



Guardians And Ceasefire

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Chapter 1

The City of Steel

Twilight had never actually set foot outside of Canterlot before Princess Celestia had transferred her to Ponyville. She'd hadn't really felt the urging or had the time to leave so long as her studies were most important, but the move had done her a lot of good. While the acclimation process had been aggravating (hair-raisingly so), the bookworm had plenty of new friends to ease her into the place and teach her several valuable things about friendship. And while she had familiarized herself with the stories of all the regions and cities of Equestria (ranging from the small ones like Trottingham and Hoofington to the enormous places like Manehattan and Fillydelphia) she hadn't set foot in many aside from Appleloosa. So, needless to say, Stalliongrad took her a little by surprise.

"I don't get it," Spike remarked, frowning as he and Twilight stepped off the train and onto the departure platform, raised up several stories and supported by iron girders. The structure afforded a good view of a large part of the city, and even though it was currently snowing mildly several of the more famous buildings such as the Equestria National Medical Institute and the Experimental Theater were still distinguishable.

Spike leaned up to the railing and looked out at the skyline, blackened but still blue thanks to the work of the city's local Environmental Brigade, Pegasi who worked around the clock to keep the city still at the minimum Clear Skies limit. Still, it didn't help considering what most of the city was.

"There's so many factories here. Even Manehattan isn't this bad, and it's got three times Stalliongrad's population." The infant dragon huffed, sending a plume of flame into the air that turned a small bit of falling snow into warm vapor.

Twilight had dressed warmly, remembering to bring a nice warm saddle, scarf and boots. Stalliongrad was much further north of Canterlot, and as such was subject to extreme drops in temperature, making such attire almost required to even set foot in the city.

"All those things that are made for us ponies have to be built somewhere, Spike," she remarked, idly blowing a forelock out of her eyes. "Stalliongrad contains all of Equestria's industry, and the workers here make their living off the imports of raw materials and the exports of finished goods to places such as Canterlot, Cloudsdale and even Ponyville. There's a lot of things that can't be produced locally in the towns, and Stalliongrad grew from that." Twilight looked out over the city with something akin to a mix of curiosity and sadness. "These ponies lead quite simple lives. Work, go to sleep. They're not very bothered by things at large."

Spike snorted in typical Spike fashion. "Booooring. Seriously, that's all they do? Why don't they just power the factories with magic? Be so much simpler and free a lot of those workers from a life filled with nothing but two dull things. Although sleep is alright..."

Here, Twilight glared down at Spike, who seemed oblivious to her. "Spike, if we were to remove these ponies from their jobs, where would they go? What would they do? How would they get their bits? And let's not mention the dragons and their loss of horde-"

"Wait! Did you just say dragons live here?" Spike abruptly seemed –very- interested in what Twilight had to say, staring up at her with wide eyes. She shrugged, unable to resist the chance to run her studies through her brain. "It's a favored place of adolescent dragons for the warmth and potential wealth. Dragons don't buy much, so they usually save their earnings as the beginning of their hordes. The place is also famous for several cafes that cater only to dragons with gemstones they buy from the quarries."

Not surprisingly, Spike's attitude suddenly took a complete turnaround, and he grinned, sticking a thumbs-up into the air. "Alright! Sign me up, I say we go to one of those places right now!"

Twilight sighed, knowing she shouldn't have divulged that little bit of information to her miniscule draconian companion. "No, Spike. This isn't a social call, remember? We're here to meet with the head of the Worker's League and discuss difficulties in Princess Celestia's stead."

And just like that, Spike did another about-face with his mood, his shoulders slumping and his brow dragging down. "Fine. Let's get this over with..."

However, as they descended the stairs to reach the main station and thus their gateway into the city, Twilight noticed something a little strange awaiting them by the entrance. A single pony was standing next to a large white cardboard sign with 'Twilight Sparkle and Guest' written on it in what looked to be some kind of paint. While Spike fumed about being the 'Guest' and therefore not important enough for his actual name ("It's the same amount of letters, for crying out loud!") the unicorn inspected the pony from a distance, noting that he wasn't like the others around them.

Most ponies in Stalliongrad were earth ponies, like Ponyville, and not even the large amounts of moving and intermixing of culture had changed that fact. The stallion (or colt, she wasn't sure of his age) that had caught her attention was a gray-skinned pony with a mane and tail as dark as coal, both of which were trimmed short. He was definitely an earth pony; there was nowhere to hide his horn or wings thanks to his attire. Thanks to Stalliongrad's climate it was absolute foolhardiness to go outside without at least a coat on, but he wore a blue padded vest over a simple long sleeved shirt, goggles over his eyes and what appeared to be a helmet on his head.

"A soldierpony?" she muttered, tilting her head to the side as she scrutinized the stallion awaiting their arrival. He was standing rock-steady, his head staring right at them, though the goggles kept his eyes obscured. The vest, then, must be a combat piece, and the shirt his fatigues. Twilight had, of course, studied Equestria's history extensively, but when she'd learned that the Army hadn't been deactivated like the Air Force and Magic Corps had been in the few hundred years since the last war, she'd done a little digging in her texts.

Spike snorted. "What's the military even doing in Stalliongrad? We're miles from the griffon border. It's not like we need them anyway."

"Spike, soldiers perform other tasks than fighting. Sometimes if a situation gets too out of hand for the local police, the army will step in to help. Manehattan, Fillydelphia, all the major cities keep an active garrison of regular army and at least a few companies of reserves in case things ever get out of hand."

"Out of hand, right." Here, Spike snorted again, his obvious disdain at not going for gemstones obviously weighing down his attitude. "Think about it, Twilight. We solve pretty much every problem in and around Ponyville

without –any- police at all. And I doubt the rest of Equestria is so feeble they can't take care of themselves. Is the army even –needed- anymore?"

Of course it was. They provide protection and security to the land, as well as jobs for those who need them. Well, that's what Twilight would have said if she hadn't stopped her automatic response and genuinely thought about what Spike was saying. Most ponies in Equestria felt safe enough as is, and stayed away from places they didn't...mostly (the memories of the numerous occasions in the Everfree Forest came to mind) and jobs were quite simple to come across. If they weren't, one was made for them out of sheer courtesy.

Were these soldiers actually needed? Or were they simply a relic from the past?

Before she could answer her dragon assistant, she turned her head back, intending to glance at the trooper pony again, only to be shocked at finding him right in front of her all of a sudden.

"Ma'am? You're Twilight Sparkle, correct?" His voice was curt, crisp and full of deference. As a regular pony, she had very little power. As Princess Celestia's star pupil, however, she had quite a reputation. If the army sent someone to meet her, they would undoubtedly show them what she looked like. Fortunately, she managed to compose herself enough to smile and answer.

"Yeah, I am. Pleasure to meet you. This is Spike, my assistant."

"Sup?" asked the dragon in question, looking quite bored and uninterested in their greeter.

Twilight tilted her head to the side, ignoring Spike's foul manners as she said "We're here on official business. What's your name?"

"Oh, pardon me." The soldier reached up, pushing his goggles over the brim of his helmet before he smiled and held out his hoof. "Private Stop, Royal Army. Nice to meet you, ma'am."

He seemed like a polite enough colt, so she reached out, shaking hooves with him as she replied "Please, just call me Twilight. You're making me feel old. Stop's an interesting name, though."

He blushed a little, grinning sheepishly as he grunted awkwardly. "It's uh, my last name. Short Stop, see?"

Short Stop turned a little, showing off his flank and the ball and bat cutie mark upon it. "Most of my family played professionally."

Twilight knew of the sport, but only had a loose grasp on the status of the games worldwide. "What about you?"

Here, however, Short Stop became a bit fidgety, and seemed to draw back into himself. "Well, it's family tradition...anyway, I bet you're wondering why I'm here. I was assigned to be your liaison for your visit here. I'll take care of all your needs and help you out with negotiations around here."

"Liaison? What's that?" Spike asked, not giving this stranger any sense that the baby dragon was truly interested whatsoever.

Fortunately, it was Twilight that answered, drawing at least a little of her assistant's attention. "It's sort of like you, Spike. Except liaisons are short term and usually drawn from the local people. Speaking of which," here she turned back to Short and asked "Why do we need one? I'm just going to talk to the head of the Worker's League. It's not like I'm trying to negotiate with the dragons." Now that she thought about it, a liaison could have helped with that one dragon who'd been smogging up Equestria during his nap, but Fluttershy had come through in the end, so no use in starting What If's.

Short answered quickly and curtly, as seemed to be his base attitude. "Beg pardon, but ponies from other cities aren't respected much around here. Stalliongrad just doesn't take outsiders seriously. I'm supposed to be there to give you guys some credit and smooth things over."

Twilight frowned anew, puzzled by the statement. Ponies were ponies. It wasn't like the interspecies negotiations involving the griffons or dogs from across the borders, or even trying to talk down a dragon.

"I think I have plenty of credit, uh...Private. I'm Princess Celestia's star pupil. Surely I can at least convince them to talk to me."

Short didn't look convinced, raising a black eyebrow to hide underneath the brim of his helmet, but to his credit he at least gave way and didn't pursue the topic.

"Alright. Do you want me to call for a steam wagon? The League's quartered only a short distance away, but I figure you might appreciate the ride."

Twilight smiled again, thankful he wasn't a bitter stallion, and trotted past into the snowy streets, saying "No thanks. I just spent six hours cooped up in a metal box. I'd like to stretch my legs a little for the short time we'll be here."

Spike, however, objected very strongly. "But Twilight! It's so freaking cold out here!"

Stalliongrad had a rugged beauty to it, as the strong, old brick walls stretched above her head. It took her a little while to finally realize that there were residences, hotels and other shops squeezed between the factories, so similarly were they built that she suspected they had all belonged to one enormous building and simply built down into as time went on. Her books had said that the entire city had been carefully planned, but had been suspiciously vague about what extents the architects had gone to.

Still, for a business trip, the place was indeed nice to watch. Worker ponies seemed to at least keep a measure of spirit despite their rather grim surroundings, and it was obvious that while they weren't completely happy they were at least content.

It wasn't just ponies on the street, either. Occasionally, a small group of dragons ranging anywhere from Spike's size to as tall as the buildings around them walked past, separating the crowds around them as the reptiles went on their way. Spike waved hi to these groups, and while they were polite enough to wave and smile, they didn't engage in his casual banter at all. Eventually, the baby dragon simply gave up, more content to sulk as he followed in Twilight's wake next to Short.

Things were starting to get a little awkward for the purple unicorn. The longer she stayed in this city, the more she felt like all the happiness and soul was being sucked out of her surroundings. The buildings were becoming drab, the sky turning grey and the ponies around her were becoming more and more depressed, and she began to stick out like a sore hoof. She needed a distraction. Quickly.

She glanced back at Short before saying "So, Short. I notice you don't have a gun-yoke on. Aren't you on active duty?"

He nodded, a small smile of understanding gracing his features, causing her to blink once or twice. He wasn't that bad looking, really. And he was definitely in top shape...

"We're not allowed to carry weapons outside the garrison. Standard Equestrian law. Unless there is an imminent invasion, riot or we're transporting equipment to another site, lethal equipment cannot leave the allotted area. It's the same as every other city."

"Oh," said Twilight, remembering that she had read up on the institution of that law after the Pie Riots when sixteen ponies and four soldiers had become wounded during a heated exchange. Fortunately, no one had died, but the army had been completely at fault for firing on a crowd without issuing a warning. As such, no carrying weapons.

Fortunately, Short didn't miss a beat, continuing right on as though he were oblivious of Twilight's embarrassment (or maybe he really was). "We may not be right on the border with the griffons but we do sometimes still get problems occasionally."

At this, the unicorn's ears perked up. "Problems? What kind? Surely it can't be too bad if Princess Celestia hasn't been informed, right?"

To her surprise, Short shook his head. "Actually, I don't think the mayor reports them to Canterlot. We get a few bands of no-gooders occasionally that need to be chased out. Mostly diamond dogs, nothing to ever really worry about."

Spike's expression at the words diamond dogs was nothing less than a furious scowl, obviously looking to exact some vengeance for Rarity's capture and forced labor, even if she did get herself out of it. Twilight

ignored her assistant and his muttered curses, instead focusing on the issue at hand.

"Mostly? How often do they come by?"

Before Short could answer, however, there was an enormous *CRASH* up ahead, and a wooden produce stand split in half as an enormous bulldog tore through it from behind as though the wood was nothing more than tissue paper. Behind it, from the alleyway the stand had hidden, a group of dogs poured out, spreading out and snarling as they began tackling ponies, searching them roughly before moving on.

