

Chapter 21: Aces High

"Good morning everypony, and welcome to a bright day in the Neighvada Wasteland! This is your all-time favourite station and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, here to bring you the best music and the latest news, and trust me, there's a hoofful of them today! For now, a little recap on what we've been listening to this last hour. You know, I am more of a quick beat kind of pony, more prone to listening to Vinyl Scratch than Octavia, but the Concerts of the Equestrian Philharmonic Orchestra are a masterpiece of their own, and so they should be regarded. This last one was the choral ending to Beethayven's Ninth Symphony, a very adequate piece for a day like today.

Because, frankly, what a day that of yesterday! I hope that all of you got to see the one-of-a-kind phenomenon that took place in the skies above us, because such things leave an imprint in a pony's memory! For those of you who couldn't witness it or have short-term memory issues, here's what happened. A terrible explosion shook the world and the cloud cover turned burning red, then it started to detach and come off, and the sun shone through, letting us see the blue sky that has always been hidden to us. Today, the bright golden light of a clear day makes everything look better, even the Wasteland itself gleams!

Now, the theories regarding what happened to cause the cloud cover to come breaking down are as varied as they can get, and some of them are really wacky. We've got ponies speaking of a thunderstorm gone wrong, some others speak of a war above the clouds that has caused the cover to disintegrate, and there are ponies that claim that this is an omen predicting the arrival of the Goddesses to bring justice upon the sinful ponies of the Wasteland. The most accepted theory is that of an attack launched against an unknown faction that was hiding over the clouds. Who the attacker is and who the victim is, that remains a mystery.

On other news, the war between the Republic and the Tsardom keeps raging on through the Wasteland. As it tends to be the case in these situations, the informations we can get are contradictory and incomplete, but we'll try to fill you in the best way possible. We do know for certain that the frontline lies still beyond Hoofer Dam, in a cruel battle for the control of the crags that act like a trench system leading to the far end of the facility. The forces of the New Equestrian Republic attempted to push forward into enemy territory but were forced to retreat quickly, as the Tsar's troops threatened to encircle them.

Beyond that information, all we have is rumours spread by caravaneers and Wasteland travelers. Some speak of an attempted amphibious assault of the Republic through Lake Honeymead against the undefended side of the Tsardom Army, but there is no proof that the NER has deployed or built any kind of craft. Another common tale that has grown lately is that of a Tsardom scout team who would have actually bypassed the Republican defences, just to be destroyed by another hinterland patrol. This last rumour might have a bit more of consistency, though, since some Wastelanders have found pieces of armor and weaponry that might belong to the invaders' forces.

All of this makes me wonder, though. What will happen to the City of New Pegasus if the

Tsardom gets beyond Hoover Dam? Let's not forget that the electricity used in the City comes from the pre-War power station beneath the facility, and if the Tsar is cunning enough, he will already have planned to gamble using that card as soon as he gets his hooves on it. This war has not been a problem for us yet, but if the Republic is flushed out of the Dam we might be involved in the conflict in a way we don't want to. My question is... have our current leaders thought how to deal with this situation?

Well, that is all the news for this hour, we'll be back in another sixty minutes with a new batch of information to share with you. In the meantime, let's return to some music! I have here a collection of Sweetie Belle's greatest hits, ready to bring true delight to your ears. Once a classic, always a classic, don't you think? Enjoy, and remember that you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, speaking right to your hearts!"

We were actually flying, one thing that I would never have thought we would be doing. After a rather rough takeoff, Avro had told us to lock our hooves to a series of security straps that would keep us in place despite all the twists and turns the craft made. This implied that we didn't move, but the constant swaying and the accelerations set our bodies into serious stress.

In my case, I had a mixture of feelings battling inside me, as this was a completely new experience for me. On the one side, there was this inherent fear of being out of one's natural element, and being airborne was something so alien to me that it confused and frightened me at the same time. However, altitude had something alluring for me. Knowing that we were standing far above the same red lands we had travelled earlier was strangely fulfilling and positive. The wailing wind, the speed, the accelerations, the twists and turns... all that was fearsome and at the same time really enjoyable.

Avro piloted the Mystral class gunship with evident knowledge and calmness. The takeoff had been a little shaky, but from that moment on the craft had moved with soft turns and steady advances, cruising through the blue skies towards the Fleet of the Communist Pegasi Front. We had been flying in a reverent silence, with only the roaring of the engines and the howl of the passing wind in our ears.

"How are you two doing back there?" Avro asked.

"I'm fine!" I replied. "It's just that this whole situation is... odd to me, that's why I haven't said a word."

"And you, Nadyr?"

"Let's say I'm getting along, shall we?" Nadyr grimaced.

"Come on, don't you tell me that I'm making this a rough ride!" Avro giggled. "This baby can be handled with a single hoof! It's the most stable thing you'll see in the Wasteland!"

"I don't doubt it's stable, honey." I laughed nervously. "However, you'll have to admit that we are a bit misplaced here. We don't have wings that can sustain us if we fall."

"Are you locked tight?"

"Of course."

"Then take it easy. Those straps were tried out with five times a pony's weight, and they could handle it during limit-g movements."

"Limit-g movements? The hell is that?" Nadyr mumbled.

"Corkscrews, loops at high speeds, sudden fall recoveries... stunt moves, mostly." Avro replied. "The kinds of tricks that a skilled pilot would pull off in the heat of battle. Those in the back seats must know that they can keep firing without having to fear being hurled off the gunship."

"You sure know a lot about all this." I grinned.

"Of course I do! These are my babies, after all."

"Really?"

"Yes, really! I told you I was an engineer! I designed and helped build the Mystral and many other ships that form the Fleet."

"Wow, that must have been amazing."

"It was, really. You know, moving past the dated designs of the Cloudships was quite a bugger. The biggest problem was relying on those large, bulky hulls that needed a lot of magic infused into them to make them float. My design team and I had to work very hard and do a lot of complex calculations to minimize the lift required to keep them airborne."

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"We found out that giving them wings and powerful propellers made the smaller ships remain up in the air when a proper speed was reached. In a sense, they are like us pegasi when gliding, it's the air itself what holds us from falling. Of course, we had to give them a pinch of magic to make the arcano-engines work."

