAF. At least, that's what I've heard."

"Correct. Highly decorated, responsible for stopping fifteen attempted settlements in past fifty years. Hope's Point only one to succeed. NPAF sending out most-decorated admiral, three Gargantuan-class cruisers: pre-meditated? No. Spontaneous. Admiral Hotstreak issued orders himself, gathered loyal captains to pilot cruisers. Did so without NPAF approval, did not file anything. Took up task personally. Suggests vested interest. Perhaps another servant of this... Nihila, was it?" she suggested. Twilight and her friends looked warily at one another.

Blackburn continued, "Similar to Starlight Shadow and her... team. Similar to assassin that was after Tick Tock. Similar to soldier at the Gate. Last one, most intriguing. Name was Jetstream. Hotstreak likely here on orders from Nihila because of you six. Likely kept tabs on

you all, knew where you were headed. Waiting for suspicious activity. Background check requests certainly suspicious. Clever plan. Walked right into it.”

“I still don’t follow,” Flathoof shook his head.

“Key to success in battle: knowing one’s enemy,” Blackburn explained, “Admiral Hotstreak a serious threat to city. Researched him. Know his tactics. Know his background. Know his family. Unsure of fate of Commander Jetstream after encounter with you all. Given character of Nihila... likely severely punished. Most punishments eventually fatal. Hotstreak would blame those responsible for his punishment, likely sought revenge without needed orders. Blame you all for death of his son.”

“His *son*?” Twilight’s jaw dropped. “Oh... oh dear...”

“As for false ultimatum, double purpose. First, keep fellow ship captains under assumption that plan was always Hope’s Point. No NPAF captain would want to jeopardize coveted rank following a madpony after six random mares. Needs their support, keeps up appearances. Second, confirmation. As said, two infiltrators in city. One, a saboteur, unaffiliated. Other, an informant. Ultimatum a signal to informant. Needed to track us. Had to respond, could not risk bombardment with shield still down. Hotstreak plays along. Clever plan.”

“All the more reason to hurry this along then,” Tick Tock interjected, “He said he would pursue us through the city? That means we’re being chased, right? Should we be-”

“Worried? No. No, Lockwood was right when I... lost myself, he is right now,” Blackburn said seriously, “Remain focused. Approaching seventh level. Even if Troopers found stairwell or other path down, would be too far behind to catch up. On off chance they do,” she added, turning behind her and addressing the group, “You all stay behind us. Gadget and Crossfire are taking point.”

“No offense, Your Majesty,” Rainbow chortled, “But-”

“You have combat skills, yes,” Blackburn interrupted, “As do Gadget and Crossfire; incidentally, they have more experience dealing with A.M.P. Troopers. Robotic. Troopers will not be using less-lethal tactics. Will be actively trying to kill targets. Keep safe, let them handle it. Twilight Sparkle!” she suddenly called, “If trouble occurs, you keep your friends protected. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Twilight nodded. She looked over at Rainbow’s discontent face. “Relax, Rainbow... it’s important that we all stay safe. If Her Highness wants us to be protected, then we should follow her lead. We are guests in her kingdom, after all. Princess Celestia would expect the same of any of us.”

Rainbow nodded. "Yeah... okay, Twilight. If you say so."

They continued to descend stairs, until very suddenly Blackburn stopped walking; Briarthorn and Lockwood, who'd been just behind her, bumped into her.

"Ow!" Briarthorn said as he half-stumbled.

"Shh!" she commanded. She perked up her ears slightly, turning her head towards the nearby wall. "Anypony else hear that?"

Everypony else stopped. Ears perked as they all strained to listen. Crossfire spoke first, keeping his voice low. "Yeah... sounds like drillin'."

Blackburn pointed at the wall. "Gadget, Crossfire: take point. Twilight Sparkle, may be good to get your Barrier spell ready. Briar, Lockwood, stay with them. Pinkie Pie..." She rolled her eyes and gestured for the pink earth pony to step forward, "Take rear position. Long-range cover."

"Wait wait, *what?*" Rainbow blurted, "Why do you want Pinkie to-"

"*Another* 'why' that is ultimately a 'how'. Pinkie Pie has armor. Protection. Effective combat with minimal danger," Blackburn explained. "Is the *whole point of armor.*"

"Oh boy!" Pinkie happily chirped, cocking her rifle and positioning herself near Blackburn, "Here we go, *finally* get a chance to use *this.*"

Blackburn's ears perked up again as [music](#) started coming in through her earpiece. She stared at Pinkie Pie, and shook her head. "Ridiculous... but... *presumably* necessary." She then stared right back at the wall. "Ready positions..."

Seconds passed, and the strange drilling sound became louder and louder, and then suddenly stopped. Ears twitched as, from behind the wall, a soft click could be heard.

The wall burst apart in a spray of rock and metal.

Twilight, in a panic, deployed a Barrier spell large enough to encompass herself and all the ponies near her, which from her position meant that Blackburn, Pinkie, Gadget, and Crossfire were exposed. Before the smoke and debris even cleared, they heard a loud buzzing noise and saw the familiar shape of a mechanical pony leap out of the large hole in the wall, straight at the central target in the formation: Blackburn. She didn't flinch even slightly. As soon as the A.M.P. Trooper's glowing forehoof came within a few feet of her, it was suddenly ripped off by a powerful blast of electromagnetic energy. The blast fired again and tore into the robot's head, blasting it apart and sending shrapnel flying everywhere.

“Hyperstatic Generator operating at peak capacity!” Gadget brightly declared, loudly cocking it again, “Discharge successful, no accidental feedback!”

“Excellent. Will need to commission more once you get it out of prototype phase,” Blackburn noted as more Troopers piled out of the hole.

The additional Troopers didn’t get far out of the hole in the wall before being waylaid by a barrage of electromagnetic bursts from Gadget, a few well-placed bullets from Pinkie’s rifle, and Crossfire’s shoulder-mounted guns. The smoke cleared and the last of the Troopers collapsed in a heap, its head riddled with holes. Blackburn trotted forward to investigate the breach, where the dirt was beginning to collapse in on itself. She stepped out of the gap just as a large swath of rock fell into it.

“Can these things seriously bore through all that solid rock to chase after us?” Tick Tock asked, “That... doesn’t seem like good news...”

“Not without assistance,” Blackburn explained, “Noticed drilling unit with formation. Not typically involved with military operations. Impressive forethought. Knowledge that targets would be leaving quickly and would require pursuit underground. Hotstreak’s informant is skilled... and hidden well. Need to increase pace.”

The drilling noises could still be heard, but were now coming from the lower end of the stairs nearby. The wall just beside the stairwell on the next flight below them burst apart as the one near them had, and Troopers started to pour out.

“Incoming!” Crossfire called as the Troopers below them crawled out of the rubble.

Crossfire charged to the forefront and took cover behind a Barrier that Gadget had briefly generated, just in time to avoid getting hit by a volley of flechettes. After they stopped to reload, Gadget dropped the shield and Crossfire settled his hooves into the floor. His shoulder plates rotated and opened, and the right one fired a rocket that careened into the middle of the pack, blowing apart most of the squad. Two of the Troopers were merely knocked aside. They regained their footing and locked on again, but before they could fire any more rounds, one of them crumbled to the floor as its head exploded in a shower of shrapnel.

“Boom! Headshot!” Pinkie cheered.

The other Trooper fired its rounds, but they were blocked by another shield from Gadget, allowing Pinkie to fire another shot into its head.

“They sure as shootin’ ain’t pullin’ any punches,” Crossfire noted, “Full lethal tactics, Yer Highness.”

“Not after me at all,” Blackburn agreed, “Ultimatum demanded surrender. Implied desire to take me alive. Lethal Tactics? Pretense falls apart. All Troopers would be under Hotstreak’s direct control. After you six, not concerned who else is with you. Follow close! Only three floors to go. Almost to hangar bay.”

The party followed Blackburn and her entourage, which now had adopted Pinkie into their number quite readily, down more and more stairs. After several minutes and several more flights of stairs, they finally reached the bottom floor and came out into the dark hangar bay.

The lights above barely flickered, showing the hangar to be mostly empty except for abandoned loading equipment and piles of cargo that had been left behind in the hurry to evacuate, completely devoid of living things, barring the baker’s dozen ponies that just entered. There was a large door on the east side of the structure, which Blackburn led the others towards.

As they approached, they could see the sparks of electrical work coming from a panel on the far right side of the door. There was a pony there working meticulously at the panel. They immediately approached him, though other than Blackburn, Gadget, and Crossfire, they all did so warily. At first, Gadget was approaching with her weapon drawn, but as they got closer they saw her noticeably lower it.

Though they could only see him through the dim lights of the ceiling and the electrical sparks from the panel as he worked, they were able to make out his features somewhat accurately. He was a sea green unicorn, wearing a white safety vest over his dark blue jumpsuit. His mane and tail were short and spiky, a bright yellowish-blond ending in black tips. He was hurriedly using three different tools at once inside the panel, a small wrench and a pair of pliers with his magic, and a screwdriver with his mouth.

“You there! Unicorn!” Blackburn called as they approached, “State your name and business!”

The unicorn jumped and dropped everything he was doing in a rapid fashion, dropping his screwdriver to the floor and flinging his wrench and pliers against the wall. In a fluster he saluted his Queen as she approached. “Oh! Voltage Surge reporting for duty, Your Majesty! Chief Wingineer... er, *Engineer Spark Plug* sent me down to repair the hangar paid lunch... er, *bay launch* systems for you!” He nervously smiled in Gadget’s direction, who put a hoof to her face. “The emergency escalator... *elevator* system is back online, I fixed it on my way down here, Your Majesty!”