"Quite often, actually," replied Short in an annoyed tone.

Chapter 2

A Narrow Escape

To say that Twilight had never been faced with danger would be an outright lie. She'd battled creatures numerous times that could have killed her or her friends in an instant. She knew how to handle herself in a crisis situation.

But then why was she currently standing stock still as the rampaging canines charged closer and closer to her, paws and claws outstretched and jowls hanging, ropes of disgusting saliva streaming from yellowing teeth...

Regardless, it was Short who snapped her out of it. Just as the first dog was about to leap onto her, no doubt to frisk her and look for her gemstones, a flash of grey came out of nowhere, and the dog was suddenly reeling backwards to the snow-covered street, twin horseshoe-shaped bruises already forming under the jaw.

"C'mon!" the trooper yelled, pushing Twilight aside, to which she acquiesced almost immediately, galloping full pelt into a nearby café as Spike scuttled along after them. Coming out was an older stallion, one who looked ready to go back to work, his hard hat already back on his head. Unfortunately, the horse was bowled over as a unicorn and Earth pony slammed into him, throwing him back into the shop as Spike slammed the door shut. Every pony in the place was staring at the trio, and Twilight suddenly found herself at a loss for words, feeling the fixed eyes of over a dozen bewildered eaters.

Once again, however, it seemed Short had things under control. "Alright, no need to panic folks," he announced, stepping forward so the entire crowd could focus on him. "We've got a small problem outside. The police will arrive any minute, and we can then get out of your manes, okay? In the meantime, please enjoy your lunch. Sorry to disturb you."

He turned back, his reassuring tone gone as he said, quietly so only Twilight could hear him, "You know any combat magic?"

She frowned, not sure she understood the question. "Uh...."

"Y'know. Battle magic. Spells made for the express purpose of incapacitating or eliminating your enemy?" Short looked at her beseechingly, trying to get across how badly he wanted a 'yes' from her, but knowing she wouldn't have it.

"I thought you said the problem was 'small.' What happened to that?" she replied, desperate to change topics.

Outside, a gunshot boomed, and a chorus of victorious howls echoed up and down the streets, making every pony in the building cry out and seek shelter or simply sit there, shivering in fear. Following that was a rattle as more guns went off, almost sounding like somepony had foolishly lit an entire crate of firecrackers and thrown it into a drum shop.

"That's what happened! The diamond dogs of this area are really well armed! Dogs –invented- gunpowder, but these guys are almost addicted to it! Ugh!" Short sighed, hanging his head before reaching up and keying the radio strapped to his vest, saying "S-Command, this is Victor Seven with traffic, come in."

"Roger, Victor Seven, this is S-Command. Send traffic, over."

"S-Command, we've got an incursion in the Industrial District, Zone uh..."

He frowned, thinking to himself before stepping over to the counter, peering over the side and addressing the quivering lump below that was the bartender, huddled away in fright. "Hey, what's this place's address?"

"T-thirteen thirty-seven, Saddle Street. Ah!"

Another volley of gunfire went off outside, sending the bartender deeper under the counter, and Short grunted, speaking into his hand-held again. "Industrial District, Zone Seventeen. Combatants are armed, repeat armed. Interrogative, have the police been dispatched?"

"Standby, Victor...uh, negative, that's a negative. We're getting reports of six other incursions around the city. Please standby, over."

"What the hay?" Short asked, his expression shocked. Twilight, not understanding anything that had just happened, stepped closer, trying to keep up their façade of calm, even as more gunshots echoed outside, this time accompanied by equestrian cries of panic and more howls.

"Short...what's going on?"

"I don't know," the colt replied, turning to her with a bewildered look on his face. "It's the weirdest thing. It sounds like we're being hit in different areas at the same time. But that's impossible; diamond dogs don't have the coordination for that."

"Then what-" Twilight snapped, losing her composure as she gestured wildly over her shoulder "The hay is that going on out there?" Swiftly realizing her blunder, she spun around, looking over the room of wide-eyed ponies before coughing awkwardly and adding on "With that weather! I mean, you've got your Weather Officers working so hard out there on the smoke that they can't even manage the snow!" She smiled, hoping to add on a little more credibility.

"You know they don't believe you, right?" asked Spike and Short at the same time in the same, flat tone before glancing at each other, scowling. Twilight sighed in defeat, hanging her head and muttering "Yeah, yeah..."

Short snorted, lost in thought for a second before trying the radio once more. "S-Command, this is Victor Seven, come in."

But, oddly, only static came back to their end, and now Spike and Twilight were staring worriedly at the handset. Short tried again. "S-Command, this is Victor Seven, do you copy?" Again, static.

Grumbling, Short tucked the handset away, muttering something about bad weather and the short-range and ineffectiveness of the radios. The stallion stood there, scratching his chin with his hoof as he tried to think.

This entire visit should have just been a pleasant trip, Twilight thought. She should have arrived, gotten to the Worker's League, talked with the leader about what problems they were having, then spend the night at her hotel and go home the next day. Instead, it looked like she'd be stuck in a dangerous city for much longer than that. Compared to gem-hungry diamond dogs charging around with firearms, planning a surprise party for

Pinkie Pie or getting Rainbow Dash to buck up and perform for a show seemed...well, rather trivial.

Finally, Short turned, heading back to the door and pushing it open slightly, peering out at the street beyond. His tone was one of a cautious onlooker who did not want to be discovered, like an adolescent colt sneaking into his father's salt cabinet. "Okay, looks clear for now. The dogs are gone."

He turned back, a frown on his face and obviously something else on his mind, but whatever it was, he didn't voice it, instead looking around the room at the myriad of ponies who were only now venturing out to sit in their seats again. "If the dogs come back they'll search the whole place top to bottom, and everyone here."

"Well, what do we do?" muttered Twilight, trying to keep the whine out of her voice, aware that now may not be the best time to upset her guide slash bodyguard.

She still had a niggling voice in the back of her head, however, telling her to take charge of the situation like she always did. If the local police couldn't handle this, then the Royal Army would take over. And if the Army couldn't handle this...what was she thinking? Twilight wasn't Rainbow Dash, no matter how much she tried to tell herself she could be brave. And she doubted that music from the reeds and warm milk would make these rogue dogs go away.

Fortunately, Short did have another plan. "We follow them. They'll be least likely to backtrack, and with any luck this raid will be over with soon. Hay, we might even run into a few other troopers and get you out of here. Celestia knows the radios don't always work."

"What about the ponies here?" Spike asked, gesturing to the café at large, most of whom had recovered by now and come to form a semicircle around the three, looking beseechingly at those who looked like they may know what they were doing. Short frowned, grunting in frustration before saying aloud "All of you, lock the doors and windows after we leave. Do not, repeat, do NOT open the door for anypony at all without asking for some kind of proof of who they are, whether by seeing them or some other method."

He took a deep breath, glancing around the room at the scared faces, looking for direction and leadership. He wasn't cut out for this stuff, this was what officers did to make themselves useful.

"As of now," he said, his voice more level as he tried to project an air of calm "This building is under lockdown."

"You didn't have to be so melodramatic."

"It's the only thing civilians listen to! If the authorities don't make drama about something, they're not taken seriously!"

"Well, I guess that explains why Princess Celestia's been making a fuss for you to do all this research on friendship, Twilight," Spike chortled as he dashed along after the two, his stubby legs barely keeping up with the ponies' cantering pace.

The student shot an annoyed glance back at her assistant before slamming into Short's rear, sending them both tumbling head over hooves to land in a pile on the snowy stone street. At first, she had to concentrate on simply rediscovering which way up was, and then deciding if the purple thing in her field of view was Spike, or simply her hoof. She kicked out to find something solid, and with a sharp retort of "Ow!" she discovered it to be both the former and the latter.

"Nice moves there, miss..." Short groaned from under her, the brim of his helmet shoved down over his eyes. "You should become a danger, I mean, dancer."

"Oh, shut up," Twilight muttered, finally sorting out which limbs were hers and which were Short's, extricating herself and standing wobbly to her feet. They'd only gone a few blocks down the street from the now barricaded café, but her surroundings didn't seem any different. Snowy, brick-lined buildings, stalls along the lane...except there were no ponies, anywhere. Evidence of their habitation was seen everywhere in abandoned saddlebags, magazines and other pieces of property and several dozens of hoof prints, followed by enormous paw tracks in the white slush. One could tell that a struggle had happened here and there, most likely as ponies were thrown to the ground and patted down for gems before the canines

moved on. Every now and again, there was a small pile of brass casings and a splash of red blood. Fortunately, no bodies.

"Everyone's hiding already?"

"Yeah," grunted Short as he stood, readjusting his helmet and looking around as well. "We're pretty used to this. Still, there's something wrong about this..." He leaned, down, inspecting one of the aforementioned piles of shells, sniffing the open end and nudging one around. "Automatic rifles. Fired quite recently, probably to scare the crowd."

She tilted her head to the side in confusion, looking at another shell casing nearby, then a few more in a small group.

"How can you tell all that? They look the same to me?"

"Yeah," said Spike, a bitter look on his face as he tossed away a half-chewed one. "And they don't taste as good with gunpowder in them."

Short straightened up, trotting towards an intersection ahead, making Spike and Twilight move as well, or risk being left behind.

"Well, the caliber is easy. The fact that they were all in a pile leant credit to my theory, but it's still just a guess. If someone was firing on a crowd, they'd move the weapon back and forth, throwing spent shells everywhere." It was a rather grim picture, but the fact that there were no dead so far gave Twilight the ease of mind to know that at least ponies weren't dying. There were a few unconscious and wounded that they found as they continued, but each time Short insisted that they keep moving. He didn't share why.

They found their first dead pony around the corner, down an avenue. She lay on the pavement with two red holes in her neck, staining her blue police uniform into a deep, sickening black. Her officer's cap lay nearby, where she had fallen. Next to the downed policemare was what had to be her partner, a colt whose features were hard to distinguish due to a lack of a head, simply a bloody and pulped mess attached to his white neck.

Twilight and Spike both stood there, unable to process the tragedy that lay before them in the form of the two dead ponies, simply doing their job and protecting the city. Short, meanwhile, leaned closer, inspecting both corpses before shaking his head and saying "Must have heard the shots

and tried to set up an ambush. The two were overwhelmed before they could even get a shot off."

He moved in, pushing the mare around, and Twilight felt a bitter stab of indignation at the nerve of what he was doing. "Stop that!" she hissed, slamming a hard blow into his flank to interrupt his grim task. "Show some respect, Short! They should be left to rest in peace!"

The trooper snorted, turning back to the body and finally achieving his goal in getting her gun yoke off, saying "She's got no more use for it, and it'll keep us safe...mildly." Twilight could find no words to retort, and a quick glance at Spike revealed the same shocked expression on his features as well as they both looked back the stallion, who was currently shrugging the yoke onto his shoulders, checking the trigger bit.

A gun yoke consisted of a weight-bearing yoke like the one on a plow (such as the one Big Mac wore and never took off) and carried whatever weapon was currently in use on a pivot over the right shoulder, in this case a light caliber repeater, worn by police while on patrol (political intricacies not being one of her fortes, she ran the conundrum of why the force still had access to weapons by Princess Luna, albeit grudgingly. The measure that had taken the Army's guns had set no restrictions on police weapons, allowing them a nice, comfortable loophole) and not known for its lethality. The bullet sleeve trailed down the support strut, over the back of the yoke and into the ammunition box on the left side, which Short was checking now, tugging the belt to ensure it would feed properly.

The trooper turned to the unicorn and dragon, contemplating his words carefully before asking "Do either of you want one?"

Twilight started, a little surprised at the concept of her holding a lethal weapon. The good Samaritan in her automatically said no, but she began reconsidering the protection after looking once more at the two dead ponies in the street. Seeing her indecisiveness, Short tilted his head before asking "Do you know how to use one?"

"Well," the mage replied carefully, finally tearing her eyes away from the crimson blood splashed over the snowy stone street. "I've seen one..." Short's gaze became irritated and unbelieving, and he continued staring at her as she chewed her lip. "Uh...studied them?" Again with the stare, not a muscle moving save for his eyelids, looking at her and waiting for a halfway

true story. She found herself lowering her head, trying to avoid the awkwardness of the situation as she continued "Read about them?...okay, fine! I don't know anything about guns, are you happy now!"

Short shook his head, glancing down at Spike, who simply crossed his arms over his scaled chest without a word, glaring back. The answer was obvious; 'does it –look- like I can wear that?' However, before the dragon could utter a single noise of sarcastic contempt, Twilight spotted movement over Short's shoulder, an enormous black blur flashing towards them, and did the first thing she could think of; yell "Look out!" and cast a barrier between the soldier and the enemy. The enormous paw of a Great Dane smashed into her purple magic field, causing it to visibly crack at the impact.