"Magic? But you pegasi can't..."

"Of course we can't, but we found a proper workaround. We managed to discreetly get our hooves on a gem mine, and by means of clever trading and shady businesses, we built a small enterprise that would get the gems and enchant them for us. Then, we would sell some and retain some for our purposes."

"That is certainly cunning." I smiled.

"It is." Avro laughed. "But as much as I'd regret to say that, it's not my idea. It worked like

a charm, though, and we began building our ships without any restraint. We bought materials from beyond the Divide and used the gems to create flotation devices or arcano-engines."

"I assume that the bigger ships won't rely that much in speed. After all, moving large masses at high velocity would have an incredible cost in energy."

"Very smart!" Avro laughed. "That's why I love you, Farsight, you always understand things at the first glance. Yes, the main capital ships are more floaters than flyers. We needed to commission a real lot of gems, but it was only a matter of time."

"Congratulations for that, Avro. Such a feat is incredible. You and Ampera should work together, I think that New Pegasus would benefit of your joint technical prowess."

"I guess that we could talk about it when we came back." Avro muttered. "Still, I don't know how she would take it."

"Everything can be talked calmly." I smiled. "Speaking of peace and calm..."

"What's wrong?"

"I am baffled about one thing, Avro. You said that you built your fleet to live in exile, but this is a gunship. You call it a gunship, and you don't hide the fact that it has weapons. Not too peaceful to me."

"Farsight, you should know that peace can't be achieved if both parties don't want to. As much as we would like to live in harmony with the world, if the rest of the ponies in the Wasteland don't want such coexistence..."

"You say you need guns to enforce peace." Nadyr said.

"Exactly." Avro nodded.

"Well, that would explain things." I mumbled.

I found Avro's words vacuous and fabricated, and that made my heart squirm. Indeed, she was hiding something from me, and that felt terrible. Still, I didn't want her to notice my growing suspicions. We would have to make things very clear when we returned home.

"You seem to be a skilled pilot as well, Avro." Nadyr whistled. "I would say you have been flying these things for a long time."

"Well, every pegasus up there has to be a pilot. Who knows who will have to take command of a capital ship or a small transport someday? We're all trained to know how to handle ourselves with these machines, in case we need to take a step forward."

"I see..." I mumbled. "So you could react in case of battle, wouldn't you?"

"Certainly." Avro nodded. "As long as there is a chance of being attacked, we need to know how to defend ourselves."

Silence fell like a heavy burden upon us. Avro's last explanations had been contradictory and heavily unsettling, as if the pegasus I had fallen in love with had a dark secret that she was reluctant to tell me, even if it was driving us to the verge of war. My words had been chosen with the intent of eliminating the doubts that Rose and Ampera had sown in me with a bit of clairvoyance or, probably, mere intuition. However, instead of doing that, the pegasus had replied in a way that had proven their doubts right.

I looked at Nadyr and met his gaze. The half-zebra was smiling at me, but unlike other times, his smile was sad. He was noticing the same lies and secrets in Avro's words, and as much as he tried to like her, he couldn't trust her; nor could I, really. No matter how hard I wanted to believe her and give her a chance to redeem herself, I simply couldn't. For the moment, I would have to carry on with this endeavour of ours, but as soon as it was over, she and I were going to have a long conversation; and if I felt like I was being tricked, then I would have no choice than to ask her to leave, no matter how much it would hurt me.

"Hey, bro." Nadyr whispered so that Avro couldn't hear us. "I know what you're thinking."

"If you do, you'll be aware that it's not something easy to talk about."

"Yes, but we need to have a friend to friend chat. Now."

"Then go ahead." I frowned. "I don't think you're going to let me go anyway."

"Listen, Farsight, I have heard the same things out of her mouth that you have. I have noticed that her story is flimsy at best, and I have the same awry feeling about her. Still, I know how you cherish her. We could discuss whether you might have made a mistake by letting her into your heart, but then again, the heart and the mind work in different ways. Love isn't logical most of times, because, after all, it's love, dammit!" Nadyr chuckled. "Don't go so hard on yourself. You needed somepony, and she happened to fall down from the skies upon you. She might have lied to us, but tell me, Farsight, what does your heart say about her?"

"My heart?"

"Yes, your heart. How do you feel in the very deep about her? Do you believe that she loves you genuinely?"

"Well, yes... I think she does."

"Then keep that belief in you, and expect for the best. If she is true, she will make up for her mistakes. You just need to give her time."

"What if she doesn't?"

"In that case..." Nadyr shook his head. "Well, let's hope it never happens, for our own good."

"Hey, you two, what's with all the chit-chat?" Avro laughed. "Would you mind sharing it with me?"

"Well, honey, we were admiring your glorious plot." I smiled. "That armor makes your rear view so... seductive."

"That's why we were keeping it to ourselves, Avro." Nadyr chuckled. "I am a married stallion, and we didn't know how you would react."

"You two are incorrigible." Avro giggled, pleased. "Next time, say it out loud. I always appreciate a compliment."

"Will do, my dear, will do." I smiled. "By the way, where is the damn Fleet?"

"I am picking up signals in the radar already." Avro said calmly. "I think we're about to meet the avantgarde of Ilyushin's group. I hope you are ready to rumble."

"I was born ready." Nadyr smirked.

"Great, because I already have a visual!" Avro shouted. "Look at your nine!"

I gazed out of the open door and saw what the pegasus was telling us. About one kilometer away from us in a straight line, another airship was cruising the skies. This one was bigger than our Mystral, but retained the wedge shape of our gunship, with the large backward wings and the frontal beak, but had a second suit of smaller wings at a higher level and its back gleamed with the pinkish color of arcano-engines at full speed.

"Is that one of the capital ships?" I asked.

"Meh, hardly. That's a Gale class frigate. It's bigger, tougher and it can hold more ponies inside, but this one won't get you through a barrage. However, its plating is better than the one of the Mystrals. Probably, it's working as a radio beacon for the rest of the fleet, exploring ahead of the really big ones."

"And what are we going to do with it?" Nadyr asked.

"We're going to take it down!" Avro cheered. "Now hold on tight!"

At her command, the gunship made a tight turn towards the frigate, almost rolling to a ninety-degree position. If I hadn't been latched tight, I would have fallen into the void, and that very image made me shake in fear.