Blackburn nodded and gestured for him to be at ease. “Status report, Voltage Surge.”

“You can call me ‘Colt’... er, ‘*Vol!*’ for short, if it makes it easier for you, Your Majesty,” the

unicorn saluted again.

“Status report, *Volt*,” Blackburn addressed with a cordial nod, “What is the present itinerary until launch preparations?”

Volt held a hoof to his head and bit his tongue in thought. “Well, the entire hangar bay is on lockdown... er, *lockdown*, Your Highness. I’m gonna have to reactivate everything manually, and with the power system at margarine... uh, *marginal* capacity, there’s a lot of systems to boot up. The main door is first. I should have it quacked... *cracked* open in another minute or two, give or take.”

Blackburn nodded again. “Carry on, *Volt*.” He saluted and turned back to his work, grabbing his tools as he did so.

Volt continued to work on the panel system, and for nearly a minute all that could be heard or seen were bright, sputtering sparks. Then, a great jolt of electricity burst out of the panel, and Volt was sent flying back several feet, slamming hard into the floor.

Gadget ran over to him. “*Volt*! Golly... are you okay? Hey, *Volt*!” She tenderly held his head in her hooves and knelt at his side. “C’mon, dangit, answer me!”

Volt bit his tongue and tried to uncross his eyes. “Hey sweetie, long time no see. If I’d known all I had to do was electorate... er, *electrocute* myself to get you to get all mushy on me, I would’ve done that *months* ago. Well I mean, in front of you I would’ve. I do it all the time by myself. That... that can be misinformation... *misinterpreted*, can’t it?”

Gadget dropped his head instantly and groaned, “Yeah, he’s okay. Dang idiot landed on his head, nothing important.”

Volt gave a dumb smile and lifted his head to observe the situation. “Hoo... fifteen feet! A new record! You see that, Gadget? That’s why *I’m* the export. Dangit, *expert*.”

Blackburn nodded in approval as the massive door into the hangar bay central hub slid open. “Excellent. Not much further. First bay belongs to the Wyvern. Best of the best.”

The party followed behind Blackburn and towards the first hangar, which was marked by a very large door just to the right of the main entryway. Volt busied himself at the panel nearby and after adjusting a few buttons on it and rebooting the system, he lifted up to the main terminal.

“Repowering floodgate shields,” he announced as he twisted a dial.

“Floodgate?” Twilight asked Briarthorn, who seemed intent on remaining closest.

“All our ships work underwater and under weather,” Briarthorn smiled quickly, “Floodgates to keep us from getting wet until we’re ready. Though technically speaking, we’re ready all the time. Fully submersible. Harder to detect a ship from the air when it’s underway. Neat thing is? Every single ship’s got that kind of transforming potential here in Hope’s Point. When you get right down to it, after all, water is just really slow air... in a manner of speaking,” he said, when Twilight gave him an odd look, “Well, look, same principles apply, you know? Of course, we’re high-tailing it, so we need to get into the air pretty quick if we’re going through the Belt of Tranquility. Can’t really get most of the shields ready down there. Oh, and for like, a smaller ship, like mine? There’s only like an hour of air for like two ponies when you’re in the drink. Had a few quickies down there. If we were, uh, calmer, might be two hours.. So it’s diversionary at best. But talk about a diversion! Keeps ‘em guessing to this day.”

“Floodgate activated, draining... the... hmm?” Volt scratched his head with his screwdriver after a moment of observing the terminal screen further.

“What’s the problem?” Gadget asked.

“Well, normally with all the power systems down across the board like this, the room would be flooded because the floodgate shields were deflowered... ooh, uh... *deactivated*,” he explained with a blush in Gadget’s direction, “But... uh... according to this, the room is already draining at a rapid rate now that the floodgate is up. I didn’t even animate... er, *activate* the drain function yet.”

They waited for several moments until the terminal made a soft beeping noise, signaling the room had been completely drained. They waited another moment or two while Volt busied himself with the door system, but then their ears all perked up at the sound of dozens of hoofsteps from the other side. Then, they heard a massive explosion from inside the hangar. Volt panicked and worked faster, and as soon as he was finished, the door slid open.

Blackburn’s jaw dropped. “My ship!” she cried.

What was left of what had once been a very large aircraft now laid strewn about the hangar in hideous piles of flaming debris on the still-damp floor. The culprits, several dozen Trooper units armed with shoulder-mounted cannons, all turned towards the door to greet the new visitors.

“Lower floodgate shield, Volt!” Blackburn shouted.

Volt did as asked, and the party saw a magical shield fade out on the ceiling, while another one sparked in just in front of them. Blackburn hastily closed the door, and they all stepped quickly away from it as the barrage of rockets exploded into the shield behind it. There was then a large crashing sound as the hangar was flooded again.

“Another surprise. Great,” Blackburn said acidly, “Knew exactly where my ship was docked... *damn!* Hotstreak? Not after me. *Still* pissing me off. Briar! *Captain Briarthorn.*”

Briarthorn placed himself front and center and saluted precisely. “Yes, ma’am, sir, ma’am?”

“The Thunder is only a few bays down. Need pilot codes to start ship itself, don’t have my override key with me.” She heaved her shoulders, a defeated, soundless laugh, “*Lucky* we brought you along. No other options with current itinerary. Time to go.”

“Are... are you... well, okay, no, I know. You’re sure,” Briarthorn smiled uneasily, “Keep in mind, though, Queenie: the Thunder’s barely built to accommodate a foursome- er, a *crew* of four ponies, let alone fourteen. Guess it’s good I have such a large cargo hold, huh? Gonna get uncomfortable, but-”

“Only option, comfort irrelevant,” Blackburn interjected, “Lead the way, move! Rest of you, follow close!”

“Well, uh... alright. Your... wish is my command...” Briarthorn murmured, flapping ahead of the group.

They trailed behind Briarthorn now and ran several hangar bays down until they reached his. As with the Wyvern’s hangar, Volt was required to crack open the maintenance panel and fiddle around inside with various wires and knobs until the terminal sprung to life. As before, he reactivated the floodgate shield, followed by the draining process. As the group stood and waited, they heard another series of explosions coming from down the corridor near the entryway.

“Still following us,” Blackburn snorted, “Ready positions.”

“Come on, you stupid door!” Rainbow shouted, “This isn’t the time to be all finicky on whether you wanna work or not!”

“Dashie, yelling at the machine won’t-” Pinkie started.

The terminal gave a soft beeping noise.

Rainbow smirked at Pinkie. “See? Just needed a little persuasion.”

With the draining process finished, Volt went straight to the emergency door switch, pushing it with a hoof. The door flung open, the party all entered the hangar, and the door closed right behind them with another push of a button.

Several jaws fell at the sight. The Thunder was, while perfectly intact, not at all what they were expecting. It was a large, gold-colored aircraft with an elongated oval shape, braced against the ground by large beams that were deployed from the underside.

“What a piece of *junk*,” Rainbow commented.

“You said it, Dashie,” Pinkie agreed, nodding sagely, “I was about to say the same thing.”

“I’ve seen some beat up junkers in my lifetime,” Tick Tock said, shaking her head, “But can this thing even fly?”

“It flies just fine, and laugh it up if you want, but this piece of junk is *my* piece of junk.” Briarthorn proudly declared, “You really think Her Majesty would let me keep this old girl around if she wasn’t in tip-top shape? She flies. Hell, I’d go so far as to say she’s the best flyer there is for hauling, towing, and running the Belt.”

He pulled a tiny device from his vest pocket and pressed it, causing a hatch on the port side of the ship to open and deploy an access ramp for everypony to enter through. He issued everypony forward to board it.

“Junkpile she may be, but the Thunder’s got her gifts. Multiple engines that let you take a lickin’ and keep on kickin’, minimal-surface tension Diffusion that is without doubt the fastest and strongest system in our weird little marina here, ultra-fast acceleration, in the top-ten for top speed, and a really cushy interior. I had carpeting installed. Paid for that with my own money, still don’t regret it.” He settled onto the, sure enough, carpeted access ramp and winged the group through, with Blackburn bringing up the rear. “I’m going to assume, your Majesty, that it’ll be your honor today to fly the girl who lets me inside her the most consistently?”

“Naturally,” Blackburn nodded, “Start making takeoff preparations. Ensure our passengers are suitably situated for safe flight. Gadget! Crossfire!” she shouted behind her, “Ensure any pursuers don’t give us trouble. Board the ship when Volt has completed the override.”

“That’s a ten-four, ay-oh-kay, roger-wilco!” Briarthorn saluted, following her inside.

“Right behind you, Your Highness,” Gadget saluted as well, “Come on Volt, get the override started.”

“Yes! Right, the overlord... *override!*” Volt sputtered.

Gadget, Crossfire, and Voltage Surge stayed outside the ship for the time being. The latter of the three trotted over to the large terminal on the side of the room and hastily fiddled

with the maintenance panel, pulled a small device out of his pocket, attached it inside the panel, then began working his tools around inside again.

A large banging sound could be heard coming from the door just before he reached the halfway point. Gadget and Crossfire hustled over to the entry ramp of the Thunder and got into defensive positions, taking cover behind the very short side rails.

“Golly, Volt, stop lollygagging!” Gadget called impatiently, “Double-time it! We need to get going!”

“Can’t risk a short in the circus... er, *circuits*.” Volt nervously replied, “Sorry sweetie, but this remote is *very* delicate. One little errant wire, and it won’t work! I’m a stickler for acupuncture... no, *accuracy*. Not the other thing. With the needles.”