The dog didn't even appear to feel its paw ram into the shield, reeling back for another blow. Standing at least three times higher than Twilight, he could have probably pulped both ponies without any effort whatsoever. However, before it could move, Short was there once more, firing rapidly with the repeater as he galloped at their foe, the barrel flashing and his teeth clenching on the trigger as he let out several short bursts, causing blood and dust to fly from the black fur. However, for all the results, the dog appeared unharmed, coughing a little as if he'd gotten the wind knocked out of him. Fortunately, Short had it in hand, for he body-slammed the Dane full force, knocking it to the ground before pouring an unending stream of rounds into it.

Twilight couldn't help but stare, enraptured by the violence as more blood flew, along with great chunks of black fur and pink flesh before, finally, the dog stopped moving, and Short stood there panting above the corpse, repeater smoking in the cold air. Handfuls of new shell casings lay steaming in the snow, rapidly cooling from the air around them.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Short backed away from the dog, reaching up with a hoof and wiping a splatter of blood out of his face. "Dangit...I can never remember the bucking goggles..." Finally, however, his eyes were clear, and he could see again, letting go of the trigger as he glanced around, finally spying Twilight and Spike, both of whom had backed into a wall and watched the grim fracas with pale faces. Immediately embarrassed and slightly ashamed, the stallion stammered incoherently for a second before he steeled himself, his expression

hardening. "He was going to hurt us! It's what you do to people with bad intentions."

He turned, looking up at a nearby street sign, advertising that they were on 42nd Avenue, a boulevard with piles upon piles of abandoned goods, carts and stands, obviously dropped in a hurry. "C'mon," he said, still watching the nearby buildings. "There's an outpost down the road from here. Should be able to find out what's going on from there." Again, he received no reply, and turned to find Twilight down on her belly, staring at the mangled corpse of the Great Dane, eyes wide. Spike was on her back, eyes buried in her mane, obviously to block out the gruesome sight. Wincing, Short knew he'd have to be insensitive, and moved over to Twilight. He considered backhoofing her, but knew that would get a bad reaction. She wasn't a soldier or an officer, she was just a student here at the behest of her regent.

Sighing, the trooper trotted around to Twilight's rear, bending down and headbutting her in the flank, causing the unicorn to either stand or be knocked into a snowbank. Fortunately, Twilight's reflex kept her balanced, and once she was standing he nudged her along again, hard. She made no sound, simply staring down at the street, her eyes wide.

"Never gets easy..." Short muttered as he kept pushing her, mindful to watch the alleyways, buildings and wagons for any sign of an ambush. At least she and the dragon weren't resisting.

Fortunately for all of them, they were alone save for the wind, the carts, and a few dead ponies and dogs scattered in and amongst the debris.

Chapter 3

The Plot Thickens

Stalliongrad Army Garrison Radio Room

71st Royal Army Battalion

Near the center of the Industrial Sector of Stalliongrad was an enormous, high-walled compound, built from concrete and steel and hadn't been properly taken care of for years, as evidenced by the chunks missing from the walls and rust on the steel surfaces. There were watchtowers around the site, and while they mounted spotlights, the machine guns that went into these towers had long since been removed by order of royal decree decades ago.

The 71st was an active Royal Army unit, composing of a little more than six-hundred stallions and mares, all of whom wore the customary blue armor and white battledress that troopers in Stalliongrad had on to blend in with the wintery terrain. And, if six-hundred soldiers weren't enough, Stalliongrad played host to ten companies of Army Reserves, regular citizens who had sworn the Oath of Service and gone through the training. They could be called upon in an instant to the garrison.

The battalion was well equipped, possessed its own radio hub, several armories and outposts scattered around the city, and a machine shop filled with advanced steam wagons, armored four-wheeled constructs that carried ponies to their destination quickly, protected by a machine gun up top. Some critics said the vehicle was a waste of resources, funneling bits and time into military equipment when said military wasn't even needed.

Even so, Colonel Eagle Eye refused to believe that his role as a protector of Equestria was any less important than before. Unfortunately, when you're tied by the hooves into inaction thanks to laws and royal decrees, frustration tends to get the best of you, and this is true for anypony.

"I'm not hearing anything," the black stallion announced as he strolled into the garrison's radio room, watching the two dozen or so radio operator

ponies dash back and forth between radio control stations, comparing frequencies and bandwidths. "I ordered radios back online twelve minutes ago! Somepony give me a dang status report!" A nearby colt turned his head from his station, looking extremely overworked and sheepish as he replied "Sorry, sir! No luck so far!"

The Colonel stepped up to the rail around the raised platform in the middle of the room, looking down at the work being done to try and restore radios across the city. But it wasn't just the lack of communications that was bothering the black stallion as he leaned down and sniffed a mug of coffee on a table, deciding to leave it.

The real problem was the swiftness and organization of the diamond dogs. They had literally swarmed through Stalliongrad's entrances, overtaking the police patrols in every district in mere minutes. Stalliongrad had a police force of over six-thousand ponies, and the fact that they were being overwhelmed from the Colonel's last report before the radios went out was a very bad sign indeed. The Stalliongrad policeponies were disciplined officers, well-used to riots and violent confrontations. Though lightly armed, they had their own fleet of several hundred steam wagons to patrol the streets with, and if these didn't help them then it meant something was very wrong here.

First of all, diamonds dogs didn't work together. At all. The different packs would eagerly tear each other apart as much as go after pony stockpiles for their gems. The numbers coming in of the police being outnumbered three to one were greatly terrifying, meaning that out in the hills there had been thousands of ruffian canines that could have attacked the city of industry at any time.

Then there were the weapons. Reports had stated automatic firearms, sure, and that was nothing new. But explosives and anti-armor weapons in the hands of diamond dogs were some fiendish creation of a nightmare, which was already giving Colonel Eagle Eye a chill down his spine. That kind of equipment, the kind that dogs could use, was only found in the hands of the Canid Hegemony, a neighboring state on the other side of the ocean from Equestria. He didn't like to brew on the implications that posed.

Suddenly, a mare down in one of the radio stations straightened up, pressing a hoof to her headset and catching the stallion's eye. He reached

up, adjusting the blue beret on his head and the winter jacket he wore, simply to rid himself of the tension he was feeling. He knew what was coming.

"Colonel, I've got a signal coming in...it's the city hall on the radio."

"We've got comms again, Lieutenant?"

"Just short range, sir. We're getting calls from units across the city, but I can't connect to Canterlot or Cloudsdale."

"Dang. Must have destroyed the transceiver," Eagle Eye muttered, reluctantly impressed. This attack was fast and precise, not how diamonds dogs operated at all. Still, it was something else to think on as he stepped forward, accepting the headset and pressing it to his ear, realigning the microphone.

"Eagle Eye."

"Colonel? Thank Celestia! Mayor Caesar wants to speak to you, sir. One moment..."

Personally, Eagle Eye wasn't sure how Caesar had gotten the position of mayor. He was a business-stallion, owned several factories in and around Stalliongrad and had made several generous donations to the police department, making them one of the best equipped forces in Equestria. But beneath it all, the stallion was a greedy coward who wished to sit up in his ivory tower and bask in its glory so long as things went to plan.

"Colonel? Colonel Eagle Eye, are you there?"

The scratchy voice (not scratchy because of the white noise that made it much harder to understand the words being spoken) was coming from the headset, and the Colonel knew it wasn't the mayor's flowing golden tongue speaking those words.

"Chief Iron Star. I was told the mayor was coming."

"He is. Just wanted to let you know that we've got the whole situation under control."

"Oh really?"

Chief Iron Star's family all had Cutie Marks for upholding the law. Iron's own brother Silver was currently the sheriff of Appleloosa out on the frontier. But while Silver had (to Eagle) earned his position and did a very good job with it, Iron wasn't all that and everyone knew it. He'd started a deadbeat cop and somehow wormed his way up the ranks to Chief over his career with impeccable speed, despite the numerous partners that had perished alongside him and the counts of police brutality he had stacked on his record. And, worst of all, ever since he became head of the Stalliongrad precinct, Iron Star had been trying to undercut the Colonel and the entire Army operation. Either by diverting funds, refusing to bow to Eagle Eye's authority, or even flat out berating the Colonel like some fresh recruit, there was always something that the Chief found at fault with the Army.

Another pony passed the Colonel a clipboard, and he slid it onto the table in front of him, checking the fresh report on it before saying "Alright, Chief. Explain a few things here, because we've only just got radios back up. My teams estimate that there are at least twenty-thousand enemy combatants in the city."

"Over exaggerated, probably by hyped up troopers who don't know what to do," said Iron Star, sounding bored already. *"My officers estimate that there are no more than two-thousand. A large pack, to be sure, but not unheard of."*

The Colonel grit his teeth, grinding them as he tried to stay focused. His cutie mark was a silver crown, dangit. He had been born to command, and command meant he had to deal with blowhards like the chief of police.

"Alright. We've also got word that they're using explosives and anti-armor weapons."

"A few are carrying crude grenades here and there, but so far no evidence of rockets or cannons."

"My scouts say the dogs are rampaging across the Industrial Sector."

"That's where they're most concentrated, but we're pushing them back."

Eagle Eye had to put down the head set at this point, taking a deep breath...before bucking onto his forelegs and kicking a chair halfway across the room, swiftly bringing an air of silence and fear to the group at this outburst of frustration.

Eagle Eye ignored them, putting the headset back on. "I assume you won't need our help, then?"

The chief's chuckle could be heard like a piece of granite on blackboard, scratchy, low and dirty. *"No, we've got it. Let the real enforcers do their job, Mister Mayor."*

"Out of my way, Iron! Colonel Eagle Eye, are you there?"

"Mayor Caesar," the Colonel replied, happy to hear a voice other than the idiot Iron Hoof's. "I assume you're alright?"

"For now. Luckily I was hosting a banquet here and Star's men locked the building up tight as soon as the dogs invaded. We're sealed up in here and I've got at least a hundred officers around me. For now, I'm safe. But we need to worry about the city, Colonel."

"I was under the impression that Chief Iron Star had the situation under control."

A pause. White noise and static filtered back over the radio before the Colonel heard *"Chief, can you see if there's a way to get to your precinct? It might do us better for you to be on location."*

"Of course, Mister Mayor."

"And don't forget, you're in command of the city's forces!...alright, he's gone. Listen Colonel. You and I know what's going on out there. I'm hearing the weapons, the screams, the fighting. I can't stand to let my ponies suffer anymore. Therefore, I'm giving you authorization to activate your forces completely."

Eagle Eye was not a fan of war. He was a career soldier, sure, but he'd fought border skirmishes with Gryphons and these give and take wars with the dogs long enough to know that war sucked. A hay of a lot. Still, despite all this, he'd been secretly awaiting a day when he'd get the chance to

show the world that the Royal Army was not only still needed, but could get the job done. So it was with some small amount of repressed glee that he glanced around and replied "Of course, Mister Mayor. I assume you also mean the Reserves, too?"

"Whatever it takes, Colonel. Armor, Reserves, air support, mages, I don't care what you do as long as you do –something.- Iron Star's living in a fantasy land where his officers are supersoldiers and it's going to get us all –killed.-"

The Colonel nodded, fighting hard to suppress a grin from coming to his muzzle. "Yes, Mister Mayor. I warn you, we're light on air, magic and armored support, but I can give you grunts."

"Give me everything, Colonel. You're the one calling the shots. No one can radio outside the city and the phone lines are all cut. I expect a status report soon."

"Yes, sir," said Eagle Eye, who ended the call and tossed the headset aside, now sporting a very small smile...that disappeared as he turned, clapped his hooves on the metal floor for silence and cleared his throat before announcing "We have just been given authorization from the mayor himself to initiate Code Orange. I want every company, every platoon, every –squad- called to the nearest garrison or armory and equipped, accounted for and ready to go! Get it done, people!"

Code Orange meant a hostile presence in the city, one that could potentially destroy it or kill most of the inhabitants. Fortunately, all the radio operators were well disciplined, or they might have not automatically reached for their sets and begun blaring out orders across the city, their faces masks of shock as everypony spread the word to every soldier listening; prepare for war.

Twilight came back to her senses slowly. Caught up in her mind, the city passed around her like a hazy dreamland, and Short's insisting nudges into her hindquarters were mild annoyances rather than offending or intrusive. However, it wasn't until the trooper had herded her inside a small, low down structure and into its warm confines that she finally became aware of her surroundings.