"Get ready to open fire at my order, OK?"

"Understood." I turned towards the gunner post and used my magic to handle the minigun, while Nadyr used the bite meant for pegasi.

We flew closer and closer to the larger craft, and I saw how it was distributed. Two decks formed the hull of the ship, with cannons and gunner posts sticking like spikes out of a raider's armor. Gems formed shield patches around vital parts of the Communist aircraft, protecting it from possible attacks, while two large red stars painted in the sides of the hull left no trace of doubt about who that hulk of flying metal belonged to. It was an imposing sight, and the fact that it wasn't the largest unit of the Red Fleet made me shake. How were we going to take them out by ourselves?

"Now, wait until I tell you." Avro squinted. "We won't stand a chance unless we hit them hard in their vital spots."

We kept advancing towards the Gale frigate, moving parallel to it, with the deafening roar of the larger craft's arcano-engines overpassing every single sound that we could make. As we advanced towards the front of the enemy ship, the sound of an incoming transmission broke the silence we were navigating in.

"Gunship D6, gunship D6, this is frigate Horizons speaking. Welcome back, comrade Lieutenant Grumman, we were worried about you. What happened down there?"

"Hi there, Horizons." Avro tried to mimic Grumman's voice. "It was a true hell, but we're back on track. The enemies attacking Neighliss were eliminated and the rest of the missiles were disabled out of caution."

"You couldn't avoid the attack, though."

"They were eight, with the traitor DeHavilland leading them. As much as we tried to hold them back, we couldn't avoid one getting into the tower and firing the attack."

"At least we had time to evacuate Skyhaven. All the population is in the Fleet now, or back at base. Still, you will have to report back to Comrade Commander Ilyushin."

"Do you think this will get me into trouble?"

"Maybe. We've sustained heavy losses, although I can understand why you couldn't avoid the missile launch. It was a calculated risk, as far as I know."

"Thanks for being so understanding." Avro sighed. "Could I ask you a favor? Our gunship took some damage in the takeoff, so I doubt we will make it to the main Fleet. Could we dock the D6 to the Horizons while we repair it?"

"Of course, Comrade Lieutenant Grumman. We'll begin with the procedures now. Lowering the shields in three, two, one... Shields down."

"NOW!" Avro yelled. "FIRE AT THE EXPOSED GEMS!"

Avro hit the controls and the D6 made a sharp turn to face the hull and the bridge of the Horizons, while unleashing all the firepower of the small gunship against the weaker spots of the frigate.

"That flying... IT'S DEHAVILLAND! Alarm! To all the fleet, Grumman is dead and we're under attack by DeHavilland on board of gunship D6! Repeat, frigate Horizons is under attack by gunship D6!"

I steered my cannon towards the metal hull of the Horizons, aiming at the shield gemstones that stuck out of the walls. The miniguns spewed fire at an amazing rate, covering the red stars on the sides with a myriad of black dots. Without a single instant to rest, I steered the trail of bullets from one gem to the next, causing them to blow in spectacular explosions of bright colors.

"Yes!" Avro stomped the floor. "That got them!"

"Raise the shields and scramble! Set all the cannons into firing mode!"

"Sir, the shields are down!"

"All of them?"

"I'm afraid that it's a yes, sir! DeHavilland has left us without defences!"

"Fuck that bitch! Reroute all the power into the main engine drive! Get ready to smother them in gunfire, and send the troopers out for a boarding maneuver!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Get ready, you two." Avro warned. "We're about to move fast!"

Just an instant before all the guns of the Horizons began firing at our position, Avro pulled the lever of the gunship and we darted upward in a radical climb that almost left me unconscious. While my blood was still relocating in my body, the D6 took a sharp right turn and plummeted down, dodging a stream of bullets and firing a payload of missiles at one of the wings of the frigate. The explosion caused the enemy craft to sway from side to side, and the radio frequency filled with cries of alarm and damage reports.

"YESSSSS!" Avro yelled. "EAT THAT!"

"Give me a Celestia-damned report!" The captain of the Horizons yelled.

"Sir, the right wing is severely damaged! Direct missile strike against the hull, she knew where to hit us!"

"Can you do something?"

"We are trying, sir!"

"Then try harder, for fuck's sake! Dawnmist, where the hell are you?"

"Dawnmist here. Approaching target." The voice of a mare, covered in static, replied coldly.

"I want them disabled or dead now, you hear me, Dawnmist?"

"Loud and clear, sir."

"OK, you two, they are about to bite the dust, but they've sent their onboard troopers to try and hit us from up close! I can't see them coming, so I'm counting on you to shoot the air from their wings!"

"Understood." I nodded.

"Perfect! Hold on tight, we're going for another one!"

The gunship seemed to hit an invisible wall and bounced upward, beginning a loop maneuver, while corkscrewing around its longitudinal axis to let Avro see the frigate from a top-down view. Meanwhile, I fought gravity while trying to make eye contact with the incoming pegasi. At these speeds, it was impossible that my Eyes-Forward Sparkle could locate the threats before they were right upon us. The Horizons was leaning to its damaged side, trying to keep a straight trajectory; but it was clear that it would have to land soon to repair the broken wing.

"Ooh, look at it!" Avro giggled. "It can't fly straight with that big hole in its wing."

"Yes, but they're not done yet." I replied. "They still can fire."

"Leave that to me. You take care of those five bandits that are going to cross us right now."

Right as she was saying that, five bolts of crimson whizzed past our craft, making Avro recoil and sway sideways. As soon as they did that, they performed a sharp turn and tried to get to our tail.

"Don't let them blow up the engine gemstone! If they do that, we're fried!" Avro roared.

"No need to say it twice!" Nadyr replied and moved the minigun swiftly.

My companion and I began firing the miniguns at the enemy pegasi that fluttered around us, moving at high speed. Trying to pick such small targets moving at such high speed was very difficult, so we had no other chance than to spray and pray. Meanwhile, the pegasi fired rounds and missiles back at us, most of them woozing past just by a few centimeters, thanks to Avro's dodging prowess.

"That one went close!" I roared.

"Farsight, you have to shoot them down!" Avro replied.

"I am trying, dammit!"