The door suddenly burst apart at one portion, and several A.M.P. Troopers streamed into the room and instantly began firing flechette rounds at the Thunder’s entry port. Gadget tossed her Barrier up to protect herself and Crossfire, who was busy aiming his weapon at the approaching mechanical soldiers. As soon as he had an opening, Gadget dropped the shield and let Crossfire launch a barrage of bullets from both barrels on his shoulder-mounted guns, tearing through the clumped squads of Troopers with ease. The robots began to spread out and fire on the move, keeping Corssfire in cover while Gadget used her shield to try and protect Volt as best she could.

“Come on, Volt!” Gadget called again, “I can’t keep these Barriers up forever, y’know!”

“Just a little more...” Volt nervously gulped. “There!” He cheered, grabbed his portion of the remote, and galloped towards the Thunder as fast as he could.

One of the Trooper’s began firing at Gadget, causing her to panic and move her Barrier in order to protect herself. While she was distracted, another Trooper fired another volley at Volt, and he couldn’t react in time to throw any sort of defenses up. One round pierced him in the shoulder, knocking him off-balance and causing him to drop his device into a nearby puddle.

“No!” Gadget yelled. She glared at the offending Trooper and fired off a heavy bolt of energy from her gun, tearing the robot to pieces. “Volt! Volt, are you okay! Get over here, we’ll get you fixed up!”

Volt struggled to his hooves, and looked down with a grim frown at the device that he’d dropped, which was now sputtering off sparks and hissing with smoke. He attempted to reach for it, but hesitated for just a brief moment and pulled his hoof away. He then steeled his face, straightened his blood-stained vest, and galloped full speed towards the wall and terminal again.

“Volt? Volt?!” Gadget called in a panic. “Dammit, you brainless idiot! Get back here! Don’t

you *dare* do what you're thinking about-

"Sorry, Gadget!" Volt called back, "Somepony needs to deactivate the floodgates! Our Queen needs to take off, and the remote override is shorted! I'm gonna have to do it maniacally! Er... *manually!*"

Gadget pleaded, "You don't have to-"

"I'm the only pony other than you that knows how to do it, and Her Highness ordered you to get on board the ship! So, get on board!"

Volt fumbled with his tools inside the terminal again. He ducked as more Troopers clamored into the hangar and began firing at him as well as at the Thunder, and used his magic to yank a discarded cargo lift over towards him, using it as best he could for cover.

"Volt, come on, just get the startup activated, it'll do the rest on its own!" Gadget screamed, firing off more bolts of electromagnetic power at approaching soldiers.

"They just keep coming! Dagnabit!" Crossfire swore, "C'mon, kid! Get yer butt over here! This ain't no time ta be no hero!"

"Can't! Too many soldiers, the motion sensors won't shut off the floodgate as long as they're in here! I'm gonna cut the power, flood the hangar that way!" Volt yelled back, "Don't worry Gadget... this is for Her Highness! We've all dedicated our lives to her and this city. I don't regret one second of it!"

"Volt!" Gadget croaked, "Dammit, Volt! Don't... don't be-"

Crossfire grabbed her and tugged her towards the entry port. "C'mon, Gadget, we've gotta board before the floodgate opens!"

"Dammit Volt!" she yelled again.

As she was tugged on, the entry port shut behind them, and the ship suddenly glowed a very dim blue. Volt smiled and jabbed his screwdriver into the maintenance panel, causing it to give off a violent display of sparks. The shield flickered, moving from the ceiling to the entryway to prevent the torrent of water from flooding the main hanger. Several hundred tons of water came crashing down and flooded the tiny hangar bay in seconds, crushing everything inside under incredible pressure, except for the Thunder itself which remained safely intact and firmly attached to the floor, still glowing a dull blue.

"That idiot!" Gadget slammed her hooves on the entry port door. "That... that idiot... that stupid... stupid..."

Crossfire put a hoof on her shoulder, keeping her steady as she shook in place. "Gadget... I'm sorry... I'm sorry I had ta-

"It's not your fault..." Gadget wiped her eyes on her collar, sniffing loudly. "I can... I can grieve later. Come on... we've gotta get Her Majesty and her guests out of here..."

Gadget turned from the entry point and headed right, towards the front of the ship. Crossfire looked on with a slight frown, before turning away and leaving for the rear. As Gadget came into the cockpit, she saw Queen Blackburn already preparing herself for flight. Her wings were coated in a black substance that clung to her feathers like liquid, and on her face was a thick green visor. She stood on a small circular platform in the center of the cockpit area, standing clear of the sides as a thick glass cylinder descended around her, locking into place with a loud clang. Gadget trotted over to the control panel, took a seat, and immediately began using her magic and her hooves in conjunction to manipulate buttons and switches all over the front and side panels before putting a similar visor to Blackburn's on her own face.

"Gadget... I am sorry," Blackburn said solemnly, "Crossfire is almost as capable as you are, if you need to sit this one out. Will not and would never hold it against you."

"Volt gave his life for you, Your Majesty," Gadget said fondly, giving Blackburn a very small, sincere smile, "Any one of us would gladly do the same without hesitation. I'm not going to waste his sacrifice by giving you a second-rate co-pilot. You'll need the best you can get to fly Briarthorn's junk heap. I'll... I'll be alright..."

Blackburn nodded appreciatively, and tapped a hoof to the side of her visor. "Sync up, Gadget."

"All synced, Your Majesty," Gadget nodded, tapping the side of her own.

Blackburn called out, her voice carrying through the ship's intercom system into the cargo hold, where Briarthorn was hurriedly making sure everypony was comfortably in their seats and strapped in with harnesses he'd hastily rigged together from assorted cargo-holding straps.

"We're moving out. Enemy knows we're leaving, knows we're underwater, can predict standard departure path. Will have prepared pursuit route. Alternate route mapped out along coast to the west, keeping to shallow waters. Will break surface when a mile out, then make for Belt of Tranquility. Should give plenty of time for Diffusion system to activate before enemy pursues, especially given the ship." She turned to Gadget and nodded. "Take us out, Gadget."

"Yes, Your Highness," Gadget confirmed, flipping a series of five switches on the side of the control panel.

As she did so, the compartment that Blackburn was contained in gave a loud hiss, and Blackburn began floating as currents of air flowed into the compartment. The Thunder's landing gear tucked in, and the ship immediately began to float upwards through the ceiling of the hangar bay. It floated for several minutes until it came level with an underwater tunnel that Blackburn carefully steered the ship through, using her wings to direct the ship as if she herself were flying, or rather, swimming through the water. As the ship cleared the tunnel, she steered it slightly to the side. They continued out for several minutes before a loud beeping sound came from one of the panels to Gadget's left.

"What the-" she blinked. She observed the panel and turned to Blackburn in a panic. "Your Majesty! The cruisers are moving this way! They're-"

"Tracking us," Blackburn sneered, "They have something homing on us, tracks better than standard sonar. Gadget, prepare to surface. Need to start early, before they open fire while we're underwater." Blackburn called into the ship's intercom again, "Briar! Suit up ahead of schedule!"

Briarthorn swore silently under his breath as he helped Rarity into her seat. "What, *now*? What happened to-"

"Being directly tracked, Briar. Not sure how yet. Incredibly suspicious, not keen on wasting time. Suit up. While you're at it... we need some defense support. The Thunder does not have a weapons platform, correct?"

"Chassis is slick for transport, but I don't even have a *firearm*, you know, the old things that used *bullets*? She turns on a dime," Briarthorn said mournfully, "but the poor girl's circuit grid just isn't a strong enough power system to carry *any* weapons *and* use a Diffusion system, even if it's *my* Diffusion system."

"Crossfire!" Blackburn's voice called, "Suit up with Briar. Going to need close-range defense when we come under attack."

"Right away, Yer Majesty," Crossfire agreed.

As he and Briarthorn headed off, Rainbow Dash suddenly loosened herself from her seat. "Hang on a minute!" she snapped, "Will somepony tell us what's going on? Under attack? Being tracked? Should we be worried and actually do something, or just sit here and worry like a bunch of wimps? I'm sick of being babysat here!"

"Dash, those cruisers are going to come after us, but since they fly about as well as a rock does, they won't reliably be able to use their weapon systems unless they crank their engines up to full. That'll take a few minutes, and that means they're going to be launching

Aerial A.M.P. Troopers. We're going to need some close-range support to keep them off the ship. I have to get the Diffusion system up before the cruisers get here. With me so far?"

"So what you're saying is, we're about to go toe-to-toe with a bunch of no-good flying robots," Rainbow said slowly, "And you're going to need help fighting them off, and you didn't think to invite me? Come on, dude, what gives? If you need some help, I'm offering!"

Briarthorn beamed. "Dash, consider yourself *formally* invited to clobber some robots. Three cruisers is three times the robots. We're gonna need all the help you can give us. Let's go get suited up."

Twilight got out of her seat immediately after. "I'm helping too. It's obvious you don't need pegasi here if Crossfire's going along, so I'd like to help if I can." She turned to Tick Tock. "Tick Tock. Care to accompany... me?"

Tick Tock held a hoof to her mouth. "I... n-no thanks, Twilight. Afraid of heights, remember? Terribly sorry... not really... no..." She started to shake a little, causing Applejack, her nearest neighbor, to pat her back reassuringly.

Twilight frowned. "Oh... Tick Tock, I'm sorry. Well then, Mister Crossfire," she announced, "I guess I'm your one-and-only unicorn. Care to have me along?"

"Well alright then, glad ta have ya aboard, if'n y'all're as talented as Her Majesty says y'all are," Crossfire chuckled, "If y'all're gonna help, let's get y'all suited up."