The room was metal all around, from the floor to the walls to the ceilings, and was stacked with all kinds of devices, radios from the look of it. Nearby, a unicorn mare in winter battledress sat at her station, headset on and scribbling something with a levitated pencil onto a notepad. She reached the end of her page and flipped it, moving on to the next one.

A doorway was on the other side of the room, halfway open to expose the interior of another chamber, through which Twilight could see shelves of some kind, a storeroom containing green, unlabelled boxes. She glanced around, realizing she was seated in a chair herself and that Spike was next to her, asleep in a little ball. As she watched, the little dragon turned over fitfully, muttering to himself as his face scrunched up. He must have been having a nightmare, and who wouldn't after witnessing such gruesome demises as the dead in the street...

Twilight glanced at the radiomare once more, who continued writing, oblivious of her guests as she did her work. Twilight couldn't hear anything from the headset clamped over the soldier's ears, but every now and then the mare would stop, perk up, press her hoof to one earpiece and then continue writing.

It didn't seem like they were being held hostage, so Twilight slipped off the chair and crept towards the door. While they may not be held against their will, she was in no way eager to alert the other room's occupants, and she kept her eye on the radiomare as she nudged the door open completely, finding herself in the storeroom she'd seen. Fortunately there was nopony there, simply stacks of crates and shelves full of supplies, reaching back further than she had originally supposed, for on the other wall were two billboards, each cluttered with papers pinned to them. She peered at the slips and found them covered with reminders, lost and found notices, meetings, flyers, all the different things needed to keep ponies going through informed of things around them. To tell the truth, it wasn't much different than the Notice Board in Ponyville, save for the times for training drills, disciplinary notices, reminders to keep your weapon maintained. The list went on.

From the room behind her, Twilight suddenly heard the hiss of an opening door sliding along the ground, the clank of the latch and the metallic cllop of horseshoes on steel. Judging by the sound, there were many ponies

stepping inside from wherever there was out there, and the low murmur of voices abruptly halted.

"Aw, shoot. Sunbeam...Sunbeam!"

"Corporal Sunbeam!" the harsh bark rang out, causing Twilight to almost launch towards the ceiling in shock. "Get that danged thing off your ears and tell us where the pony who you were –supposed- to be watching has gone!"

"Y-yes, Sergeant Gunn! Well...I appear to have lost her, sir."

"LOST her, Corporal?"

"Yes, sir! Lost her!"

Twilight grit her teeth, realizing the unicorn was about to take the fall for her disappearance. She wasn't sure why the soldier ponies didn't simply look into the storeroom, but a look back at the door from her angle suddenly confirmed why. From that room, they wouldn't see her thanks to the steel door blocking the view, but a glance would say she wasn't in there.

Deciding not to let someone else take the brunt of the sergeant's rage for her vanishing trick, Twilight slowly peered out from behind the door, back into the radio room to find that five others had come in, all sporting the same dress as Short had. Winter jackets, blue armor and helmets, goggles and this time white facemasks, presumably to keep out what the goggles missed. The largest one wore the triple chevron symbol of a sergeant on his sleeves, and had no helmet or goggles, but a simple cap pulled down between his ears. He was practically in the radiomare's face, but had caught the slight motion of Twilight coming in out of the corner of his eye, and snapped around to face her.

Twilight knew instantly that she was looking upon a true man of action, if an aggressive one. The sergeant was almost the size of Big Macintosh, a large burly horse with a deep blue coat and black mane, almost making his armor disappear against him. Muscles bulged under his battledress, telling of long hours spent in physical exercise, something that could make any stallion back down in fright (save for the crazy, the dumb or the determined). The sergeant's eyes were full of anger, but the stallion at least

managed to pull himself together enough to not yell at the mage, gritting his teeth in obvious frustration.

Once again, as seemed to be constant around this city, Short Stop stepped in again to save her (she was actually starting to become a little suspicious of his 'timely' saves) from the wrath of his commander. She didn't recognize him at first, but when he pulled down the facemask and removed the goggles Short's concerned face appeared under his helmet once more.

"Twilight, you're...awake." Not that she'd really gone to sleep, she suspected. "Sarge, take it easy on her. She's had a bit of a rough day." Fortunately, the sergeant had definitely calmed down, and grunted noncommittally before turning to the radiomare (Sunbeam, apparently) and saying "Corporal! Get back to monitoring the radio! I want the Colonel's orders on my lap before he's even finished speaking!"

Sunbeam snapped a quick salute before doing just that, standing her chair back up and reapply her headset, pencil writing rapidly. Twilight wondered if the sergeant might be just a bit harsh on the mare, but she fortunately didn't seem to be any worse off than before with imminent physical harm out of the way. She supposed this was just how it was done in the Army.

Short gestured to the stern stallion, stating "This is Sergeant Lock Gunn. He's my squad leader and has also been assigned to your protection. Sarge, this is Twilight Sparkle, student of Princess Celestia. We're supposed to watch her flank and keep her and the little scaly thing outta trouble." Finally, as if the mention of him was like a trigger, Spike awoke, having somehow slept through the commotion earlier, glancing around with bleary eyes.

"Woah," he muttered, attracting the rest of the squad's bewildered attention. "Weird dream..." The baby dragon shook his head, attempting to dispel whatever illusion was in front of him before, realizing that he truly was awake, he bolted upright, eyes wide. "Oh, man! Twilight, we gotta get out of this city!"

Short frowned at the mage's assistant before turning back to find Twilight's wary eyes on him. He raised a brow, his face one of confusion as he said "What? You're staring at me like I'm from Zebrabwe or something." True, Twilight was keeping away from the colt, making sure that a minimum distance of a few feet was between them at all times. After the events of

today (if it was indeed still the same day) she wondered what else the innocent if mischievous face hid from her. After all, Short had killed someone (even if it had been attacking them) right in front of her and never given it a second thought, even with blood on his face. Blood! Somepony else's blood! What if he was secretly a serial killer or enjoyed the horrific sensation of taking another's life? Or what if he was-

Fortunately, Twilight was saved both the awkwardness of speaking to Short and the rambling of her own mind by Sunbeam, who suddenly pivoted in her chair, yelling out "Sarge! Got a message for you from the Colonel! I'll pipe it through to you."

Gunn kept his eyes rooted on Twilight as he reached up, keying his handset and saying "Victor One here. Go ahead."

"Victor One, this is S-Command, Colonel Eye speaking. Is Miss Sparkle there with you?"

"Yessir. She just started moving around."

"So she's doing better. Good. Load her up in a wagon and get her up here. I expect her flank to be intact."

"Yessir. I'll get it done."

"Good. S-Com out."

Steam wagons operated off of the same principal as locomotives; the engine burned coal or water to build pressure and move pistons, generating power to a set of wheels. Whereas locomotives had changed very little in the last century, however, steam wagons were the new technology of the age, using more compact parts to move half as much weight the same basic speed as a train (though some engineer ponies liked to pull their own trains to show off) on four wheels. The driver sat up front while the engine was placed in the back, directly over the rear axle and cutting down on extra parts. This meant, however, that two hatches needed to be installed in the sides in order to accommodate the passengers in the middle. A steam wagon could hold eight fully-equipped ponies, and Victor squad had grabbed all their gear, consisting of gun yokes mounting

automatic rifles as well as saddlebags holding enough supplies to make even Applejack think twice about picking one up.

Their driver was a colt named Black Blitz, a master behind the wheel and obvious speed freak. Every time one of the wagons four wheels ran through a dip or into a bump in the road, a cheer could be heard from up front before his co-driver Penny shushed him. Penny was a mare of few words, someone who preferred to spend time used talking to carry out her intent. Unfortunately, paired with the braggart Blitz (who reminded Twilight somewhat of Rainbow Dash, making her feel homesick already) the two constantly argued up front, which could be heard over the sound of the engine.

Short Stop was strapped in next to Twilight, checking over his rifle for what seemed the hundredth time. She didn't understand just why he needed to see the same thing over and over, checking to see if anything had changed when there wasn't the most remote possibility that it had. She still hadn't spoken to him since they left the outpost, and she knew he was becoming both annoyed and concerned for her well-being. While that was indeed kind of him, the fact still remained that she didn't know if she could trust the stallion. Another part of her brain reasoned that she was overreacting quite a bit. Yes, he had killed a living creature without the slightest sign of remorse or regret, but he'd done it to protect her and Spike. As for keeping secrets, it wasn't as if he'd told her that much about himself already. No, she was simply in shock from the events she'd witnessed earlier, that's all.

She turned to Spike, on her other side, who was too small for the restraints and instead found himself parked in an ammunition pouch over the seat's headrest, sulking and not saying a word. It was impossible to tell if he was simply grouchy or still genuinely affected, but she knew that his wish to leave the city was still strong, as was hers.

Abruptly, Sergeant Gunn turned to the group from upfront, calling out "Listen up, ponies! We just got a report from Buckboard One up ahead. There's some heavy fighting a few streets over, so we're detouring to find a safer route!" Their steam wagon was part of a three-machine convoy, traveling down the streets of Stalliongrad in their attempt to ferry both her and Spike to the Royal Army garrison in the center of the district, where she'd be safe, according to the soldiers. From what little she'd heard, the police were being slaughtered and the Army deployed barely a half-hour

ago to assist in evacuating all the residents to a safer area. Unfortunately, this meant that the Army could only cover a small part of the city, leaving the police to do the majority of the fighting.

For now, though, the Army was concentrating on keeping the dogs occupied while the resident ponies got to a place of safety, namely the garrison, city hall, any of the numerous hospitals (there were so many refugees that even the National Medical Institute and Experimental Theater were made into evacuation shelters). The dogs were free to rampage around the other parts of the city without fear from anything but a few bothersome strikes from whatever Pegasi in the Army Sky Corps could be spared to try and keep them occupied.

So far, it wasn't working so well.

Twilight felt the wagon lurch as it hit a hard corner, peeling around what was most likely a turn into an intersection, while Blitz's excited cheers could be heard as he turned the multi-ton machine, nearly lifting into onto two wheels. "Danged foal!" Gunn snarled, pounding on the separating hatch with his hoof. "Slow down, you idiot! You're going to crash!"

Unfortunately, Blitz's only reply was "Woah! What the hay!" followed by an explosion outside that, to Twilight, seemed to be of epic proportions.

Abruptly, the wagon slammed into reverse, it's wheels skidding on the icy stones to gain purchase before it almost literally flew back, and with a bone-shaking impact slammed into the third wagon behind it, pushing both machines back a ways before something else hit them, and with a blow that felt like a kick to the flank, tipped the wagon over onto its side.

Short came to a minute or so later to find his world had been inverted. Still trapped inside the metal casket of the steam wagon, he realized he was hanging by his safety harness, meaning the hatch before him was blocked.

"Settle down, troopers!" yelled Gunn as he struggled his way up to the other side. "Sound off!"

"Blitz and Penny are dead!" yelled Azure from the front hatch, glancing back over her shoulder. The turquoise draft horse had two short-barreled recoilless rifles on her gun yoke and back rig, linked by belt to the enormous pack she had strapped to her back. The simple fact she could

move around as nimbly as she did for her size and the strain on her was unbelievable, especially here in the steam wagon, being the largest of the squad.

"Hatch is jammed!" yelled Maple as he slammed into the 'ceiling' repeatedly, trying to force it open without breaking either his bones or his gun.

"Precious cargo is okay!" Short said, checking on Twilight and Spike. Aside from a few bruises and being dazed, they were fine. Above him, Gunn finally managed to make his way up to be well balanced, and a curse emanated from the sergeant.

"Dangit! Joker and Lorraine are KIA! We're pulling this job half-staffed!"

"That's okay, Sarge!" Maple said, still struggling against the hatch, a red stain appearing in his torn shoulder beneath his brown coat. "Victor Squad is up for anything!"

"Oh, move aside you buckin' idiot!" snarled Azure, pushing the smaller colt aside and hitting the hatch once with a carefully aimed hoof. The lock finally snapped, and the hatch flew open...off its hinges. Still, it did let in the fresh, snowy air, allowing the ponies to breath without difficulty and finally escape the confines of their wrecked transport.

However, it also let the sounds of battle in. The rattle of automatic weapons, the deep *thunkthunkthunk* drumroll of high-caliber machine guns and the howl of bloodthirsty diamond dogs.

Azure was the first one out, falling to the snow and seeking shelter immediately behind the wreck of their steam wagon, wincing as bullets ricocheted off the metal and stone around her. "There's a lot of them, Sarge! Up in the buildings and down on the street!" Gunn was down next, pulling at his rifle's ammo belt before retorting "I can see that, Private! Maple! Get your flank down here! Short, defend those VIPs at all cost!"