"Dawnmist, you're firing at us!" The captain of the Horizons cried. We were in between the pegasi and the frigate, so all missed shots went straight into the Horizons' hull.

"Sorry, sir, DeHavilland is a tough target to hit."

"So what? That doesn't mean that you have to blow us up!"

"Understood, sir! Team, disengage!"

Dawnmist's team broke the chase and began to overtake us, probably to charge at us head on. Even if fast, their parallel trajectory turned them into viable targets. I followed two of them with the cannon of my minigun and opened fire at them. The hail of bullets hit the couple of pegasi right in the chests of their power armors, piercing them and sending their bodies straight into the abyss.

"Two down!" I roared.

"Two more here!" Nadyr yelled.

"Nice work, you two!" Avro laughed. "Now let's take them out for good!"

"Dawnmist here! My team has been taken out, repeat, my team has been taken out!"

"Disengage, Dawnmist, and return to the Horizons! Crew, set engines at full power and return to the Fleet! NOW!"

"You're not going anywhere!" Avro replied, and deployed another barrage of missiles.

The first two hit the bridge, in the front end of the top deck, causing a chain reaction of explosions that left the ship without communications or control. The next two landed in the main firing deck, provoking a massive blast of ammo and shrapnel, while the last two hit the engine chamber, blowing the ship up in a blinding pink and blue blast. When the lights faded, the Horizons was no more and Avro pulled the D6 back into a horizontal trajectory.

"OK, that was unbelievable." Nadyr was sweating.

"You did a great job, you two. Considering that it was your first time doing this, I must admit that you managed to handle yourselves like pros. Taking down four pegasi in mid air... damn."

"Well, it's not like you are new to combat flying either..." I replied.

"No, but it is the first time I shoot down a Gale frigate!" Avro laughed. "I had a lot of fun!"

"As fun as it may have been, it was a very close call... How are we going to face an entire fleet?" I asked.

"I thought you were the thinky pony, Farsight..."

"This is not my field of expertise, Avro. It's yours. You built those things, so you should be the one thinking how to blow them up to pieces."

"Well, frigates would be easy to take down one by one. After all, they won't have much more than three or four pegasi in them to intercept. As I told you, most of the Fleet is controlled by computers, to leave the living beings inside focus on other stuff. However, when it comes to bigger ships..."

"Bigger ships?" Nadyr winced. "Like what?"

"Like those coming straight at us..." Avro gulped. "I never thought they would make it here this quick. They must have been closer than what I expected."

In the horizon, the blue of the sky had become clouded with spots of steel grey and red, as a swarm of ships was steadily advancing towards us. Some of the airships that formed the Red Fleet were already known to us, with a dozen of Mystral gunships buzzing around like a cloud of parasprites, and three or four Gale frigates protecting the exposed sides of their bigger counterparts. The rest of the components of Ilyushin's fleet were unknown to us.

The main capital ships were two twin massive hulks of steel and cannons, which even if sleek and pointy, looked more like steady gunning platforms with docking bays than like quick means of traversing the skies. They crawled more than moved, forcing the rest of the airships to lag behind not to break formation, but the incredible amount of firepower they were carrying was simply terrorizing. If one of the shells fired from the main cannons of those behemoths hit the D6, we would be pulverized.

"Those two of the middle are true fortresses." I grunted, as I realized that Avro's story was flimsy. "And one thing's for certain, they weren't meant for peace."

"Yes they are, they were designed as freight carriers. In fact, they're called Stormwind class carriers." Avro shook her head. "Ilyushin had the factories pack as many guns as possible in them."

"Avro, will you cut that out, please?" I grunted. "The Fleet is a war fleet. Gunships, frigates, carriers... all of them are meant to carry weaponry on them. I'm not judging your intentions, my dear, but I would thank you if you would stop lying."

"Farsight, please..."

"No, Avro, stop the charade. I vouched for you in the Council. I got into this war because I love you!" I roared. "The least I can ask for is a bit of honesty. I was waiting for our return but I can't take it anymore!"

"I'm sorry..." Avro sighed sadly. "I should have told you the truth from the very beginning, but the mistrust that your friends had towards me and my kin made me invent that story."

"Listen, Avro, I know what the Enclave did in the past." Nadyr said calmly. "What your

former leaders did was terrible, but I've learned to forgive and forget, and so have the most of us. Whatever you did in the Red Front, it wouldn't have mattered to us. At least, I wouldn't have cared at all."

"Please, Avro, be honest for once. Why did you flee?" I asked.

"I didn't get along with Ilyushin. I could understand the need of a Fleet capable of defending itself, while carrying us inside; but there was no way I was going to start a war against those of the surface. We had been defeated before and nearly destroyed, and frankly, I didn't want to find myself in the losing side."

"Fair enough. Was it so hard?" I sighed. So many qualms could have been solved so easily...

"No... in the end, it wasn't. I should have told you the truth the first time I met you."

"Well, never mind. It doesn't matter anymore." I shrugged. "How are we supposed to take those carriers down?"

"Hmm... The best way to do that would be from the inside, by setting the computers to self-destruct."

"Hacking, eh?" I smiled. "That's more like my style."

"We would have to get through those corvettes first, though. Not to mention the frigates and the remaining gunships." Avro grunted.

"I'm guessing that the other ships are the corvettes..."

"Yes, Scirocco class corvettes. Stronger than the frigates, mostly meant for to fend off attacks by smaller craft." Avro chanted. "There's no way we're getting close to the carriers if those corvettes are defending them."

"All the airships have computerized controls, right?" I asked.

"Yes. The crew inside each one will be of between six and ten ponies. The rest is managed by a maneframe."

"Then get me close to one of those frigates and keep the rest of the fleet distracted." I smiled. "It's time to make some noise."

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It turned out not to be as simple as I had expected. As soon as we got within range of the Red Fleet, we were welcomed by a true thunderstorm of shelling and gunfire. Avro had no choice than to pull off another one of her gut-churning triple loop-de-loops to avoid getting torn to shreds, and we were forced into an acrobatic chase across the skies. Since my marefriend didn't like to do things the easy way, she decided to begin criss-crossing the firing axes of the larger crafts.