The two mares followed behind Briarthorn and Crossfire to the airlock at the entry port. Briarthorn opened a compartment on the side panel and took out a set of thick suits made of a latex-like material, and threw one each to the mares accompanying him. He put the last one back in the compartment, then reached in and fished out a set of metal horseshoes with glowing lights on the sides and bottom. He tossed it over to Twilight, who caught it with her magic and looked at both it and the suit hesitantly, then tossed another to Rainbow, then put one on himself. Crossfire didn't take one of either, and moved over to the port hatch, adjusting his helmet all the while.

"What's with all the gear?" Rainbow asked as she looked her suit, her eyes slowly widening in elation, "This thing is pretty boss. Actually... they look sorta familiar. What-"

"Something from your end of the universe, or whatever the hell spacetime magic whisked you from? This is just our standard issue pilot safety uniform," Briarthorn explained as he undid the buttons on his shirt and shrugged off his vest.

"Whoa whoa whoa!" Rainbow blurted suddenly as Briarthorn reached his mouth back and then untied his belt with his mouth, "Dude! Not cool! Naked! No! Do not want!" She quickly

shielded her eyes and averted her gaze at once.

Briarthorn smirked wide and wiggled his eyebrows. “Hey now, whoa! *Dashie-poo*, do you mind? It’s not polite to stare. Gosh, and here I was thinking you didn’t want to look at all.”

“We’re in a bit of a hurry, Rainbow,” Twilight said quickly as she began to remove her cloak.

“Twilight!” Rainbow flustered, “What the hay?! Don’t go all nude on me too!”

“Rainbow. *Relax*,” Twilight said reassuringly, “No time to worry about that kind of stuff now. Since when did you get all worked up over this kind of stuff?”

Rainbow crossed her hooves in front of her chest. “Well since this weird world made me kinda self-conscious about it, that’s when!”

As slowly as he dared, under the dire circumstances, Briarthorn began to fit into his uniform, with a massive, conspiratorial grin on his face. “You weren’t self-conscious when you got here. You didn’t even know nudism was a faux-pas here. ‘Hey’,” Briarthorn said in a fairly convincing impression of Rainbow, “‘What’s the jerk-ass talking about?’ Oh, nothing, Dash, just Twily’s memory spell that jammed all our brains with your memories right up to you entering the world. With nothing on. Rarity was trim, Applejack was firm, Fluttershy was soft, and you’ve got nice tone all up and down that lovely blue flank of yours. I can see why your plush-bottomed pink friend gets a kick out of you.”

Rainbow shook violently. She bit her lip, narrowed her eyes, and belted, “Just keep talking, Briarthorn, and I swear to Celestia when we’re all done with this, I’m going to knock your teeth out. *All of them*.”

Briarthorn smiled sincerely at Rainbow Dash with his un-knocked-out teeth. “If it helps, remember that I play all over the field. No offense, no fouls, just one *athlete* to another: nice form and figure.”

Twilight put her hoof on Rainbow’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Rainbow. I can’t imagine what this sort of stuff is gonna do to your psyche when we get home. Besides, this is like a locker room isn’t it? Don’t the Wonderbolts have to ‘go all nude’ to get into uniform?”

“Yeah... yeah, fine,” Rainbow grumbled. She warily stripped off her jacket and began donning her suit herself, putting all of her effort into staring straight at the floor and making sure Briarthorn’s eyes were kept to himself, which she was actually embarrassed to see was the truth, and that she’d been staring at him the whole time to make sure of it. After all the suits had been put on, Rainbow checked herself out and nodded in approval.

“These suits definitely look familiar,” she said, “Good call on the Wonderbolts thing, Twi. I was thinking the same thing.”

Indeed, each of the suits was a perfectly form-fitting latex-like uniform colored a bright pine green with golden lightning bolt designs on the chest and an inch from the bottom of each leg. Other than being green instead of blue, Rainbow was positive that these were almost perfect copies of the uniforms the Wonderbolts wore, right down to the goggles that Briarthorn was handing to Twilight. She and Briarthorn tucked their own goggles over their eyes.

“Okay... this is pretty awesome,” Rainbow said with a small, gleeful squeal, “This is easily the closest I’ve been to actually *being* a Wonderbolt. Oh man... if I can’t make it in after this, I’m going to be really surprised. So. *Awesome*.”

“What about these?” Twilight asked as she slid the horseshoes on over the uniform, “Oof... wow, they’re heavier wearing them than lifting with my magic.”

“Magnetic horseshoes, Twily,” Briarthorn explained, “You’re going topside with Crossfire. That means you’re going to need some way to stay on the ship with all the fancy flying Her Highness is going to be doing. I hope you’re not too squeamish when flying. She’s not as smooth of a ride as I am.” He stopped a second and chuckled, “Heh... how d’ya like that? That wasn’t even intentional.”

Blackburn’s voice came over the intercom system. “Suited up down there?”

“Diffusion prep is go!” Briarthorn replied, “Ready whenever you are!”

“Roger that, preparing to surface.”

“Phew... okay, one more thing before we get started,” Briarthorn said to nopony in particular. He reached into one of the pockets of his discarded vest, and pulled out a small flask. Without hesitation, he drew it back and chugged the contents in the space of five seconds.

“Dude, you’re *drinking* before you fly?” Rainbow balked, mouth agape, “Didn’t they teach you anything in flight school?”

“Dash, believe you me for once, considering we’re going life-and-death here?” Briarthorn said with a soft smile as he replaced the flask into the vest, “When you see what I’m gonna have to do out there, you’ll forgive me for wanting a little buffer. You’d be crazy doing my job stone-cold sober.”

The four ponies in the airlock stood and waited. They heard a loud burst of an engine from the rear of the ship as it broke the surface. As soon as they were above water, the airlock opened and Briarthorn zipped outside past Crossfire, flapping his wings hard and fast to keep

up with the ship's rapidly-increasing speed. Rainbow followed suit, rushing out into the open air and spinning loops around Briarthorn, getting readjusted to flying again after days on the ground; Briarthorn watched in interest as she began to fly faster and faster outrunning him easily and actually starting to outpace the Thunder itself.

Crossfire turned to Twilight and beckoned for her to go next. "Ladies first, Miss Sparkle."

Twilight gulped and warily looked at her horseshoes, "Well... here goes... um... oh dear..."

Twilight stepped forward and poked her head out of the entry port, keeping her forehooves just on the edge of the opening. She took a deep breath and nervously fidgeted in place; Briarthorn swung over towards her, offering her a hoof to grab.

"Alrighty then, Twily, let's keep this from getting weird on you, but, well, to keep it simple, you're gonna need a lift!" he called over the din of crashing waves below and rushing air all around.

She nodded nervously, reached out, touched her hoof to his. He immediately followed by reaching out with his mouth and flicking a small button on the horseshoe she was wearing, which began to glow a dull blue just the like the ones he wore; the other three shoes followed suit entirely of their own accord, syncing together with the first. She felt her hoof stick to his just like two opposite halves of a magnet, and gave a loud yelp as he yanked her out of the airlock.

As Briarthorn increased altitude, Twilight saw that the Thunder had changed in appearance since she'd boarded it. Two large panels on the top of the craft had opened, revealing a great set of wings that spread diagonally outwards from the body of the aircraft in a manner similar to pegasus wings. Beneath each of the wings' "feathers" she could see the dull blue glow of techno-magic, and at the rear she could see same glow, only more powerful, propelling the ship forward and upward. The entire ship was also dotted with long, thin rods spaced evenly around the ship's hull.

As she looked south, she could see great explosions as all three massive cruisers blasted away at a reflective golden surface with various weapons that she couldn't make out from here. The shield was back online. However, they were beginning to turn and move in their direction in wide, sweeping arcs. The large panels on the sides of the crafts began to slide open, and even from here she could see hundreds upon hundreds of tiny red dots swarming out of the frontmost ship first, then the second, then the third. In fact, the more she seemed to focus on the faraway events, the closer they seemed to get, as if her goggles were functioning like a pair of binoculars.

"W-whoa!" she exclaimed as she felt the rush of wind blasting against her during one of Briarthorn's tight loops. She glad to be wearing a warm suit and a pair of goggles. "Oh gosh..."

t-this is... this is new... this is very new. I am *not* used to flying like this at all..."

"First time for everything, Twily," Briarthorn grinned as he reached down and took her other hoof in his to strengthen the hold, "I figure you're used to being flown around by pegasi every now and then, but now you get to ride on top of a real, live, honest-to-goodness *airship*. I know what you're thinking. The Thunder's not exactly the greatest first-timer craft, but she holds up under fire. Just think of her as the ship-version of me!"

"You mean it's loud and obnoxious?" Rainbow jabbed as she pulled up alongside Briarthorn.

"Says the girlfriend of 'tiny pink Briar'," Briarthorn snickered, "No, no, no. Nah, come on, Dash, follow more along the lines of: it's going to be a long and bumpy ride, but when you're through, you're gonna see *stars*. You can use that on Pinkie prior to some private time if we end up all living, I can vouch that she'll get a kick out of it."

"Stars? Oh! You mean... this ship can go into *space*?" Twilight gasped, "Oh wow, that's incredible! I'd love to see the stars from up close like that!"

Briarthorn blinked repeatedly, then smiled and sighed. "Twily, you really are just the most adorable pony I have ever met. Also somehow really smart and really... uh, shall we say, *virtuous*. That's probably the most polite euphemism. No lie? I am seriously rethinking quite a lot of things, since these last few days and really mostly the memory blast that gave me the skivvy. There's only ever been one pony that made me do anything like that before."