"On it, Sarge!" Short replied over the handset, still inside the wagon as he leaned down, trying to look into Twilight's eyes. "Hold still...are you okay? Do you have a concussion?" He peered down as the unicorn mare coughed, trying to turn in her safety harness. "Hold still, I just need to-" Abruptly, his helmeted head was struck by a firm blow, hardly hurting him

through the cloth-covered steel but definitely hard enough to make a loud *CLANG!* resonate through the wagon. "I'll take that as a 'yes, I'm fine'," he muttered, shaking his skull to make the fluttering dragons around his eyes go away.

"Oh! Short, are you okay?" Twilight said, reaching out to try and see if the colt was hurt despite the harness in her way. "I didn't mean to do that, I just-can you get me out of this thing?"

"At least you're talking again," Short muttered, leaning up and pulling the release switch, letting the unicorn fall unceremoniously to the metal below. Fortunately, she managed to clumsily land on her feet, shaking her head again. "You okay?" Short asked again, moving to tug Spike out of the ammo pouch.

"Yeah, I think so..." Twilight muttered, looking around and wincing as an explosion went off outside. "What's going on?"

"We ran into an ambush. I think the first wagon's gone!" Short clambered up to the open hatch, peering outside before ducking his head down, bullets flying past and sparking off the metal. "The dogs have a bazooka up ahead, a few stories up. Buckboard One is giving them all kinds of trouble, but..." He glanced up again, and when he didn't get shot at he rose a little higher. "Yeah, the dogs are still dug in. Looks like a roadblock across the street. We're not going anywhere until we get rid of them all."

Ahead, Azure fired another two shells, adjusted her aim through the sights and fired again. She wasn't meant to participate in long-term engagements, she only had a hundred rounds between her guns, meaning she could fire another forty-two...forty-one times. Beside her, at the rough barricade the squad had formed out of an abandoned cart and a stack of crates, Maple and Gunn poured on the fire with their rifles, letting out burst after burst at the dogs.

"This is no good!" Maple yelled as he squeezed the bit-trigger again, his eye glued to the sight on the side of the barrel. "They're too far away, I'm not hitting anything!"

"Speak for yourself!" replied Gunn as he ducked back into cover. "I've taken down at least six!"

Short slid up next to them, pausing before firing over the crates wildly, ducking back down once more as a bullet splintered off his chunk of cover.

"Private Stop, what is the status of the VIPs?"

"They're okay, sir! A little banged up, but they're safe in the wagon!"

Abruptly, Buckboard Three pushed around the wreckage of number Two, rolling forward on its four wheels while the pony up top fired the heavier machine gun from his protected shell. Behind the wagon, the eight trooper ponies from inside were advancing, keeping close to the machine to use as cover.

"Good!" yelled Gunn, firing again before addressing the squad. "We're moving to the wagon! Use it as cover and advance on the enemy position! These dogs want a piece of us? Let's show them that the Army's still got some fight left!"

"HOO-AH!" the three soldiers yelled, slamming their hooves together before making the dash for the protection of the wagon.

Chapter 4

Brewing Storm

High Above the Industrial Sector

Lieutenant Leroy Wingkins AKA "Cobra Six"

71st Royal Army Battalion ASC

Current Mission: Engage enemy forces

"Eyes sharp, Six. I'm seeing a knot of activity below us. Ready on your go."

Compared to most Pegasi, Leroy was modestly average. The only reason he'd signed up for the young flier competition was because of the tricks he'd learned at the Cloudsdale Military Academy. He hadn't won, of course, but he'd felt like he'd brought his all, and that was all that mattered. It had gotten him noticed, at least, and he'd earned himself a track onto the Bomber Program, intended to instruct Pegasus ponies in how to carry large amounts of ordnance and avoid enemy fliers and ground fire. He wasn't the strongest, the smartest or the bravest. But he was, in his humble opinion, the luckiest, and that helped out in spades.

Through his flight goggles, he saw the struggle in the Industrial Sector unfolding as if a storybook before his eyes. The attack had only been going on for a little more than an hour and a half, but already the dogs had made great gains. Already more than halfway through the factories and refineries, the dogs suddenly found themselves up against firmer resistance than police with repeater yokes. The Army had drawn a line across the Sector, desperate to protect it and City Center, where the city hall, police precinct and several other political standings were contained. Colonel Eagle Eye had given the order to begin bringing in the Reserves to bolster their forces, and that unfortunately meant Wingkins. He had signed up with the Army because he knew the kingdom paid civil servants well, and he would be getting paid to do what he loved; flying. Never had he expected he'd be called to combat, however. War with the Hippogryph Republic and Canid Hegemony just seemed like such a remote impossibility, and the police and

active Army had always been there to take care of any other problems before.

Now, here he was, flying with a pair of old hundred-pound napalm bombs attached to his load-bearing harness over the city and looking for a good target. He could probably just let go now and dash back to the airfield and still hit the dogs below, all without risking himself, but that wasn't how you were trained in the Army, even the Reserves. Every nerve cluster in his pony brain urged him to acquire a target first.

His wing mate, Sam Swift, came into formation on his wing, waiting for Leroy's signal to begin their bombing run. Like Wingkins, Swift carried bombs under his wings, and the two kept in contact over the radio, making sure to coordinate their attack run. Having met at the Academy, Swift and Wingkins were fast friends, and had gotten assigned to the same group thanks to their near identical aptitude scores. They'd been flying for the Reserves together ever since.

With a deep breath from the thin air, Wingkins yelled out "LET'S DO THIS!" drew his wings in and peeled for a tight dive, swooping down to a few hundred feet. Leroy leveled out, finding himself only a few dozen meters above the streets, zipping over the heads of an entire column of diamond dogs, all dressed and armed in vastly differing variations. Quickly, he reached out, clamping his teeth around the bit-trigger and squeezing, letting first one bomb then the second go, gaining altitude from the loss of such enormous amounts of weight. Behind him, the twin explosions rocked the streets, one bomb even slamming into the ground floor of a shop, sending a dozen looter dogs flying in bits and pieces. A sharp ascension quickly pulled Leroy out of danger from return fire, feeling bullets snap and crack past him as he spun, flipped and barrel-rolled his way back up to safety.

"ALRIGHT!" he cheered, punching the air with a hoof as he soared along, glancing back to inspect his hoofiwork. Four splotches of fire burned down the street, with smaller, running torches dashing away from the flames. Survivors of the incendiary bombs, set aflame by the explosions.

It was then that Leroy realized his wing mate was gone from the skies. He was neither behind Wingkins nor on his wing. The brown Pegasus slowed his speed, looking around frantically for any sign of the green stallion.

"Swift? Swift? Sam!" He reached for his handset, keying it off the frequency his squad used for themselves and sending out a general call. "Cobra Five, come in! Cobra Five, respond! Sam! SAM!"

But there was no response on the radio. Nothing but white noise. And below Wingkins, the street he and Swift had just dropped four hundred pounds of ordnance onto burned with a fire as if cast by a demonic presence.

Twilight was not one to put herself in danger willingly (unless it meant helping her friends, of course) and becoming 'bullet bait' as Sergeant Gunn had stated seemed like the very epitome of self-endangerment. She knew enough about ballistics to realize that bullets bounced and they were never completely predictable. Especially when said bullets were being fired on full-automatic haphazardly, like both the ponies and dogs were doing.

Not being adept in the art of war, Twilight could only pause and wonder at what plan the trooper ponies were forming, abandoning their firing positions to hide behind the last working wagon. The cover was certainly desirable, but couldn't whatever had knocked out the last two wagons simply destroy this one?

Just as the thought entered the unicorn's mind, a plume of rocket exhaust suddenly streamed out into the air as the dogs fired their bazooka once again, the warhead detonating only a few meters off from the wagon she and Spike were hiding in, shoving it right into the building next to it, tipping over and slamming onto its back with an almighty *—CRASH—*, depositing the last two living occupants of the armored machine out into the street and the line of fire.

Her ears were ringing, and as she lifted her head she felt an immense pressure, like someone had tied a block of lead to her ear. Her vision was fuzzy, and the whole world seemed to simply swim by in slow, watery motion. Up ahead, the ponies behind the wagon finally split up their team, surging around it with every detail revealed to Twilight's eyes. Snow, dirt and sparks flew up from metal shod hooves, accompanied by bullets striking the stones. One pony took a round in the chest and fell, his breath coming in gasps as the round sank into his combat armor, knocking the air out of his lungs. Over to the left, another soldier wasn't quite so lucky, and

a round tore through his head, causing his body to spin in an impressive if gruesome pirouette, more bullets tearing away chunks of flesh in great red ribbons...

Two ponies from Baker squad went down as the remnants of the platoon dashed for cover, finding behind pieces of debris, smaller barricades or, like the survivors from Buckboard two, in explosive craters, great black scars carved into the streets to expose the glistening, dark earth below, like actual wounds in the city's skin. "Incoming!" A grenade detonated nearby, showering the platoon in debris as they took up positions, sergeants ordering suppressive fire through the clamor and the commotion.

"Keep up that fire!"

"What are you, an idiot? Keep your danged sights on the enemy!"

"Look out, on the left!"

"Sniper, up high!"

"I can't see 'em, can't see 'em!"

"Shells out!"

Short almost lost all distinction of what he was hearing as the sounds of battle raged on, but he ignored the confusion, rising from behind the wrecked cart he'd taken shelter behind to pour out a long burst, watching with satisfaction as a bulldog reeled around, struggled back to its feet and toppled under his hail of fire. The buckers took some effort to put down, but all it took was more bullets in the end.

Overhead, the bazooka roared again, striking Buckboard Two dead on, detonating against its glacis plate and, fortunately, causing no serious damage. Thanks to that, the machine gun up top continued rattling, pounding the structure ahead with high-caliber bullets as the pony swung it back and forth, raking the walls with bullet holes.

"Victor squad! Grenades, up and over!" yelled Sergeant Gunn, and all four instantly reached down, grasping the oversized handles of the grenades

strapped to their vests, their teeth digging into the rubber. Short reached up with his hoof, holding the explosives as he twisted his neck, unlatching the handle.

"TOSS 'EM!" Gunn ordered, and the four soldier ponies did exactly that, four grenades flying up and over the redoubt with a single jerk of the head, an artform mastered in training drills. Three of them made it up and over the lip of the window sill, detonating seconds later inside the room, while the last fell to the ground, exploding harmlessly.

"CHARGE!" yelled the squad commander of Baker squad, a stout mare who galloped over the cover, causing the rest of her soldiers to follow, all of them firing as they advanced on the dog's ground-level fortifications.

"Keep the pressure on!" yelled Gunn, his rifle hammering away. Short did the same, already feeling the yoke causing a bruise on his shoulder, despite it's recoil absorbing frame. Already, he'd fired more rounds in the last two hours than he'd ever fired in any of his training drills, and a quick glance at the mud below would reveal hundreds of brass shell casings from over thirty rifles, glistening in the midday light.

Figures. Princess Celestia can control the danged sun, but when her kingdom comes under attack she's nowhere to be found. Some omnipotent goddess...

"Up and over, Victor! We're advancing!" Gunn said, leaping to the next piece of cover, his shoes clattering against the street. Azure was next, her big guns booming as she paused for only a brief instant to acquire her target. Maple after her, firing wildly like the hyper-active rookie he was (being even greener than Short, Maple was still not imbued with the sense of discipline that years of training gave you).

Before Short could move forward, however, something made him look back, back down the street towards the wrecked wagon that he had hoped would protect Twilight and Spike. It didn't look to be doing a very good job, since the unicorn and dragon were both lying in the street, vulnerable and unprotected in their current position. His orders were to protect Twilight 'at all cost' but it still went against the grain for him to be throwing his squad to the dogs. Literally, in this case.

He only hesitated a second before galloping at breakneck speed back towards her.

Bombs going off. Bullets flying everywhere. Rockets exploding. Ponies dying...

Stop, she told herself, tearing her eyes away from the gun battle to stare at the ground, taking deep, calming breaths. What would Rainbow Dash do? She'd square herself away, set her jaw and go find a gun to get into that fight-

No! Don't focus on what Dash would or wouldn't do! Focus on what Twilight Sparkle would do!

Calm down, calm down...magic is the key. Magic is your special talent, it's what gets you through everything! Think! Magic is the key to everything, it's the sixth of the Elements of Harmony, and it's what binds all the rest together...