One thing was certain, and that was that the Mystral gunship was reliable and fast. The small airship was able to flip and twist through the narrowest spaces, forcing other gunships and larger crafts to constantly recalibrate their aims. It wasn't so pleasant for us, though, as we were constantly tugged and shaken by the sudden changes in gravity, speed and centrifugal force. Avro, on the other hoof, seemed to be enjoying the ride.

"Woo-hoo!" She cheered. "You can't even see me, you assholes! I've always been the best pilot around!"

"I don't doubt that, my dear..." I grunted. "But we're flying a bit too close to those corvettes, don't you think?"

"It's the only way to stop them from firing!" She replied. "Those explosive shells would wreck their own cannons if we're too close. That's why I keep them at very short range!"

"Can't you just stabilize yourself for a second, so that I can try to board one of them?"

"Are you nuts? As soon as I stop twisting, the rest of the gunships would turn us to smithereens!"

"Then what do you suggest we do?" I roared.

"For the moment, keep firing!" Avro yelled. "I'll try to give you a proper time window to jump onto one of them!"

"Urgh, fine!" I gulped and sent another hail of bullets towards an uncertain point of space.

I was baffled at our own endurance. Being able to recover from a two minute long upside-down trip without having to throw up was something I had absolutely no faith in being able to pull off. However, my body seemed to be willing to prove that it was more than a mere container for my mind. Forcing myself back into the twisting reality, I tried to fix my aim in one of the gunships behind us.

The Mystrals had a clear disadvantage in a firefight, and that was the total lack of shielding. However, they would trump that lack of defences with a brilliant speed and maneuverability, as we were witnessing. Still, when fighting against an enemy of equal characteristics, that advantage was rendered useless, and that was the circumstance I was willing to exploit.

"Avro! Gunship dead on our tail!" I roared. "Stop fluttering for a moment, so that I can have a clear shot!"

"Are you sure you can do it?" She replied.

"Trust me, I only need a moment!"

"Copy that, Farsight!" Avro smiled. "Establishing advance vector in three, two, one... now!"

The constant turning and corkscrewing stopped, and the blurry contours of the Fleet became solid and definite. I saw the Mystral that was trailing us clearly, and aimed my minigun. As soon as the crosshairs merged with the glass cover of the cockpit, I pulled the bite-trigger and the cannon spewed burning death at a rate of a thousand bullets per minute. The enemy ship took most of the hits, and something blew up in the Communist gunship, causing it to break the chase and plummet down in a trail of black smoke.

"Gunship D11 is down! Repeat, gunship D11 is down!" The radio filled with distress calls and orders.

"Who is DeHavilland's gunner? It's the first time that I see a Mystral taken down by minigun fire!"

"It's the first time you ever see a Mystral taken down, you stupid cunt! We hadn't engaged in battle before!"

"Hey, watch what you say!"

"Would you all stop faffing about! It's just a single gunship! Why can't you take it down, for Luna's sake?"

"Corvette Heroes here. We have a possible shot, but they're too close to us. Our shelling would damage the hull and cannons."

"Understood, Heroes. Break formation and try to take them down. Frigates Ouroboros and Treasure, escort the Heroes to new vector."

"Ouroboros here. All clear."

"Treasure here, we copy. Moving to new position."

"That's the answer to our prayers." Avro giggled. "Two frigates and a corvette, far from the rest of the Fleet! I think your plan is going to work."

"Great, but won't the other corvettes fry us as soon as we get into their range?" Nadyr asked.

"Concentrate on the gunships, Nadyr." Avro whined. "I know exactly how to get this done."

The Fleet broke in two, as the commander had ordered. A corvette, a three-decker airship that was covered from prow to stern in cannons of the most various calibers, had separated from the group and was trying to gain distance to fire at us safely, with two frigates cautiously keeping its sides guarded. The gunships kept trying to take potshots at us, but after having downed one of them, they stayed at a higher distance, beyond the range of the miniguns. Avro accelerated the D6 and got as close as possible to the Heroes while dodging the attacks from the two escorting frigates.

"Heroes here. We can't take a shot, repeat, can't take a shot. DeHavilland is stuck to us."

"Don't worry, Heroes. We have this under control. Stop and reroute power to shields. Ouroboros, Treasure, fall back and hold a proper distance."

"Sir, are you going to fire at us?"

"No, I'm going to fire at the gunship, but some shells will hit you anyway. It's a necessary collateral damage. Any complaints, Heroes?"

"No, sir. Maximizing shield output now."

"Wonderful. Corvette Starlight, assume firing stance."

"Starlight here. Target locked and ready to fire. Are you prepared, Heroes?"

"Go ahead, Starlight."

"Errr, Avro... what now?" I asked. "That corvette is about to obliterate us."

"Now you jump!" Avro groaned and stabilized the gunship, putting it close to the top deck of the corvette.

"What about the shields?"

"They're designed to stop projectiles at high speed!" Avro replied. "You'll just pass through unscathed! Now jump before we're turned to ashes!"

I didn't need more encouragement to take the risk, as the idea of a hailstorm of explosive shells was really terrifying. I unstrapped myself, took a step back, and prayed to the Goddesses for a safe landing. There was no more time to think, I had to jump in one... two... three!

I leapt into the blue. For a moment, there was nothing more than the wind beneath my body and the thunder of engines and cannons. No gravity, no speed, no notion of risk. I had to thank Ampera for the augments in my hindlegs, as they had allowed me to jump further than what I would have ever expected. I landed on the metallic plating of the top deck, just a second before a massive explosion rocked the whole airship. The volley of fire from the Starlight had just impacted the shields of the Heroes, but there was no apparent damage in the craft. I was already on it, now it was time to get into it.

A hatch allowed me to get into the bowels of the corvette. Inside, everything was plated in dark steel and iron, which reminded me in a sense to the depths of the factories beneath the Platinum Horseshoe. A constant humming filled the air, and propaganda posters of the Red Front were stuck in almost every piece of wall. As if they needed more indoctrination. Every now and then, radio broadcasts broke the silence.

"The D6 has dodged the attack! What now, sir?"

"Gunship D4 here! We think we saw a pony jump onto the Heroes from the D6, is that possible?"

"Heroes, confirm that."

"Still no trace of it. We're searching."

"Frigate Ouroboros here. We believe to have seen that as well."