Briarthorn laughed, swept upwards, and swung over the top of the aircraft, then carefully set Twilight down on the roof. Twilight's magnetic horseshoes on her rear hooves stuck fast to the roof. Briarthorn deactivated his own horseshoes and eased Twilight onto the roof steadily. A loud clanging noise from the port side of the ship drew Twilight's attention, and she saw Crossfire climbing onto the roof completely on his own, using his horseshoes as grips to hold onto the ship. Twilight found she was able to move around quite easily as well, almost as if the horseshoes weren't there, but knowing full well that the wind speed should have been blowing her clean off; that didn't make her feel any better if the ship was going to moving like he said it was.

She gave Briarthorn a worried look. "These magnets don't feel strong enough to hold us onto the roof through much," she protested.

"Not to worry, Twily," Briarthorn grinned. He pressed a hoof to his ear. "Queenie? We're all set up here. Go ahead and activate the polarity charge. Also: please try to not to blow up my ship. Most of us would die if that happened, and the salvage costs would be worse than my current low-level booze punishment by a couple hundred shots of Venom."

The ship gave a loud clang and the dull blue glow was replaced by a soft pink one for all of a second. Twilight suddenly felt her hooves stick solidly to the metal of the ship, and she was completely unable to move her hooves at all. Briarthorn, whose magnets were off, landed softly down in front of her and double-checked each of her hooves in turn to make sure they were all in good condition while Crossfire handled his own. When Briarthorn was finished, he leaned in close to Twilight and pat her head gently with the tip of his wing, pulling a small wire from the side of her goggles up and latching it to the base of her horn. She shivered a little and gulped nervously as the sudden feeling of foreign magic flowed through her.

“And... there we go! All synced up. Okay! Twily... you’re going to be in for quite a rush,” he said as seriously as he could, though he was smiling, “Your goggles are equipped with targeting-assisters. Little markers on the screens of the goggles. They’ll help you target your magic accurately *and* use it to your fullest, which I’m quite excited over. You’re going to be moving a lot and blowing things up. The only reason I’m giving you these goggles is because I want this show to go off without a hitch. Performance time, you know? Blind dress rehearsal. As great as a spellcaster I know you are, I, uh... I wouldn’t assume you’d be really proficient, say in, *solid* marksmanship training, which we kinda need right now.”

“Wasn’t really in the curriculum at Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns, no,” Twilight said sheepishly, “Though I was interested in the subject when my brother started training for the Royal Guard. I studied a few books on the matter!”

Rainbow rolled her eyes. “Twilight, this isn’t like taking tips from ‘*Running for Eggheads*’. This is serious! What could you have learned from a book on this?! What was it, ‘*Marksmanship for Eggheads*?’”

Twilight narrowed her eyes at Rainbow. “For starters, all of Chapter One was on the topic of targeting the center of mass. Increases accuracy by about seventy-five percent over aiming for the head or limbs. Chapter Two, leading a moving target. Chapter Three-”

“I get it, I get it!” Rainbow said, throwing her hooves up, “Yeesh, Twi, what *can’t* you learn from a book? I’m starting to wonder if I should read up on some flight techniques instead of just adventure stories...”

Briarthorn blinked, smiled, and continued, “Well, that’s a nice surprise! You know some basics. That’s gonna make the targeting assist make you all homing-shot material. And talk about a fast track for improvement. Not a bad field test! Anyway, hostile targets are marked red, friendlies - that’s me and Rainbow and Crossfire here - are marked green. The system is voice-, thought-, and magic-sensitive, so if you want you can call out targets by looking at them and just thinking about targeting them, or saying you want to mark them, or just using your magic in some way; they’ll be highlighted for you and us in yellow, and we can mark targets the same as you can. With me so far?”

"I think so..." Twilight gulped, "So much new techno-magic all at once... phew..."

"It's not too complicated if you don't think about it too much," Crossfire shrugged, "You've got the very basic system, and you're a unicorn. You'll be fine. Imagine how I feel, not having magic to work with."

"Twily, keep Crossfire's glorious bod covered if you have to," Briarthorn continued, "He'll handle the brunt of the assault, what with all the experience and natural talent, but he might attract a lot of attention. If it looks rough up here, just stay safe and keep that Barrier magic going. The targeting assist will compensate for that too, to help you conserve magic by directing where the Barrier is. Neat, right? However, I want to stress this: *Do not* try to shield the whole ship, or me, even if it looks like I'm about to take a hard smack. Our Diffusion stuff? That's *my* job."

"Your job?" Twilight and Rainbow asked in unison.

Briarthorn strut over to a large cylindrical device sticking up out of the roof, and pulled the small rectangular attachment on the top off of it, then stretched it out into a long band. He then strut over to Rainbow Dash, and offered it towards her.

"Do I have permission to touch your body with non-sexual intent?" he said, a look of complete seriousness on his face despite his voice almost laughing every other word.

She grunted, "Yeah... uh... whatever."

He strapped it around her midsection with a sharp snap. He then pulled a thin cord from it, attached it to the tip of her left wing, and let it snap into place, where it immediately contoured to the curvature of the appendage; he did the same with the other wing, then gestured for her to flex them both to make sure the attachments were solidly in place.

"The patented Diffusion system!" he explained with a dramatic flair, "Or, if you want to really, really, *really* use laypony's terms, the ship's primary shield generator. This little number protects from weapon fire decent enough, but most importantly, its particulars of originally and entirely being pegasus wavelength type stuff, this baby here protects us from the magicks of the Belt of Tranquility. I'll be flying loops around the ship to charge it up, which is a very precise, delicate process. Your jobs are to provide me cover, since the shield only affects the ship, not those on top or around it. This attachment I gave to Rainbow Dash here, when activated, will allow her to help out if, uh, necessary." His last statement was said with a hint of trepidation.

"Wait, hold up. You're not putting one on. But you're the pony doing whatever the Diffusion system does. Does... your flying around power it up?" Rainbow asked.

Briarthorn's attempt at a charming smile failed, and he looked guilty, but pushed on with

his bravado as he went on. "Well, this system is something only the best pilots can manage. Remember, I said it's a very precise, delicate process. Nearly all of the ships in our fleet use an automatic system, like the one on your back, to charge and sustain it. It's rough, though. One hell of a power drain and *brutally* slow. The better pilots do it manually, using this Diffusion amplifier," he explained, gesturing to her wings, "To generate the proper frequency of magic behind them. Remember, I'm a one-pony smuggler team. Yet, I still use a Diffusion system. With auto-pilot kicked on, I can do it completely on my own, no attachment required.

"The Diffusion techno-magic is a little bit of a family legacy, see? My great-grandfather Briarpatch figured out how to similar stuff to the Barrier magicks you unicorns use to make things like our city's shield, and turned it into pegasus velocity magic. Y'know, the 'PMV' your gryphon buddy talked about? How when a pegasus flies very fast, they-

"Leave a trail of magic, yeah, we know all about that," Rainbow nodded.

Briarthorn's look of guilt grew on his face. Twilight and even Rainbow were staring at him, bemused by his nervous look, even as he seemed to be bringing up brag-worthy accomplishments. "While I'll get *more* shield, and *faster*, we can't have just me to rely on, right? The showboater?" He took a deep breath, and looked at Rainbow with a half-hearted attempt at a smile, and both Twilight and Rainbow felt a chill crawl down their spines. "So if... if I go down, Rainbow... you've gotta finish it. This isn't my first time trying to apply it mid-combat, but those numbers are a lot more than I'm used to, so I'm... I'm just taking precautions here. Simple enough process, just turn it on, and fly loops around the ship. The attachment will take care of the rest."

"Are you sure you're going to be okay doing this with everything happening at once? This all sounds very complicated... and dangerous..." Twilight gulped, "Okay... I'm ready for this... I'm ready..."

Briarthorn grinned wide and approached her again. "Dangerous is right, Twily. You're gonna be loaded with pressure and anxiety up here. But after living the life you've lived on, uh, *our* world, I think you're up to it. Don't worry about me,. Don't worry at all! That's for warts. You're awesome and great and fantastic, and the very best spellcaster I've ever seen!" He wiggled his eyebrows. "Still if, we're going to need all the luck we can get... how about a good luck smooch?"

Twilight turned bright red. "W-what?"

Rainbow groaned, "Wow, that desperate to get her to kiss ya, huh?"

Briarthorn looked at Rainbow Dash *fondly* even as she berated him, leaning in and pecked Twilight on the cheek even as Rainbow was talking. "There we go. See?" he said to Rainbow, sticking his tongue out at her, "Harmless. Good luck, Twily. Stay safe up here."

Twilight went to put her hoof to her cheek, but couldn't as it was still stuck firmly to the roof.

Briarthorn saluted to Crossfire, then took off. He looped out of sight towards the front of the ship then came zipping around the port side in a horizontal line towards the rear, looping around the starboard side back to the front. Both Twilight and Rainbow realized why Briarthorn's body and wings were stretched the way they were. The curved wings made his flight naturally generate more lift. In his wake, his magic trail, a solid wall of light, was glowing a brilliant white-gold that looked like the ribbons on his Cutie Mark. The trail was drawn to the rods strewn about. When it came into contact with them they glowed a bright green, and started to pool more of the green glow outwards across the ship's hull.

"That's an odd trail," Rainbow observed, "I've never seen anypony leave behind something like that before."

Twilight nodded her head. "It's like he said, it gives off a similar magical signature to Barrier spells. Very peculiar..."

Rainbow shook her head and took off as well, flying slow circles in the air above the ship as it finally began to level out. She gazed off into the distance after about a minute of flying, and she caught sight of the small red dots beginning to approach, getting bigger and bigger every second. They were approaching extremely fast, making her give an annoyed snort to nopony in particular.

"Looks like we've got incoming," she said to herself, "Hmph. I could outrun 'em..."