"Come to think of it, that never actually sounded right when I said it," she muttered, rubbing at her chin. "Magic being the sixth Element? Magic doesn't tie them all together. Perhaps I should have gone with my other theory about-

"Twilight, is now –really- the time?" Spike yelled, currently attempting to push the unicorn to safety. "We shouldn't be discussing theories and intellectual problems when there's a WAR going on!"

"War?" Twilight frowned, looking down at the baby dragon with an expression akin to a combination of both confusion and skepticism, before another bazooka round smashed into a building further down the street, causing her head to swivel, first to look at the detonation, then towards its source, reminded once more. "That's right!"

"Man! Do you get wrapped up in things!" Spike declared huffily, having given up on moving Twilight from her position. Fortunately, Short (with another one of his perfectly timed saves) slid in and yelled "Get your dang head down!" Out of reflex, Twilight did so, just as another bullet snapped past her ear.

"You guys are certainly busy today!"

"Good to at least have you talking! You were a total braincase earlier-"

"You KILLED something right in front of me! I saw his blood on your muzzle, for Princess' sakes!"

Spike glanced away from the furious mare and the bewildered colt, his head snapping around at a new menace; from an alleyway nearby, another group of dogs emerged, eager to get into the fighting that already had delayed the platoon so far. "Uh oh! Trouble incoming!"

"I got this!" Short yelled, his reflexes kicking in as he automatically stepped in front of Twilight, raising his rifle and downing the first opponent with a short burst. To his astonishment, however, a purple barrier was erected between him and the enemies, into which the return fire smacked and bounced off harmlessly. A brick from the wall of a nearby factory suddenly slid out of its building before speeding into the forehead of another dog with an audible –*SMACK!*-, throwing the canine into the wall behind him. Short glanced to his right to find Twilight beside him, her horn ablaze and her face a mask of grim determination.

"Thought you didn't know any battle magic?" he said, turning back and firing again as the barrier shifted, letting him get a clear field of fire.

"I never said 'no' did I? But you're right. I don't know any spells that are lethal in and of themselves, but I know a lot of telekinesis!"

Short turned, bewildered. "Telewhat?"

Behind him, a dog leapt forward, rifle raised like a club as he rushed towards the distracted soldier, howling to the high heavens before a cart flew up from the street and over Short's head, sending the dog flying away.

"That! I can throw things!" she snapped, casting a wagon wheel to boomerang around and hit the same target twice in different locations, sending the dog to the pavement. "I'm not going to kill. You lot seem to have that under control."

"You're pretty hostile right now, y'know that?" Short quipped, sidestepping around Spike as the little dragon took shelter behind the steam wagon, equal parts rearing to dive in and ready to stay put.

"I'm not a package or some frail filly!" Twilight snarled, her levitating crowbar slamming into the back of another dog's head. "I know how to take care of myself! And what is it with you, shanghai-ing a mare out to the middle of nowhere without speaking to her about it!"

"Time was of the essence! I had my orders!" Short bit back, getting annoyed as he tugged at the slide for his rifle, attempting to clear a jam as another barrier blocked a barrage of rounds from the opposite side now, the other firefight. "And we were in the middle of a hotzone!" Finally, his hoof shoved the action back, ejecting a malformed casing in time for him to spray down a charging Labrador. "We still are!"

"Spike! Take a message!"

"What, now?"

"YES!"

"With what?"

"I don't know, find something to write on!" Twilight shrieked as a clawed swipe came too close, and she retaliated with a direct kick before using a magic bolt to knock her opponent off his feet.

"Okay!" yelled Spike as he reemerged from the ruined steam wagon, clutching a dispatch pad and a battered old pen. "I'm ready!"

"Dear Princess Celestia, Stalliongrad is under attack, send help! Your Student, Twilight Sparkle!" the bookworm quickly dictated, ramming another dog in the gut. Fortunately, her horn didn't penetrate his stomach, but the blastwave that came off the tip sent the mutt flying backwards, crashing through a factory wall. Spike, who had almost finished by this point, paused as he chewed the end of the pen. "Y'know, Twilight, I think this is the shortest note you've ever written."

"Just send it," she said exasperatedly, panting as she glanced around. No more opponents rose to face them, and the gunfire over at the street barricade halted only a second later as a last, pained howl rang out.

"Well," muttered Short, lowering his rifle as he inspected Twilight's handiwork for himself, the evidence being several unconscious dogs on the ground with cuts, bruises and other such injuries all over their persons. "Not bad, for your first engagement."

Twilight, a bit taken aback, glanced over at the trooper.

"Thanks...it's not yours? But there's been no war-"

"No, but I've fought these guys quite a few times," Short said, a small smile coming to his face. Twilight almost recoiled in disgust at the thought that this stallion might enjoy the abhorrence of bloodshed, but managed to control herself just in time. "But I can honestly say I've never had to guard VIPs before." At this, the colt looked over at the unicorn, and even though his eyes were concealed behind his goggles, she allowed herself to imagine he was watching her with an almost admiring glance. "And I ain't never seen anythin' like that."

She could have just been imagining things, but Short's voice seemed to lose its controlled, clipped and even tone for just a second, a drawl hanging onto his words for the briefest of moments, so short she might have simply wished it to be there instead. To cover up for her confusion, she cleared her throat, turning and addressing her assistant.

"Spike. Did you send the message?"

A burst of green dragonfire was her answer, and Spike turned back, licking his lips as he replied "Done and done. Best part about today, at least sending scrolls is normal."

The crunching of snow under iron-shod hooves came to everypony's ears, and they all turned to find Sergeant Gunn approaching, his own rifle hanging from its yoke, the bit trigger loose. The pony himself stopped a few meters away, looking the three over one at a time, not saying anything. Surprisingly, Short didn't snap to attention at his superior's appearance, instead only turning to keep the sergeant in his peripheral.

"Alrighty, then," said Gunn, startling the unicorn out of her observations once again. "You look okay, and you aren't huddling in the corner like some lost foal. Can I assume you're good to travel, Miss Sparkle?"

Twilight was surprised as the Sergeant's polite tone and deference, before remembering that, as the person they were guarding and Princess Celestia's representative here, she could possibly be viewed upon as the commander here. A notion she needed to dispel quickly, she realized.

"I'm fine, Sergeant. Thank you. It's good that you've got the situation under control, but please, I'm nopony important. Just Twilight. Is there still transport working?"

"Yes, ma'am," the large pony replied, seeming to ignore her attempts to slide into the background, turning to look over at the steamwagon known as Buckboard Two. It was then that Twilight got a good look at the sergeant's Cutie Mark, obscured up until this point. A silver shield with a horseshoe emblazoned upon it lay over two crossed swords, a symbol of both defense and martial prowess, something Twilight hadn't seen on anypony anywhere. She wondered just how long Gunn had been a blank flank before he discovered his special talent as a soldier.

"We've just gotten word of increased security," Gunn continued, turning back with a frown on his face. "A squad from Section Five is down the street, at Steed Square. Apparently, the dogs are making a concentrated push towards City Center and the garrison, and the Square leads to both of them."

Behind her, Short groaned, clapping a hoof to his helmet. "Section Five? Just our luck..."

"Section Five?" Twilight questioned, a frown on her brows once more. "I...I don't quite follow."

"Section Five," Gunn informed her "Is the battalion's battle mage detachment. Nothing but unicorns, miss, and they're waiting for you."

Chapter 5

To Pieces

Canterlot

Royal Palace of the Sun and the Moon (recently rechristened)

Royal Library

"Luna?"

Her eyes danced over the rows and rows of tomes before her, lined up on their shelves as far as the eye could see. The Royal palace's library was the largest of its kind in Equestria (and almost the world, but Hippogrifyph had an entire structure devoted to the Matriarch's studies that easily trumped this one room) and the high windows, while normally with their curtains open, were covered, the heavy fabric keeping the sunlight out.

"Luna?" Celestia called once more after receiving no reply. Ever since separating from Nightmare Moon, the younger of the two alicorns had spent all of her time either in here or out in various other places for short visits, on some kind of business that Celestia didn't ask about. So long as Luna wasn't plotting her downfall, Celestia was happy to let her little sister do whatever she wanted.

"In here, Sister!" came the distant echo of the blue alicorn's voice, and Celestia smiled, turning her head to follow the sound as she walked past the shelves. It was rather odd, she thought as her eyes traced up and down the volumes, that she didn't recognize half of these tomes, yet she had spent the past thousand and a half years accumulating them. Still, despite the fact that these were books she studied constantly, the titles were beginning to elude her as she delved into the archaic section, where the bindings had no letters to divine their purpose. She hadn't touched this area in decades, at least. Maybe even a few centuries.

She finally found Luna in the very back of the chamber, surrounded by several stacks of tomes, novels and, surprisingly, modern magazines. The

clash in literature astonished her for a second, before she finally understood what was going on.

"Luna, you've been back almost a year. Surely you understand how the modern world works by now?"

Luna glanced up, looking at her sister over her workdesk, but to her credit did not look bashful or embarrassed. Instead, she simply smiled from behind her reading glasses before looking back down at the copy of *Mares Monthly* in front of her. "Of course, Sister. I'm simply making a scientific comparison between today and before I left. Things have definitely changed, and I want to find out how much."

Celestia chuckled, unsurprised by her sister's innate curiosities. "Luna, dear Sister. Is there anything you –don't- want to study?"

Before the darker alicorn could reply, however, there was a brief flash of light that would have blinded Celestia if she were not the Princess of the sun, and a scroll materialized in front of her before dropping to the ground. Only one dragon in Ponyville had that kind of magical connection or access, and she knew it to be from Twilight Sparkle. Was she already finished with her assignment? But according to the timetable, she had only just arrived a few hours ago. The head of the Worker's League was a stubborn old stallion, and he would fight tooth and hoof for what he considered to be right. Celestia had only been through six of the meetings that had kept her from the visit herself, and she had twenty or thirty more to look forward to.

Curious now, she levitated the scroll, noticing instantly that it wasn't made of parchment like all the other notes Spike had sent her by dragonfire (even the ones sent by accidental hiccups) which was technically against the rules. Even now, she could see the edges of the paper were singed, and she tilted her head to the side as she realized it was a sheet of lined paper from a military notebook. That was indeed most odd. It wasn't even sealed, just tied with a piece of string.

Now a bit worried, she unrolled the sheet to read the message aloud. "'Dear Princess Celestia, Stalliongrad is under attack, send help! Your Student, Twilight Sparkle.' What in Equestria-?"

Celestia stared at the note, her jaw hanging as she tried to comprehend just what she was reading. She had just been in diplomatic discussions with both Hippogryph and Canida, and the Matriarchy had gotten along well enough. The Hegemony was a bit stiff, yes, but their discussions of trade and border disputes had been progressing for months now. That one of the Kingdom's cities, one of –HER- cities was being attacked was most definitely cause for alarm and astonishment.

Luna, however, was the first to react. With her horn glowing, she closed her eyes, saying "General Archer. Your presence is required in the Audience Chamber in five minutes. Bring your staff with you." Her eyes opened as the spell ended, and she looked down at the stacks of books scornfully. "I'll need to review modern military protocols and check the register. Perhaps we can send in air assets from Cloudsdale first. But that would require the Wonderbolts to be reactivated, and they're in Fillydelphia, too far away. Maybe from here, then?"

Luna glanced over at Celestia, who was still staring into space. Not many people could tell with a white-skinned horse, but Luna could see instantly that her sister had paled. And for good reason. Equestria's last war was centuries ago, and Celestia had placed command into the hooves of her Marshals, positions that hadn't been filled since the end of that conflict. Luna, however, came from a time right after a horrific and terrifying conflict with the griffons, the birth of Equestria itself.

"Sister. Celestia. You need to get a hold of yourself."

When talking didn't work, Luna sighed, knowing she would have to get drastic. With a short swing, her hoof connected with Celestia's jaw, knocking the goddess' tiara off.

"Snap out of it! We're under attack!" Abruptly, in a complete character change, Luna was suddenly up next to her sister, worriedly checking the older one's jaw. "Oh! I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"N-no. It's fine, Luna," Celestia said, still partially shocked as she picked up her tiara physically before repositioning it on her head shakily. "You're right. I need to cancel my appointments and...and call for a diplomatic session immediately."

"That's right," Luna said encouragingly, giving her sister a nudge. "And?"

"And...and I need to mobilize the Army. Send the Sky Corps first...oh, Luna. I'm no good at this!"

"I know," the younger alicorn said comfortingly, shushing her panicking sister. "It's alright, Sister. Let me take care of this, alright? You need to find out what's going on. Reply to Twilight's message, get more information. If she's there and still alive, she'll most likely have first-hand knowledge of our enemy."