"Watch out, Heroes. You might have an unwanted passenger."

"Copy that. We'll spread out and look for intruders."

I grabbed my rifle and began to check my E.F.S. carefully. Even if, according to Avro, the crew of the corvette could be of no more than ten pegasi, I wouldn't like to get caught in a firefight in one of those narrow corridors. The sooner I got to the bridge, the better for me. I wanted to take control of the craft to even up the odds against the Reds, but if I ended up wrecking it, I wouldn't mind either.

"Are you inside?" Avro's voice sounded dimmed by static.

"Yes, I've boarded the Heroes."

"Then head for the bridge. It's on the middle deck, to the front. There's no way of losing it."

"Understood."

"Hey, who's speaking there?" The voice of a stallion echoed in the hallway. "Intruder!"

BLAM!

He didn't say anything more, as I put a bullet through his unhelmeted head as soon as he popped from around the corner. Such narrow spaces weren't meant for careful aiming, and I wouldn't have said no to a proper battle saddle like Avro's or Ampera's, but then again, those were the cards I had to play with.

The gunshot would attract the rest of the troops inside the Heroes to my position, so I crawled to a dark corner and got ready to surprise the incoming enemies. Once again, the Fleet communications became hectic, as distress signals were radiated to the rest of the airships.

"Heroes, we heard gunshots. Reply, Heroes."

"Heroes here. We confirm the gunfire. Enemy on board, repeat, enemy on board. Prepare to execute takeover protocol."

"Denied, Heroes. Try to resist as much as possible. Gunships D8 and D2 are flying to board you."

"Understood. Moving engines to flotation status."

"Gunship D2 here! We're taking heavy fire from D6, we're going to have to abort!"

"Negative, D2, stay focused on the target."

"We can't take much long... AAARGH!"

"D2! D2! Respond!"

"This is gunship D8, D2 has been taken down by D6. Should we change our tactic?"

"Negative, D8. Frigates Ouroboros and Treasure, focus on the enemy gunship."

"Understood, sir."

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle warned me of the arrival of two more soldiers down the corridor. I squeezed myself into the shadows and hoped that they wouldn't be wearing their helmets inside the corvette. Luckily for me, they weren't, and I could see the faces of the Red soldiers that appeared from a side door, trying to catch me from behind. A mare and a stallion, both heavily armed and ready. There was no time to lose, so I activated S.A.T.S. and used that edge to get a clear shot at both the ponies' heads before they could even react.

BLAM! BLAM!

The two soldiers fell down before knowing what had hit them. I could see their faces of surprise when they noticed that there was a pony hiding in the dark corner of the corridor, and I couldn't help enjoying it. How many could there be left, though?

"Second Breeze, Second Breeze, come in!" The radio on one of the corpses buzzed.

"Second Breeze will not be able to respond in a while." I replied smugly. "I think it's related to the bullet that went through his head."

"What the...? Who are you?"

"Well, you can call me your hijacker." I laughed. "This is a hostile takeover."

"You'll never capture the ship! Fleet Command, Heroes here, execute takeover protocol!"

"Negative, Heroes. It's just one pony, take it out."

"But sir, he's taken out my entire crew!"

"We can't afford to gun down a corvette if we can recapture it first. Heroes, protocol denied. It's final."

While the captain of the corvette was speaking with his command, I galloped down the hallways of the airship towards the bridge. I crossed the cannon area of the middle deck, a massive hall of guns controlled by servoengines and robotics, and I walked into the command area, where a nervous pony on a pilot uniform was arguing with the radio. As soon as he heard me enter the room, he turned back and gulped.

"You're never going to take over the Heroes! I will fight you and..."

BLAM!

"Oh, shut up already." I groaned.

I moved the corpse of the commander of the Heroes aside and walked towards the terminal that governed the ship. It was another large computer like that of the top of the Spire, with loads of data regarding the damage of the engines, the hull status, the shield generation and the guns. I made myself comfortable and began fiddling with the inputs, feeling better as I began to control the whole massive aircraft with a flick of a switch.

"Time to start the show..." I grinned, and input an order to the main cannons.

A blast rocked the corvette as a volley of explosive shells was fired out of the guns of the Heroes, and several more explosions confirmed that I had hit my intended target. I was going to enjoy that.

"Sir, this is frigate Ouroboros! The Heroes is firing at us!"

"Frigate Treasure here! We've taken heavy damage! Our engines are losing power fast, and we're beginning to fall!"

"Shit! SHIT! Ouroboros, report your damage status!"

"Shields at 20%, sir. Our targeting systems are down and our engine is not going to take much more punishment!"

"Understood. Can you aid the Treasure?"

"We'll try, sir!"

"Do it, then! Corvettes Starlight and Guise, can you provide firing support?"

"Starlight here. Ready to fire at the Heroes."

"Guise here. Moving to firing position."

"Command, this is carrier Revolution speaking. We will need escort if the corvettes move to attack."

"Understood, Revolution. Fly in close formation to the Victory and keep your shields up. Frigates New Roam and Wintertrot, advance to escort the carriers."

"New Roam here, orders received and understood."

"Wintertrot here, on the move."

The whole Fleet rearranged while the two frigates that had been tailing me began to fall behind, trying to pull off a desperate rescue maneuver. I didn't even flinch when I targeted the Ouroboros' bridge with my rear cannons. A button pressed later, the explosions and the sound of screams coming from the radio made me squee in delight.

"Sir, the Ouroboros has been hit! We've lost contact with both frigates, and they're falling down!"

"Celestia damn his soul! You at the Heroes, are you listening to me?"

"Loud and clear." I replied curtly.

"You must be DeHavilland's pet, right?"

"I am many things, but I am no pet. Would a pet take over one of your corvettes and blow up two frigates just by himself?"

"You perform well, for an insect."

"Now I'm an insect?" I winced. "Really? I thought you would show your foe more respect, but I guess I was mistaken."

"We show respect for those who are worthy of it. Traitors and their friends are not regarded with pleasure among the ranks of the Communist Pegasi Front."

"Too bad that you are so narrow minded. I will show you who you're dealing with."

I closed the channel with the Fleet Command, and concentrated on thinking what to do next. My shields were taking a beating from the shells of the other two corvettes, so I could not stop to plan my upcoming move. That battle required bold and careless actions, and I was ready to carry them forward.