She was surprised at the sudden pair of events to follow. First, she was surprised to see that some of the tiny red dots she was staring at became highlighted by a yellow triangular marker that made them extremely easy to see, complete with small readouts beside each them that indicated, as far as she could tell, target speed and target integrity. Second, she was even more surprised to hear a voice in her ear, as if the speaker had been literally flying right beside her.

"R-Rainbow? Is that you?" Twilight asked.

Rainbow balked, "Twilight? How the-"

"You girls ever heard of radio?" came a quip from Briarthorn, also as if right next to Rainbow despite clearly being down below flying loops around the Thunder. "Your goggles also have a radio transmitter in the bands to help communicate with the ship itself and anypony else wearing a set of flight goggles. The mic is strong enough to pick up your voice so you can talk to us even over the wind, and the headset is strong enough to let you hear us over the wind as

well. Like I told Twily, Dash, mark out targets. You're our first line, so you mark things that you're going after so that Twily and Crossfire can focus on whatever manages to get past you."

"Heh, if anything even *can* get past me," Rainbow chuckled as she cracked her neck, "Here we go... time to show off what I can really do! Try not to get bored down there, Twilight!"

Rainbow swung around in a tight roll and launched herself towards the rapidly-approaching shapes. As she got closer, she could clearly see them as the recognizable figures of the A.M.P. Troopers she was used to seeing, only these all had sharp, angular, pegasus-like wings made of black metal that they tilted slightly to steer, and tiny rockets on each of their hooves that propelled them forward. As she approached, the frontmost formation steered themselves towards her incoming trajectory. She rolled to the side to avoid a volley of bullets fired from their shoulder-mounted guns.

"Ha ha! Is that all you've got?!" she challenged. She clicked her hooves together and rocketed towards them as a bolt of lightning, sending out rapidly-dispersing sparks all around her.

She collided with the lead Trooper in the formation, causing it to explode in a shower of shrapnel and sparks, then swerved around and ripped through the next-nearest one she could find, tearing through the entire squad as fast as she was able.

Some of the formations behind the first continued jetting forward and past her, ignoring her and making a beeline straight for the Thunder; others turned their attention towards her and immediately began firing bullets at her; she responded by bolting off to the side, but she yelped as some of the bullets came dangerously close. The barrage had been extremely widespread, as every individual volley had come from one of the three dozen robotic soldiers bearing down on her.

"Holy cow, these things either have really good aim, or there's just too many of them to really avoid it. Well... I guess I'm just gonna need to move faster then!" She clicked her hooves together again and exploded towards the next squadron in the line-up, twirling and twisting out of the way of the next barrage as best she could.

"Here we go, Miss Twilight," Crossfire grunted, settling himself in and aiming his shoulder-mounted cannons towards the incoming squadrons of Troopers, "Are ya ready? This ain't gonna be no walk in the park, I tell ya."

"I'm ready," Twilight nodded, "I'm ready... to show my friends just how much they can rely on me..."

Crossfire chuckled lightly, "Well then... light 'em up!"

Twilight took a deep breath and took aim towards the incoming squadrons of airborne assailants. She focused her magic and fired a bolt of energy at the first robot to enter her field of vision. It crashed into the thing's head and exploded, causing the mechanical soldier to fall helplessly towards the sea below. The ones nearby it were struck by a barrage of bullets from Crossfire's rapidly-spinning chain guns. Wings were torn apart, causing them to swerve wildly around through the rushing air currents; legs were shattered, causing them to veer off-course without a full set of propulsion; heads and bodies were blasted apart. Crossfire fired bullet after bullet until he heard a loud click, signalling his guns needed to reload.

"Reloading!" Crossfire called, "Cover fire, Miss Sparkle!"

"On it!" Twilight called.

She took another deep breath, and focused herself on the full squad of Troopers coming her way. She funneled her magic through her horn again and fired off a rapid-fire barrage of magical bolts that impacted random soldiers in the formation. They responded by returning fire, and Twilight shielded her eyes as a stream of bullets plinked against the Diffusion shield nearby. She raised her own Barrier to protect herself and Crossfire as the bullets traced a line towards the two. She sneered at the remaining approaching Troopers, latched onto the leader of the formation, and violently ripped one of its legs off, causing it to spin out of control and crash into its neighbor with an explosion.

Crossfire settled himself and rotated the cylinders on his shoulders until they locked back into place with a loud click. He then fired a small volley of tiny rockets at a formation of Troopers coming from another side of the craft. Each one struck solid hits and exploded in a burst of fire and metal. Another loud click came from Crossfire's gun when he attempted to fire a second volley at another approaching squad. Switching again, he fired off a shorter, more precise series of bullets one at a time from just one barrel, until again it too clicked and he was forced to rotate it to the next one.

"I'm goin' through ammo faster'n I'm able ta reload!" Crossfire snorted, "Miss Dash, I'm gonna need y'all ta divert more o' these here things away from the ship! There's too many of 'em fer us ta handle!"

"I'm trying as best as I can!" Rainbow called, frantically swerving to avoid another salvo of bullets, "What's with the aim on these things?! They're getting way too close with those shots! I can't take down more than a couple at a time before I'm back on the defensive!"

"They're targetin' the Troopers you're goin' after, hopin' ta catch ya in the line o' fire!" Crossfire explained, "Randomize yer pattern, don't let 'em predict yer targets!"

"Got it," she confirmed.

She looked out at the series of more and more Troopers approaching, far more than the initial formations had been and far more than she knew what to do with. There were hundreds, no, thousands of them, and an easy third of them were gunning straight for her.

“Oh boy... this is gonna get-” She was cut off when a sudden loud blaring of [music](#) came through her earpiece, causing her to hold a hoof there in surprise. “The hay?! Who the hay’s singing-”

She was distracted for all of a second and had to swerve to avoid another volley of bullets. She glared off in the direction she’d been shot at from, but just as she moved towards the offending target, its head exploded, ripped into by a tiny, bright ball of light that had been flung from someplace behind her. The Trooper behind the first was hit by another of the blasts of light. Rainbow turned to see where the blasts were coming from as another volley of them started blasting into the rest of the squadron.

“Aw wow... no way...” she muttered with a half-smile.

A bipedal suit of mechanical, robotic armor, larger than an average pony, came flying at blinding speed towards her location, its bright pink coloration easy to see against the sea of blue below and the sky of orange above. Its arm was leveled in Dash’s direction, rapidly firing off bursts of light at targets that were approaching from behind Rainbow Dash. As the suit swept in close to Rainbow, she could clearly see the propulsion jets on its feet and other arm propelling it forward and being used to rapidly steer to avoid incoming bullets, generating a light the same color as the bursts its main arm was firing.

“Pinks, is that you?” Rainbow asked into her radio, “Man, that’s a fancy new suit you’ve got there!”

“Affirmative ten-four roger wilco, Dashie,” Pinkie voice chirped over the radio comm, “No time for chatter, we’ve got bogies to deal with!”

“Heh... we sure do, Pinks. We sure do,” Rainbow smirked, launching off in pursuit of the pink-armored mare.

Crossfire grumbled as a barrage of bullets ricocheted off of a shield that Twilight had hastily thrown up to defend him. “This is gettin’ us nowhere fast, Yer Majesty, an’ nowhere ain’t no place ta be,” he said into the comm, “There’s too many o’ them out here. I think we might’ve made a slight error o’ the miscalculation type?”

“I’m with beefy,” Briarthorn agreed, “I’m doing the tightest loops as best I can out there without actually colliding with the conduits, but I’m not seeing much in the way of results. All that enemy fire is wearing on the shield too much, and I can’t ask Twily down there to try and deflect all of it. Heyo, Gadget, what’s the Diffusion shield reading? Please tell me we’re making some

kind of headway. Good numbers, right?"

Gadget's voice came over the team's radio comm, sounding worried but not panicked. "Current reading at twenty-five percent and climbing at a rate of one percent per minute, given rate of actual increase minus decrease from enemy fire. No offense to you of course, Briarthorn. If this were an automatic system, we'd hardly have any charge at all, and I don't think even Twister could get his up as fast as you. Still, fact is-"

Blackburn interrupted, "Shield not charging fast enough to be of use. Enemy cruisers gaining fast. Without Diffusion shield, can't lose them in Belt of Tranquility. Need time to power shield... hmm. May require some more erratic flight maneuvers. Gadget, check Thunder schematics. Evaluate stunt-flying capabilities."

Briarthorn's loops slowed for a moment, and his shock was tangible through the comm. "Whoa! Whoa, whoa, now. Queenie," Briarthorn said quickly, "Are you sure about this? Normally, I love your air shows, they pitch me a semi, minimum, and it's not like I can't fly fast enough to *keep up* or anything, no matter how 'erratic' you might say it gets, but you've got *riders* up top that gotta-"

"We'll be fine up here, Briarthorn! Snugger'n a bug in a rug!" Crossfire said, "Won't we, Twilight?"

"I don't exactly know what we're going to do, but if it'll help take some pressure off of us, I'm all for it!" Twilight called, "I can't keep track of all these things! Too much is happening all at once!"

"Accord reached, Briar. Fly faster. Crossfire. Twilight Sparkle. Hang on up there," Blackburn warned, "Also, keep calm. This may get... hectic. That goes for you inside, too."

"Also, any of you with weak constitutions, please barf in one of the empty crates. Not a full one. Not the floor. Then *seal it*. She hasn't said anything about it yet, but she'll be looping. Try, try, *try* to keep down your lunches, folks." Briarthorn said with sincere agitation.