Celestia nodded, summoning a scroll and quill to her quickly, thinking of a reply. It wasn't often that Celestia was frazzled or worried, and this new side of her scared both her and Luna, who always looked up to her sister as a beacon of solidity and strength. But war was not something Celestia took to well, even a thousand years ago. She was more of the public ruler, caring and wise and more than willing to visit someone to solve their problems. Luna, however, was the more political of the two, and had even commanded the armies of Equestria in days of antiquity. This was her forte, right alongside working the red-taped underbelly of a nation.

Luna was going to get them through this. With Celestia's help, of course.

"Short?"

The desk in front of him was piled high with his most precious possessions, items he had collected all throughout his colthood. The signed baseball from Sammy Saddlesa, the large poster of Babe Rhubarb, even a photograph of Roy Horsaday at the plate. Beside these pictures were the tools he'd used to implement his love. A bat with numerous nicks in it, the signs of balls skimmed and not fully hit, a tattered glove so used up that the laces looked about to fall apart any second now. A helmet with a large crack in it from when he had been beaned him in the head, hard.

He reached out to touch the treasures with a hoof...before the cast bumped into the desk and reminded him why his entire life had been wasted, ruined by every batter's worst nightmare: a colt with a fastball and no idea where the plate was. He hung his head in defeat, eyes tracing over the cheerful signatures and drawings over the plaster that did nothing to alleviate his pain.

"Short?"

His father was at the door again, trying to tell his son everything would be alright but just as crushed as he was...for the wrong reasons. And of course he would be, when a long, steady chain was abruptly broken by one single ball.

"Short...it'll be okay. Not everyone played professionally."

"Yeah?" the colt snorted, not even turning. "Name one other pony in the Stop family who didn't."

His father was silent, just as Short knew he would be. He glared out the window ahead of him, staring at the clear sky, nary a cloud to be seen thanks to the local Weather Team. At least Pegasi could live their dreams...

"Short, that's not what's important. You're going to heal up, which means you've got unlimited possibilities ahead of you. Your Cutie Mark is just your special talent, it's not your only one. Short? Short, are you listening to me? Short? Short..."

"Short...Short?"

"PRIVATE STOP, ATTEN-HUT!"

His eyes flew open, his legs snapping straight as he reflexively leapt off the chair, one hood flying to his helmeted head as he yelled "SIR, YESSIR!" He blinked, finally reasserting control of his motor functions, to find both Sergeant Gunn (nonplussed and frowning as always) and Twilight (looking a little startled, probably by the non-com's yell).

"Break's over Stop," Gunn said simply, turning and trotting away towards the last working steam wagon the platoon had, already surrounded by troopers lashing ammunition and other gear down.

Short snorted, already wishing he'd go back to his nap, before turning to Twilight. The unicorn had been suited up in a spare vest and helmet during the ten minutes all the troopers had to prepare before they moved out again, and somepony had obviously convinced her to wear the blue colored

armor. Short raised an eyebrow. "Very fetching," he said, and Twilight blushed a little, her look of worry becoming one of annoyance.

"Better than getting my head blown off, that's for sure," she muttered, reaching down and tugging at the collar with her teeth. "This thing's too tight..."

"Then loosen it," Short suggested, reaching forward to clamp the strap between his teeth. In the next second, however, he found himself on the ground, a purple leg across his throat and the iron-hard face of the prodigy mage above him.

"Don't do that. Ever." Her iron edge suddenly softened, however, as she seemed to double-think what she was doing, backing away slowly from Short, who was staring up at her, wide-eyed. "Uh...sorry. Bad memories of belts getting pulled too tight."

"It's fine," Short replied, rolling back onto his hooves and standing, instantly forgetting the show of strength Twilight had just performed, instead rubbing at his eyes briefly before turning back, glancing over at the steam wagon. With their break finished, they'd be leaving any minute now to head towards Steed Square, and hopefully deliver Twilight to the battlemages in one piece.

"Any word from Celestia?" he asked. Twilight shook her head, readjusting her helmet once more. It was a standard Earth pony model, not made for unicorns, and as such it sat too far back to be fastened both securely and comfortably. "None," the mage replied, looking worried. "It's been a few minutes. She usually gets right back to me."

"She's just been told her kingdom is under attack," Short reminded her. "That's a bit of a bombshell right there."

"I guess."

The two returned to the steam wagon, both of them climbing inside to join Spike, already inside and strapped to a seat. Though the body armor was the wrong shape for him, he still wore an oversized helmet, clutching the restraint bar with an expression of both confidence and worry. Upon seeing his mentor enter the vehicle, he glanced around before saying "Nothing yet. Sorry, Twilight."

She sighed, nodding as she also strapped herself down. "Then we just continue to wait, I guess. Steed Square isn't that far away. We need to stay focused."

As if to underline the unicorn's words, an immense explosion went off in the distance. The winds were too heavy for them to hear the entire battle, but the Square was close enough that they already knew things were going pear-shaped.

Twilight chuckled to herself, and Short leaned forward, his goggles in his hooves, in the process of cleaning them. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Yesterday I was trying to get everything in Ponyville organized so it would function for me when I got back. Now, I don't even know if I'll ever leave alive."

"Hey, you can't think like that. Pessimism means the enemy has already won," Short said, replacing his goggles before yawning, failing to cover it up from Twilight's notice.

"Tired?"

"Yeah. Didn't get much sleep last night. All this fighting isn't helping."

Twilight glanced at the clock mounted inside the wagon, frowning beneath her helmet. "This attack's only been going on for a few hours or so. How can it be getting so bad?"

Short checked his own armor's straps once more, even though he'd done so twice now. Sergeant Gunn and Sergeant Lilac, the last two commanders in the platoon alive, had agreed that all wounded and VIPs get priority inside the steam wagon. Even now, the groans of the six or seven ponies who had lived through their wounds was beginning to grate on his ears, and he needed a distraction.

"Last radio report we got at the outpost before we left said the enemy outnumbered the police three or four to one. That's twenty-thousand enemies, right there. With the reserves and police on our side, we're maybe eight-thousand." He looked Twilight straight in the eye. "There's no way we can protect everywhere. But that seems to be what Colonel Eye is trying to do."

Twilight bit her lip at that comment. "I thought you said pessimism was admitting the enemy has won?"

Short laughed, reciting the saying that kept all soldiers from being hypocrites to their own comments. "A pessimist is what an optimist calls a realist. Trust me, Twilight. In the Army, there's always a loophole somewhere. Eye's probably trying to cover evacuating civilians before he pulls back to the City Center."

Twilight looked on, incredulously. "You can't be serious. You mean he's not going to counter-attack?"

"Counter-attack with what?" Short snapped, his fatigue getting the best of him. "I just bucking told you, we're outnumbered and cut off! The best thing we can do is curl up and hope they don't break through our shell! If you can't get that through your skull, we should drop you off in the nearest safe house so we can move on without your inept flank!"

Silence reigned in the wagon for several long seconds, and Short blinked, realizing just what he'd said in his rant, turning to Twilight to give an apology. However, the look of hurt and anger on her face was enough to make him cringe, and he silently turned back. No one spoke, not daring to press the issue and make things worse. Instead, they listened to the clunks and murmurs of the ponies outside, readying the wagon to move into the hottest battle in the city.

Suddenly, Spike grimaced, his face contorting mere seconds before a loud belch tore from his lips, sending green flames splashing against the wagon's ceiling, leaving a painful looking scorch mark-and a scroll. Spike immediately snatched it up, turning and holding it to Twilight, who took it gratefully, the awkward silence forgotten.

"Twilight," she read "'I need your help. You need to tell me about these invaders and the situation so far. Help is on the way right now. Princess Luna is summoning the Sky Corps.' That's good, right?" She turned to Short, who shrugged, truly unsure. "Dunno. Depends on how many they send and what the dogs are hauling in to counter Pegasi."

Accepting his word as fact, Twilight turned back to the scroll and continued reading. "In the meantime, stay safe and get to the garrison. We're

attempting to contact Colonel Eagle Eye, the local commander. Good luck, Princess Celestia."

Twilight raised an eyebrow at the note, gritting her teeth. "Good luck? That's it?"

"She did say to stay safe..." Spike offered unhelpfully, getting a withering glare from Twilight.

"And to get to the garrison. Which is where we're headed," Short reminded her, leaning over to look at the scroll himself. "Question is, will we get there in time to make a difference?"

Chapter 6

Surge

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

Steed Square, Industrial Sector

There were hundreds of them, perhaps even thousands.

They continued to stream in from every possible entrance, immune to their own losses as they charged across the large plaza, guns firing not only at the Army and police ponies dug in on the far side, but randomly into the air, as if wasting ammunition was just as unimportant as their own lives.

By Celestia, the things were bestial. Every one of them should be exterminated.

"Got line of sight. He's out by the temple, one hundred meters to the east from the steps."

Her spotter, Golden Rays, looked up from the telescope before her, glancing at the sniper herself. "Got that, Craft?"

"Yeah, got it..." Craft replied, repositioning the large rifle before putting her eye to the scope, bringing the sights upon the Temple of the Sun and Moon. While religion was never taken as a big thing in Equestria and almost never publicized, it was expected of everypony to at least pay tribute to the Princesses in some form of prayer. Hence, the popularity of the temples.

Steed Square played host to several monuments, ranging from the Temple itself to several star cafes and even the old palace, where the governor ruled the city (or what was to become the city) back in the days before Nightmare Moon's banishment. The Castle of the Duke was a little-known landmark, and might draw in more visitors to see it if Mayor Caesar ever decided to stop being stingy and actually deal out a few bits on developing the city itself. Currently, however, its most important feature was the no-pony's-land stretching between the Royal Army and the crude scrap

barricades established by the diamond dogs, over which the canines would scramble to join the assault.

The telescopic scope settled on the statue of the Princess sisters out in front of the temple, and Craft slowly moved the high-caliber weapon around, bringing her sights squarely on a helmeted head. For all intents and purposes, a marksman yoke was almost the same as a recoilless rifle, save for the solid bullets it fired, not shells. The gun was designed for pinpoint accuracy, not explosive firepower. However, it also required a secondary bipod to be deployed and provide stability, but Craft was grateful for it as she sighted on the dog. Her prey in question was one she had seen multiple times, wearing simple white fatigues under a black combat vest and a similarly colored headpiece, this time a steel helmet. The camouflage was less detailed than the Royal Army's own winter battledress, but the fact that some of these diamond dogs wore it was an indicator that they were important, also supported by the way they directed the flow of the hundreds of other dogs.

In fact, if Craft was to give it her best guess, she might almost think these strange commanders were...

Something shifted in the middle of the Square, amidst all the flying bullets and explosives. Sure, the bricks were being constantly chipped and blown away, but the sudden humps that appeared in the stonework were nothing a simple shell could do. Not from up top, anyway. The nature of the mystery revealed itself, however, as the red stone suddenly broke in a shower of dust and dirt, sending a plume of earth several meters into the air. It was followed shortly after by several other breaks in the stone, and Craft knew instantly what they were. Golden was more on the ball than she, however, and immediately keyed her radio, breaking communication silence protocol and yelling "S-Com, this is Sightseer Two! We have line of sight on several enemy burrowers in Steed Square! Seeing six, no, seven tunnels emerging from the brickwork, advise all other units be alerted to possibility of subterranean flanking, over!"

Any reply command made was lost to Craft as she raised the rifle once more, gritting her teeth as she watched her target barking orders (literally) to another group of hapless halfwits, his paw moving in sharp, short movements as he leaned around the statue, exposing himself to get a better view...

Craft squeezed the bit-trigger, and the round flew, a bullet the size of her hoof that smashed into the dog's upper torso, tearing his arm away with a crimson cascade of blood that most certainly would kill the mongrel if the shock of the impact hadn't already. As her target fell to the snow, staining it a sickly red, Craft took her eye off the scope, releasing the bit trigger as the rifle ejected the spent casing, loading a new round.

"Gold, is Command still listening? I think I got a doozy for them."

"And that's it?" Gunn asked, an incredulous look on his face. "A promise for air reinforcements without even saying where they're from or when they'll get here?"

Twilight nodded, taking back the parchment and rolling it back into the scroll it had arrived as. "The Princesses are operating without knowing what's going on down here. I'm sure they'll send all the help they can, but you can't blame them for being vague."

"Vague? That's downright normal for orders," Gunn said, shrugging nonchalantly. "At least they bothered to send a notice."

Twilight was immediately both disgusted and mystified by the sergeant's disrespectful words about Princess Celestia (and Luna, too). To think anyone could speak ill about their monarch yet say they continued to serve them was downright...confusing.