"Farsight!" Avro called from the gunship. "Did you do that?"

"Yes, call me captain Farsight of the corvette Heroes." I laughed. "On a second thought, don't do that."

"What are you going to do?"

"I want to bring the fight to the big ships."

"Farsight, even a corvette can't do much against the plating of those carriers. I don't think that's a good idea."

"Believe me, it will be." I grinned. "I just need you to give those two frigates something else to worry about."

"Understood." Avro said calmly. "Don't risk it too much, my dear, we've got them in a pinch."

I sighed and began rerouting the power from the cannons to the engines. To get my plan working properly, I needed a boost of speed that would give me a chance to surprise the commander of the Red Fleet. As soon as my guns went silent and the corvette began to move at a noticeable pace, I changed the course to head towards one of the carriers, the Revolution. It was an incredible piece of engineering, six decks of cannons and gunner posts, with docking bays for smaller ships and a large launchpad in the top deck for gunships. A large red star with a golden wreath beneath it decorated the side hulls of the gigantic craft.

"Sir, the Heroes has stopped firing!"

"Yes, so what?"

"I don't know what they're up to!"

"Guise, I don't give a damn about what they're going to do. As long as they're not firing at us, we can try to mow them down. And that is what you should be doing!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Command, this is frigate Wintertrot! Gunship D6 has caused us some severe damage, we must fall back!"

"Negative, Wintertrot. Hold your positions. New Roam, move to engage gunship D6."

"What about the Heroes, sir?"

"Victory, Revolution! Can you get a firing vector at the Heroes?"

"Certainly, sir."

"You heard it, New Roam. Aid the Wintertrot against that bloody gunship!"

"Yes, sir!"

The guns of the two carriers, which had been silent until that very moment, began firing straight at me. As I could notice, the shields in the front end of the corvette were weaker, as some explosions began to shake the Heroes quite violently, and reports of damage appeared in the screens. While the hull could take the beating, my plan would work.

"Farsight, you're taking heavy damage!" Avro cried.

"Avro, I know what I'm doing, so concentrate on giving those frigates hell!"

"But darling..."

Another explosion stopped me from hearing Avro's last sentence, and I realized that I had to charge head on if I wanted the plan to work. I put all the power into the engine, neglecting the shields, and prayed for the best.

"The Heroes has lowered its shields!"

"Shoot it down, then!"

"Starlight here, can't do, sir. It's too close to the carriers."

"Victory, Revolution! Can you eliminate the target?"

"Revolution here! We're firing at it with all we got, but it's taking them all like a champ!"

"What is he doing? He's going straight at you!"

"Watch out, Revolution, he's going to ram you!"

"Evacuate the portside area, quick!"

I could almost see the faces on the Red troopers inside the Revolution when the prow of the corvette crashed violently against the hull of the enemy airship, causing many cannons to explode in a maelstrom of fire and metal. The force of the crash threw me to the ground, but since the bridge of the corvette was far from the front end, I came out of it rather unharmed. Leaving the airship stuck into the side hull of the carrier, I galloped to the open and crawled through the tight space in the crash area.

Inside the carrier, everything was pretty much the same as in the corvette, maybe bigger and brighter, but that could be a side effect of the many raging fires inside the ship. Chaos was loose in the Revolution, as alarm bells rang and orders were shouted out of every speaker in the six decks.

"Everypony head for the bridge! We must defend it at all costs! Repeat, everypony to the bridge!"

"Avro, you hear that?" I smiled.

"You are just out of your mind, Farsight! Crashing into another airship like that? Do you have a deathwish?"

"It was the only way to get into the carrier!"

"Fine, fine, what matters is that you're alive and well." Avro sighed. "What do you want?"

"Could you guide me to the maneframe? They won't let me use the bridge."

"Go down to the last deck. It should be right beneath your position, but there will be automated defences."

"I will deal with them."

"Be careful, will you?"

"I will, Avro, I will."

I galloped down the metallic hallways to the lower levels of the carrier. I was ready to face any foe, but it seemed that those troopers that hadn't been wiped out by the explosion had followed orders and were entrenched in the bridge of the Revolution. I entered the maneframe room quickly, and the E.F.S. warned me immediately of enemy forces in the area. I dove behind one of the server towers and took a peek around the corner, just to be aimed at by two mechanic turrets.

"Well, here you are." I groaned and took aim. The turrets sent a round of laser fire against me, and I swore I smelled charred mane right before I recoiled. They were really fast.

"Crap, they're fast."

"The turrets in the maneframe room have detected something, sir!"

"Go investigate!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Dammit!" I grunted and activated S.A.T.S. I couldn't waste any time dealing with the turrets.

BLAM! BLAM!

The automated guns exploded in a flurry of sparks and metal bits, and I galloped to the maneframe backup terminal. Hacking it would take me some time, and I would be defenceless until I managed to break the code barriers that separated me from controlling the ship.

"Avro, I'm at the maneframe, but they've detected me!" I called through the radio. "Can you give them something to worry about?"

"Sure, Farsight!"

Suddenly, a series of explosions shook the entire airship from side to side. Avro must have unloaded a whole payload of missiles against the Revolution, which even if useless, would

distract the troopers inside while I grasped control of the craft.

"It's the D6 again!"

"Sir, we're out of shields, if the gunship lands another series of missiles we are going to be in trouble!"

"Fine, scramble! I'll try to keep him off our system."

"I'd like to see you do that." I smiled and pressed a button on my PipBuck. With a faint beep, I took control of the Revolution. "Ta-ta!"

"The fuck? I've lost control! Repeat, I've lost control of the Revolution!"

"Understood! We're returning to the carrier!"

"Avro, I've got them pinned down." I smiled. "Get away from here, now!"

"Got it!"

I browsed through the options that appeared in the terminal and selected the fire control, aiming all cannons at the other carrier, the Victory. When all signals went green with lock-on, I ordered them to fire at will. The massive roar of the large carrier cannons filled the air in a dissonant symphony that made me prance in glee. Once again, the echoing destruction was responded by another lot of radio communications.

"This is the Victory, we're taking heavy damage!"

"Victory, report!"