Twilight and Crossfire lurched slightly, though were still held firmly to the ship by their magnetic horseshoes, as the Thunder suddenly spun in a wide arc, twisting around towards the east. Twilight's eyes widened as she noticed they were heading *towards* the bigger ships that were still fast approaching them, now approaching faster given their change in direction. They soared past hordes of the aerial Troopers, all of which quickly adjusted their flight paths to pursue the ship but not quickly enough to be of an immediate threat. Rainbow and Pinkie took up points alongside the ship, taking care of as many Troopers as they could that were able to keep up with the Thunder as it got closer and closer to the first of the three massive cruisers.

"Um... if... nopony minds my saying-" Rainbow Dash started.

“No, not crazy. Have to reaffirm often; used to it,” Blackburn responded, “Gargantuan-class cruisers equipped with minimal close-range combat options. Unable to give trouble at point-blank range. Horrendous turning radius, difficult time giving pursuit. Objective: charge towards them, get behind them, force them to change course, then loop back towards Belt of Tranquility. Should buy time for Diffusion shield to charge. Will need to be wary of long-range weaponry. Hold tight.”

“Speaking of the long-range weaponry, Your Highness,” Gadget announced nervously, “Formation leader has weapons locked on. Incoming fire, straight ahead. Vulcanburst missiles, full salvo dispersed in intervals of fifteen. Primary impact in thirty seconds, secondary impact following after another ten seconds. Further impacts following in ten second intervals.”

“No more? Disappointing,” Blackburn laughed, “Prepare emergency systems, brace for impact.”

“She’s heading straight through them?!” Rainbow exclaimed.

“Hey, Rainbow. Remember when I said there was only one pilot crazy enough to attempt to break through a blockade like this? Kick back and relax, we’re not actually *in* my glorious little ship.” Briarthorn chortled over the comm.

“Syphon power from rear engines, divert to dynamic thrusters,” Blackburn ordered, “Leave enough for fifty percent maximum flight speed, reduce speed to fifty percent.”

“Yeah... I remember,” Rainbow confirmed worriedly.

Gadget called, “Diverting power... power diversion completed! Dynamic thrusters operating at two hundred percent capacity. Fifteen seconds to primary impact.”

“Get ready for the best of the best, folks. Never play this mare in any of your standard chess-types, or hell, full-flush poker. Here’s to the best hooves you could hope to be in,” Briarthorn said confidently, in his game show announcer swagger, “Though, Dash? You and Pinkie might want to clear some room. This is gonna get flashy!”

Blackburn shouted, “Deploy flares... now!”

Twilight was immensely glad that she was not only magnetically attached to the ship, but that she herself was not too squeamish when it came to flying under duress thanks to oftentimes being Rainbow’s passenger. The Thunder slowed to half of its former speed, its rear engines’ blue glow dying down with it; the glow from the underside of the wings intensified from a dim blue to a glorious white. The Thunder spun into an extremely tight roll in time to avoid a salvo of missiles, each of which curved just barely past the ship’s rear and headed straight for the

stream of smoke and shrapnel that had sprayed out of hatches near the wings just seconds before. The missiles exploded just out of range of the ship, which continued to spin left until very sharply spinning right to avoid a second salvo, all of which careened off towards what was left of the smoke and shrapnel deployed earlier.

The cruiser first in line swiftly adjusted course as the Thunder began to close in, attempting to cut off the escape route. The Thunder lurched up, barely avoiding another volley of missile fire and sailing just over the top of the long battleship. The second ship in line was pointed directly at them, and opened fire with its main gun battery, launching a massive barrage of magically-charged bursts of energy straight at them. The Thunder spun away to avoid individual magic blasts. Twilight, already panicked about being jerked to and fro by the ship's rapid spinning and diving, panicked even further as the bursts curved around and pursued the Thunder. Several of the blasts didn't have the turning radius to follow properly and slammed into the side of the other cruiser, exploding in showers of purple and black flame.

"Phoenixfire bursts trailing us, primary impact in fifteen!" called Gadget's voice, "Dynamic thrusters overheating!"

"Divert power back to rear engines! Maximum speed, quintuple thrust!" Blackburn shouted.

"Queenie, woman, are you *seriously* trying to *add* to my punishment? No good booze, and if the Thunder can't run, I can't, y'know, redeem myself. Keep in mind, that'd be thirty days of me mostly sober and with no ship to run. I'd be perusing the city for orgies! You wouldn't want me to do that! Right?! I don't want to threaten your stash again, Queenie. Come on. I'll be awful. Unlivable. So you won't use all five engines at once, right!? You'll burn them out!" Briarthorn cried uselessly into the comm as he saw the engines light up, "Oh... Thunder, baby, my poor ship..."

The Thunder sped forward like a missile, but was unable to outrun the barrage of energy blasts that were slowly catching up to it. Twilight turned towards where the Thunder was flying, and saw it careening straight at the second cruiser which was noticeably adjusting its path not to block the Thunder's way, but to avoid the Thunder's current trajectory. The Thunder sharply dove after it, racing alongside the hull of the larger ship as the trailing magic blasts attempted to pursue. But, their turning radius didn't appear to be as exact as Twilight was certain they should have been, and a great many of the blasts impacted with the hull of the cruiser, ripping large holes into it with explosive force.

"I can't believe anything I'm seeing right now," Rainbow Dash said in awe as she rocketed through squads of the Troopers that were still giving pursuit.

"Well thank goodness Queenie Blackburn's piloting doesn't work like my magic!" Pinkie replied, assisting Rainbow by using her shoulder-mounted energy cannon to shoot down any

robots targeting the pegasus.

The Thunder swept low towards the ocean and started back towards the Belt of Tranquility, its speed drastically reduced and its turn at a much wider radius than any of its initial turns had been. Overhead, everypony able to see what was going on outside the ship could see the third cruiser heading straight at them and not slowing down in the slightest.

“Engines two and four, overheating!” Gadget’s voice called out, “Engine five at fifty percent recharge, engines one and three still green! Not enough for another maneuver like that!”

“Oh, Thunder, Thunder, Thunder... my poor *ship!* Oh man... I’m gonna hafta spend *weeks* repairing all this! Gadget! How’s the Diffusion reading going?!” Briarthorn called out as he continued to desperately try to maintain his looping maneuvers around the Thunder despite its incredibly jerky flying.

“Sixty percent and climbing, rate increased to two percent per minute,” Gadget announced, “We’re still not gaining enough power fast enough. All that small-arms fire is wearing it down too quickly.”

“Third cruiser accelerating towards us,” Blackburn huffed, “Thunder: Engine power falling, dynamic thrusters overheated, Diffusion shield still not primed. Pile of junk!”

“*Queenie*, do I insult the Wyvern? If I were you and I’d said that about your baby, may she rest in peace, you’d kick me just under the tail on principle,” Briarthorn wailed, “Do you just not *register* what I say when it’s not *offending* you?! The Thunder. Is not! A *stunt flier!* She wasn’t built for your kind of flying, Your Most Gracious Wondrous Stupendous Lovely Gorgeous Powerful Hammer-dropping Intimidating Highness!”

“Weapons locked,” Gadget pointed out, “Phoenixfire batteries only. Energy readings indicate maximum capacity.”

“Need Diffusion shield up, Briar!” Blackburn shouted, “Out of options!”

“I’m looping up to the ‘equator’ now, and I am going fast as I can, *Queenie!*” Briarthorn called back, “I just need to get in a few more laps... a full charge could hold against that weapon fire...”

“Weapons firing, impact in sixty seconds!” Gadget gulped, “Engines two and four still red, engine five at seventy-five percent recharge! Diffusion charge at... three percent per minute!”

“We’re trying our best, but we can’t keep all these close-range fighters off!” Rainbow spat into the comm, “Is there anything we can do to get that shield up faster? Maybe if I-”

"I haven't taken any hits, Rainbow, and that's thanks to you, okay? You're a better help taking care of as many of those Troopers as you can," Briarthorn sighed. He grabbed the second flask he's strapped to his uniform, taking a long swig before tossing it aside, then exhaled. "Whew... besides, the Diffusion system can't take more than one active pegasus at a time. Magical signatures are unique. Any dissonance? Explosions, not shields. If I go down, no more 'me' in the shield, you're safe to finish. I'm not down, though. This is all on me, unless I go down. And I don't think I want to go down, Queenie. Means all of you, too. I'll get my dearest up, I've just got to spin like I've never spun before. Here's hoping!"

"Don't worry, darling, you're not alone out there!"

Twilight blurted, "R-Rarity?!"

From the entry port at the Thunder's airlock, a bright glow could be seen. It flashed a bright white as Rarity fired off a stream of magic that struck Briarthorn as he made another pass.

Briarthorn blinked and looked about himself, then behind him, where he noticed his white-gold hard-light trail had become wider, brighter, and was slowly beginning to overtake him until he himself began to glow. "Whoa! What's this afterglow brouhaha? Feels nice!"

"Just keep up the good work, Briarthorn dear!" Rarity called into the comm system, "I'll give you another boost on your next loop around, just keep it up! We're counting on you here!"

"Thirty seconds," Gadget's voice said again, "Diffusion charge at... seven percent per minute. Current charge, seventy percent."

"Oh, man. This is nice. This... this is... *hell yes*, this is perfect! I think... I think I can actually... do the full spiral! Without passing out before it's done! Rarity, I don't know what you just did, but I'm getting some *uncouth* thoughts about you right now!" Briarthorn's loops around the ship became sharper, again and again, each lap, glowing brighter with every pass. In-flight, he began to spin on the axis of his spine, Spinning, faster and faster, causing the shield to expand, becoming tube-shaped.