"The Revolution has started firing at us! We couldn't raise our shields in time!"

"Revolution, what the hell is going on?"

"Somepony has hacked into our maneframe, sir!"

"What? How can an intruder do that?"

"He... he rammed a corvette into our hull!"

"He did WHAT?"

"Command, this is the Victory! We've lost our engines! Repeat, we have lost our engines! We're going down!"

"Can you evacuate, Victory?"

"Negative, sir, the gunships have been destroyed in the explosion!"

"Revolution, what about your gunships?"

"They're already airborne, sir. Redirecting them to aid the Victory."

"Command, come in! This is the Starlight."

"Starlight, we're listening, what is it?"

"Should we fire at the Revolution?"

"Negative, Starlight."

"But Command, it's under enemy control!"

"I don't care! We still have troops in the ship, and they're only facing one enemy! We must try to recapture it!"

"I refuse, sir!"

"Starlight, Guise, return to base. We must try to save whatever we can."

"Understood, Command. Starlight setting retreat vector."

I laughed and pranced, enjoying our victory against the entire Communist Fleet. Our joint ability had taken down almost the whole of the enemy forces, counting just with a small gunship on our side. I heard Avro cheering through the radio, while the last remnants of the Red forces wailed in angst and pain as the Victory plummeted to the ground. No matter what came in the future, we had dealt a killing blow to Ilyushin's plans of taking over New Pegasus.

"That was simply awesome, darling!" Avro giggled.

"Well, I can't even believe it myself."

"Me neither." Nadyr yelled in the background.

"It was a surprise to all of us, yes, but now I have to think how to get out of here."

"What about the troops that remain in the Revolution?"

"Oh, yes, almost forgot about them." I coughed. *"We'll have to give them a proper ending, shouldn't we?"*

"A proper ending?"

"Avro, I will need your skill once more. What's the best way to abandon the carrier quickly?"

"I guess it would be the launchpad at the top deck, but... you don't have a gunship."

"Who says I need a gunship?"

"Farsight, you're not meaning you are going to..."

"Keep an eye on the Revolution, will you?"

I shut down the communication with my companions and returned to the terminal. A few clicks and taps later, I was looking at the last stepping stone in that battle. I pressed a button and the whole airship was lit in red flashing lights.

"Self-destruct sequence activated. Three minutes until the explosion."

"What? Self-destruction? You disgusting son of a..."

"Sir, you need to evacuate the Revolution!"

"No way! A captain stays in his ship!"

"But sir!"

"Return to base, it's an order!"

"Negative sir, we're helping you out of there."

I ignored the radio chatter and galloped as fast as I could to reach the top deck. The Revolution was a massive airship, and if I had known that I would have to get so far, I would have given myself a couple more minutes. The alarm lights dyed the metal red and the constant horn sound was deafening, but I forced myself to run faster. My life depended on it.

"Two minutes to the explosion."

I jumped to avoid a crashed catwalk over the third firing deck. My improvised arrival at the carrier had caused some of the passageways to be blocked or crumbled, so I had to crawl and roll to get through the narrow spots that remained open. My heart was beating at an incredible rate, faster than I had ever heard it, as I climbed the stairs into the final deck of the Revolution. It was escape or death.

"One minute to the explosion."

The launchpad deck was a large open runway that stretched into the blue void. Some pegasi had arrived at the side of the landing area and wondered whether to shoot me or to aid their captain, who was still on the bridge. Before giving them a chance to decide, I galloped towards the far end of the runway, counting the seconds before the explosion. Ten... nine... eight... I was not going to make it... or was I... six... five... The end was right there... three... two... one...

I jumped.

*** **

BOOOOOOOM!!!

The blast acted like a thrust downward, accelerating my fall. Gravity pulled my body towards the ground, and the air caressed my fur as I plummeted and rolled in a fight to regain control of my body. The whole world turned around me at great speed, and in a matter of seconds up was down and down was up. The noise of the wind at my ears didn't let me hear the radio, so I had no idea about where Avro was.

On one of the many twists and turns, I got a glimpse of two armored pegasi that had begun a chase from the falling, burning ruins of the Revolution, which were being held from falling thanks to the last breaths of the magic gems on the lower end of the hull remnants. The Red troopers that followed me in my fall had vengeance written all over their faces, and they posed a more believable threat than that of the ground, which was still far, even if closing in quickly.

"Persistent little bastards..." I groaned.

I tried to summon my rifle, but I was moving too quickly for my magic to even be able to grip it properly, so I had no choice than to try and dodge their attacks. I held little hopes of being capable of actually performing any controlled moves, what meant that I was at their mercy.

"Avro, where are you?" I sighed.

Suddenly, the rolling sound of minigun fire came out of the blue, and the two pegasi were mowed down by a gunship that passed by me at high speed. I was able to get a glimpse of the marking on the side of the craft, where a familiar number six made me smile. Not a minute too soon!

"Farsight!" Nadyr's voice roared above the reigning noise. "Pull yourself in!"

Avro was maintaining the gunship parallel to my firing trajectory, with its side gates wide open. I rolled to the side and stretched my muzzle to try and grab one of the bites inside the craft. It took me a couple of failed attempts to get it done, but I managed to hold tight to the plummeting gunship.

"Is he aboard?" Avro yelled.

"We got him!" Nadyr replied.

At the half-zebra's response, the pegasus pulled the control lever of the D6 and the gunship performed a strong recovery, sending me flank-first into the metallic floor of the aircraft. Without wasting any more time, I strapped myself tight and gasped for air. All those thrills

had me about to have a heart attack.

"Farsight, are you alright?" Avro asked.

"Yes..." I huffed and panted. "More or less intact."

"Wonderful!" Avro squeed. "You're the best, Farsight."

"Thank you, honey." I sighed, and sat on my flanks. "Thank you."

"What now?" Nadyr asked. "Do we get to return home? We've kicked their flanks for good."

"Not yet." Avro frowned. "We haven't defeated Ilyushin."

"Well, where is he?"

"If I know him right, he must be hiding in Breakeven Point."

"What the hell is that?"

"Our main base. We must get there before the Starlight and the Guise. If we don't... we won't stand a chance."

#

Note: Perk Added

Wingless Pegasus: +10% Strength and Gun skills when fighting airborne.