"AHAHA! This is like, the opposite of breaking the sound barrier! Even if they punch through the first shield points, the tubes will shatter bit by bit. Like a big ol' tubey bubble of bubble wrap! And packing peanuts. We're going to be cozy!" The magic spiralled behind him like a giant corkscrew. The ship itself began to glow a very soft green, and each of the collecting rods shined a brilliant emerald color that caused Twilight and Crossfire to shield their eyes for a brief second.

"Diffusion charge increasing to... to five percent per *second?! Current charge at seventy-five percent... eighty... eighty-five..."* Gadget said breathlessly, "Ninety... ninety-five... Diffusion shield at maximum power! Impact in five!"

“Brace for impact!” shouted Blackburn.

A salvo of magical bolts impacted the Thunder with incredible force. The shield held fast and greatly increased in luster, shine, and relative size, glowing a bright red at the points of impact. Despite the shield taking the brunt of the impact, the ship still lurched from the sheer force of the blast, causing it to wildly jerk to port. Rainbow and Pinkie had to clear out of the way to avoid the wide spread of magical energy being thrown about from not only the initial barrage, but from all the myriad blasts that were being haphazardly reflected.

“Waaaaahaahaha!” came a shrill shriek.

Rarity was flung from the airlock by the tremendous collision and sent hurtling through the shield, which did not cover the entry port, towards the ocean below, screaming all the while and frantically flailing her legs in an attempt to fly. She closed her eyes in a panic and screamed louder and louder, until she felt a sharp impact around her midsection. Then, the incredible terror of hurtling downward was replaced by the relieving sensation of flying upward. She blinked her eyes open, and found herself being lifted upwards by Briarthorn, who maintained a tight grip on her as he soared back towards the Thunder.

“Hoo, hoo! *Lady* Rarity. You’ve sure got a real set of lungs on you, you know that? Good quality for a lady to have!” he laughed, “Come on, let’s get you back inside. We’re going to have to pull a loop, tighten out this big stretch, but once we’re done, we’re done!”

“Oh... oh thank goodness, Briarthorn...” she breathed, gripping onto him as tightly as she could. “I knew I should’ve put on those gaudy horseshoes... but they were so tacky!”

“Hey, the shoes? Function over form. But you’re immune to that kinda thing with the jumpsuit, I think. Hoo! You’re like a *gem* in that flight suit. Dig the goggles too, very chic.” He smiled and wiggled his eyebrows. “That whole ensemble? Fits you like an evening-wear stocking, *darling*. Mm mm mm!”

“If finished schmoozing out there, Briarthorn,” came Blackburn’s voice over the comm channel, “Diffusion shield is up. Suffered severe damage, recharging at accelerated pace. Everypony inside. Making for the Belt of Tranquility, don’t want to be outside ship.”

“Finishing schmoozing now, Your Majesty, en route to last pass over the ship!” Briarthorn acknowledged.

Rainbow and Pinkie looped around up top to help get Twilight and Crossfire off the roof, and got a solid grip on them before the polarization field was deactivated. They arrived at the airlock first, setting their passengers gently inside and giving everypony a chance to rest. Briarthorn’s last loop pulled the trail behind him up, and over the ship, tightening it and polarizing

it to the field, before landing inside with Rarity in tow. The luster drained out of him, and he stopped glowing as he set her down. He turned unsteadily to the entry port. After making sure the shield had fully-encompassed the hatch, he slowly closed it, and carefully locked it. Only then did he turn back inside, nearly tripping over his own hooves in time to be beset upon by Rarity again.

“You glorious stallion!” she declared, giving him a big peck on the cheek, “Oh thank you-” Another peck. “Thank you-” And another. “Thank you!” And another.

“W-whoa... couldn’t... wait? I... I... love ...m-my job...” Briarthorn muttered as he drifted into unconsciousness, crumpling over onto the floor gracelessly.

“Eh?” Rarity blinked. “Briarthorn? Briarthorn! Ooh! You *cad!* Falling asleep when a lady is *graciously* giving you a gift for a heroic-”

“Hang on, Rarity... something’s wrong...” Twilight said nervously as she lit up her horn. “Oh dear... something’s *very* wrong here...”

“What is it, darling?” Rarity asked in a panic.

“No time to worry,” Blackburn’s voice called over the intercom, “Diffusion feedback. Dangers of the trade. Get him further inside, will help with recovery when safe.” She addressed Gadget directly now, not calling anything out over the intercom. “Third cruiser still in pursuit. Direct maximum power allowance to rear engines, maximum speed. Need to reach Belt before they catch up.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Gadget confirmed.

The Thunder lunged forward in a sharp burst of speed and dived down to skim the ocean surface, narrowly avoiding another salvo of magical blasts that exploded harmlessly against the rough waters, though some managed to skim the Thunder’s Diffusion shield and reflected harshly away before exploding equally harmlessly in the open air.

“Approaching Belt of Tranquility,” she announced as they approached the massive storm cloud that stretched across the sky ahead of them, “Status on Diffusion recharge?”

“Shield has recovered to ninety-four percent, recovering at rate of one percent per minute. Holding steady,” Gadget reported, “Engine power dropping, diverting energy to-”

“Not yet,” Blackburn interrupted, “Cruiser still gaining on us. Not diverting course, not slowing. Intends to follow into the Belt? Curious...”

The Thunder passed into the Belt of Tranquility with a jolt, causing the ship to shake for

a brief moment before regaining stability again. Blackburn frowned as despite all anticipations, the final cruiser that could pursue them was actually doing so and was gaining fast. As the other ship entered the Belt of Tranquility, it was beset upon by great streams of magical, hostile lightning that ripped into it with great green explosions. These same bursts were striking against the Thunder's Diffusion shield harmlessly.

Gadget suddenly turned to her, an eyebrow raised. "Your Highness... we're being hailed by the enemy cruiser."

Blackburn nodded. "Put it through."

Gadget tapped a button on the control panel, and the large viewpanel above it descended and flickered to life. Blackburn narrowed her eyes at the pony standing there, who gave her an equally angry scowl. He was a dull pink pegasus with a short, gray mane and tail, and a big, bushy mustache to match. He was wearing the same black armor that was common of all NPAF soldiers, and unlike the multitude of robotic ponies manning stations in the background of his end of the screen, he was not wearing his helmet. Instead he was wearing a wide-brimmed, black military cap adorned with all sorts of medals in golds, silvers, bronzes, and other colors.

"Admiral Hotstreak, then?" Blackburn sneered, "Not surprised you weren't commanding lead ship. Nor that you anticipated escape trajectory after first two cruisers disabled. Kept out of sight behind other cruisers. Your reputation precedes you."

"As does yours, Queen Blackburn," Hotstreak nodded cordially, though he still wore the same scowl, "Attempting to escape into the Belt of Tranquility, knowing my ships can't follow because we lack Diffusion generators due to the energy requirements, and I didn't have the time to conscript enough pegasi to do the job. A wise move... risky, but wise indeed."

"'Risk' implies chance of failure. Odds in my favor, 'risk' factor negligible. Turn back, Hotstreak. As said, your ship lacks Diffusion shield. Other ships are crippled, own being crippled as we speak. Still a chance to return to Pandemonium."

"Your Majesty!" Gadget blurted, "Weapons lock! He's... he's firing the Devastator Cannon!"

Blackburn turned back to Hotstreak and made to speak, before he interrupted her, "It's just you and me out here, Queen Blackburn. None of your citizens to attempt to goad into betraying you, as futile a gesture I know that would be; no subordinate captains of mine to raise questions and possibly betray me, which *would* be a possibility. I have no need to pretend any longer about my intentions. My ship won't make it back if I stay out here much longer, and everypony will think I went down chasing after the fleeing ruler of the greatest thorn in the NPAF's side since-"

Blackburn smirked, "The founding of Pandemonium? Touched that my family legacy has left that much impact. Bigger threat than Fort Serenity was? *Truly* touched."

Hotstreak sneered, but continued, "Now, I'm certain you know that's not why I'm after you. If I was, I'd have continued to bombard your pathetic city until you surrendered, and even if you didn't, you couldn't stay in those bunkers forever. No, I needed certain guests in your city's care to be out in the open, and once my information confirmed that they were, I needed to make sure they didn't go into those bunkers of yours. I needed them to flee, but with my captains nearby I couldn't make it known I was after *them*. You? They have no problem chasing after you even if it's a suicide run. So, that's we're going with. I'm a slave to appearances."

"Know the feeling," Blackburn said appreciatively, "Understandable."

"I want your 'cargo', Blackburn," Hotstreak demanded, pounding a hoof on his control console, "Surrender it, now, and I'll let you return to Hope's Point, and you'll have time to lick your wounds. I'll have my shot at you another day. I am afraid we're pressed for time. If you-"

Blackburn sneered again, "Refuse, you fire Devastator Cannon. Would destroy this ship, kill them anyway. Well-played." She turned to Gadget. "Gadget. Divert power to Diffusion shield, maximum allowance. Disable all auxiliary systems, reconfigure shield for rear impact. Engines at minimal output, dynamic thrusters offline."

"Yes, Your majesty," Gadget gulped.

"You think your Diffusion shield will be enough to withstand a blast from this hulking beast's main *cannon*?" Hotstreak asked tentatively, "Bold decision. I know that your city's force field can, but is that little ship's shield as strong as the city's? It very well might be... but we'll just have to test your confidence in that techno-magic then, won't we? Either way, farewell Queen Blackburn." On his end of the screen, they could see Hotstreak push a large red button on the side of his console.

"Main cannon charging..." Gadget nervously reported, "Impact in ten."

"Comms off," Blackburn nodded. Gadget pushed a button again and the admiral vanished from view. The cockpit went eerily dark, as did the rest of the ship.

"Five..." Gadget breathed, "Four... three... two... one... im-"