"Uh, care to explain a little more?" the lavender unicorn asked, a frown on her brow, attempting to keep her flash of anger in check.

Gunn frowned himself, looking a little put off at her question, though if that was because of her actually asking it or because he'd never thought to explain it she couldn't tell.

"Well...think of it like this. See this steam wagon here?" Gunn banged a hoof on the side of the machine, to which ponies were still securing supplies and double-checking the gear stowed to it. Twilight nodded, though suspected the question to be rhetorical. "Let's say the battalion needed another one. The order would have to be filed from the master mechanic in the motor pool. It goes from him to the Colonel's desk, who

reviews it before sending it on. From there, it reaches Canterlot at Royal Army High Command, the office that keeps charge of...what's left of the military. Now, this is where it gets tricky. Ordinarily, the form should be looked over by an aide, rewritten four times to file away, and then passed on to the general in charge of supply before the copies of the *copies* are tripled and filed away elsewhere. Then-

"Okay! Gunn, I think I get it. There's a lot of paperwork involved," Twilight said, suddenly realizing just where he was going. Obviously, some people would rather 'lose' a request or notice than go through the entire procedure, even if it was important. Peace in Equestria was slowly killing the military through the choking amounts of red tape, lessening her incredulity at the swiftness with which the dogs had overtaken the city. Supply lines were neglected, notices put off...or was that simply an inflated version?

"How do you know this stuff anyway, Gunn?" she asked curiously, tilting her head to the side, feeling the helmet slide a little ways. The sergeant smiled down at her, and she could see the longer whiskers of five-o'clock shadow poking through the hair around his muzzle, indicating he hadn't shaved in some time.

"About six years back or so, I got into a scrap with a dragon who'd been rampaging through the Residential Sector after being denied more valuable gemstones to snack on. The police weren't able to do anything with their non-lethal arsenal and stunning magic, so my squad rolled in."

"Oh, no!" Twilight said, grimacing at the thought of one of Spike's kin (and by extension the possibility of Spike himself) receiving lethal measures from the Royal Army.

"Easy, easy. We didn't use our guns. Couldn't bring them with us. Instead, we hit him with a mixture of tear gas, sleep spells and stun grenades. Started lashing around like crazy, fractured my skull with his tail in the process. From what I heard, he went down easily enough, though." He chuckled, rubbing a hoof over the back of his neck. "I was laid out for six months in recovery, and I couldn't stand being cooped up in a house somewhere with nothing to do, so they temporarily reassigned me to Logistics. Hay, what a head trip that was. By the Princesses, I hope I never go back to that bureaucratic nightmare again..."

Twilight was beginning to understand where, as a soldier, Sergeant Gunn was. Positioned in a seat of command over his ponies, he demanded a lot of respect, and got it for sure. But the fact of the matter was that while the large pony tried to support the monarchy he fought for, his commanders' lack of initiative about everything was wearing away at him. Suddenly, the sullen mood Short had earlier during his anger snap began to make sense. These soldiers weren't expecting support or backup.

It was interesting what you could learn in a few words of conversation.

"Hey, Miss Sparkle?"

"Sergeant, I've told you, it's just Twilight." she said, smiling up at the squad commander, who smiled uneasily in return. "You don't have to get all formal on me simply because I'm your VIP!"

"Right...Twilight. You say you're from Ponyville? What's it like this time of year?"

She frowned, glancing around. The battle raged in the background, just within hearing range, and it was obvious that these ponies were simply making busy before the command to roll out came along. Sergeant Lilac had her ponies doing runs with their saddle-bags on and double checking their equipment while Gunn's troopers simply tightened straps, looking altogether relieved. The big blue draft mare Twilight had learned was named Azure seemed bored out of her skull, leaning against the steam wagon with her eyes half-closed. The brown colt Maple, however, seemed twitchy as all hay. He continually checked his rifle, head snapping up at every boom in the distance (which was so often Twilight was surprised the young stallion hadn't put a strain in his neck).

"Ponyville? It's springtime out there. We just wrapped up winter, so business is picking up quite a bit. Why? Haven't you been outside the city?"

"Nope," Gunn replied, scratching his chin with his hoof. "Born and raised here, in Stalliongrad. So was Maple, and so was Azure. Nearly all of the colts and fillies in the battalion are local recruits, straight from the factories. Hay, the only other pony I know of that's not local at all is Stop."

"Wait, what?" Reflexively, Twilight glanced back, looking for the familiar gray pony. Short hadn't said a word to her since the message from Celestia

had arrived, and she felt he was trying to make up for his outburst. It was a little heartbreaking, actually. Aside from Spike, Short was the only real friend she had in this entire city, even if the only reason he was there was to guard her because his orders said to.

"I'm not surprised you didn't catch it," Gunn said, reaching into his vest and extracting a wheat sprig, sticking it between his teeth and beginning to chew. "Short tries very hard to be a model soldier and fit in. Does a darned good job of it, too. Thing is, when he was first transferred here, I caught his accent a few times. Still, if I hadn't know he'd come from Savanneigh, I might have missed it."

"He's from where?" The mage was now honestly curious. Applejack had once told her that her own father was from down south around that area, the same region that the frontier and Appleloosa sat in. But Short had spoken with only smooth, curt tones like any Manehattan or Canterlot local, and only once had she caught the slip.

"Yeah, you should have heard him the first week he was here. 'Eeeeyup!' Colt was so excited..." Gunn's voice drifted for a second, as did his expression, before he snapped back into the iron hard sergeant that he was, tucking his sprig away and standing up straight once more. "But enough of that. I've probably already wasted enough of your time, Miss Sparkle. I'd advise waiting until we reach the garrison to respond to the Princess."

And with that, Gunn did an about face (a surprisingly grateful turn for a draft horse of his size) and trotted off, yelling at Maple when the colt dropped a grenade (fortunately, the pin was still in it).

What was it with these soldiers? Friendly one minute, stern and professional the next. At first, she'd thought it to be just some weird personality trait of Short, but now Sergeant Gunn was doing it too? What a strange pattern of characteristics. And then there was Short himself. His outburst could be attributed to stress from combat and lack of sleep, but that last part concerned her. He hadn't slept? Why?

And why was she trying to help everyone else when she should be taking care of herself? She was acting so much like Applejack, for some reason.

She clambered back through the hatch into the wagon, her purpose outside fulfilled. The wounded ponies were still sprawled all over the floor, and without a medic of some kind their injuries couldn't be tended to yet. Which meant the poor equines were moaning or sobbing in pain as they suffered from bullet wounds, broken bones, shrapnel or burns.

She tried to ignore the sounds of pain in the air as she stepped carefully over the broken and bleeding bodies, patched up with field kits, and strap herself into her seat. Short still kept his gaze fixed forward, eyes locked on the wall. The purple unicorn glanced down at Spike, but the baby dragon shrugged, a look midway between concern and indifference on his scaled features.

However, before Twilight could turn back to Short and ask him what the problem was, the hatch suddenly swung shut, sealing with the hiss of steam valves as the radio intercom said *"Heads up! The Square is about to be abandoned! Orders are to move out now and hope for the best! This is it, ponies!"*

They'd halted. For now, at least.

Major Zo Di'ac had to admit, the dogs were tenacious. Were she battling the hyenas of her homeland, she would have no doubt that the Royal Army would have easily turned the mongrels away. But actual dogs were apparently made of tougher stuff than that.

Currently, the Square was mostly empty, back to its drawn lines and barricades on either side that had been hastily erected. Piles upon piles of filthy canine corpses were in bloody stacks everywhere, indicating just how badly the dogs had suffered to get as far in as they had (which wasn't very far). Still, the ponies hadn't gotten off lightly themselves, either. Behind her, the recovered corpses of at least thirty ponies in battledress were laid out, covered reverently by white sheets and sent on their way to Princess Luna's Gateway. Or, so the pony myth went. Di'ac considered herself a little above religion, but knew spirituality had a heavy influence when your patron deities actually lived with you.

Next to the soldiers were dead police ponies, those who had stayed to help the Army hold the line. They numbered twice as much in alive and dead,

and they were tended to as well. Meanwhile, the civilians who had come to the Square seeking shelter had been met with a very grim fate indeed. Di'ac narrowed her eyes out at the occasional splash of color in the Square, the sign of some unfortunate worker trying to run to safety...and never making it. There were dozens of dead civilian ponies scattered across the battlefield, most of them near the diamond dogs' infernal tunnels, erupting like zits out of the brickwork.

And then there was the whole matter of the attack itself. Diamond dogs weren't organized, not nearly this well-armed and most definitely not ambitious enough to try and slaughter an entire city. Although, one of her sniper teams had reported something that revealed something much darker and more sinister...

"Major?"

She turned, looking back at her second in command, a sergeant by the name of Conway. Captain Linden had been wounded in the course of combat, and was even now being sent back aboard her company's last functioning steam wagon (she winced as her eye caught the burnt out wrecks of the other two, the first victims of the dogs' tremendous firepower). Normally, having a sergeant take over for a lieutenant wasn't such an unusual thing (as far as she understood from protocol, of course), but Conway irritated her in more ways than one; the orange unicorn was from Section Five, the battalion's nickname for Fifth Company, the battalion's mages.

And the stallion was a major pain in the flank.

"Can I have a word with you?" Conway asked, ducking his head as another rocket tore overhead, smashing into the tall brick wall that formed their rear perimeter. Di'ac, by contrast, didn't even flinch. She'd seen war before, in her homeland as well as against the dogs of the area. She knew when a threat was incoming.

"Make it short, my mage friend. Our time here is almost at an end," she replied, reaching up and touching the brim of her helmet as a chorus of dog bullets smacked into the sandbags behind her.

"That's what I need to speak to you about, Major. I'm aware you have orders from the Colonel, and I need to respectfully request that you hold

the line just a little longer. We've received word from Buckboard Two that our VIPs are en route." Conway spoke with the air of somepony speaking down to one from another class, and Zo was perfectly aware of the unicorn's outlook on her people and their current political relationship with Equestria. However, she was a full-blown citizen now, and she didn't give a hoot about some stuck up unicorn's biased and undeserved opinion.

"We have not heard anything on the radio lines. I was almost thinking it was time. We need to move soon, or face our imminent doom."

"But surely you can hold for a few more minutes, ma'am. These trenches are perfectly secure, your ponies have proved it time and time again-

Conway halted mid-sentence, surprised to see Di'ac's hoof up in his face.

"You see those bodies, lying over yonder? How many have –you- lost, I dare to ponder? We will hold this position five minutes more, before my troopers and I go to the garrison's door."

The arrogant snot tried again. "But Major, you're the battalion's second in command. Surely you can-

"Sergeant, my orders are quite clear. They say do not hold here." Di'ac fixed the unicorn with the most intimidating stare she could, her eyes narrowed as she watched some of the pomp vanish from the mage's face. "Five minutes more only. Then you'll be alone for your precious pony."

Abruptly, the argument was interrupted by Corporal Olive Drab, Di'ac's radio pony, who cried out "Ma'am, got something from Buckboard Two!"

"Spit it out, Corporal!" Conway snapped, his crisp and infuriating nature reasserting itself. Drab glanced at the zebra, confusion and a need for clarification in the colt's eyes, and Di'ac drew herself up, glancing over her shoulder at the no-pony's-land of the Square before answering "Repeat the message to our guest, so we can assist with our very best."

"Yes ma'am," Drab said, unsure but unwilling to break orders. "A Sergeant Lilac of D-platoon, Second company reports they've got wounded and VIPs. They'll be coming from the west, request directions."

"Well, give the dang sergeant directions, and make sure they're aware of the situation here!" Conway snapped, the unicorn's teeth gritted. A bullet snapped overhead and he irritably put up a magic shield over himself, deflecting the rocket that came zooming in, bouncing away and detonating harmlessly in the air.

While not appreciating the undercut to her authority, Di'ac said nothing. It was the same call she would have made. The dogs had no clue there was a VIP in the area, as the call had been broadcast that the mayor, his council and the chief of police were all safe and secure in City Center. All other VIPs had been accounted for, save two. At least Conway hadn't overreached and ordered escorts to go out and meet the wagon...

"Sending," replied Drab, his voice also strained as he tried to live with the sore attitude of Conway. Di'ac had served with Drab as her aide long enough to know when the colt was upset about something, and right now she could see all the signs. She'd left Zebrabwe with a hope for a new life, somewhere she could make a name for herself without watching a land torn by violence. Turned out, Equestria simply had a gilded curtain, rather than the gold core everypony thought was there. While the small towns and communities were indeed close-knit and peaceful, the larger cities followed the more realistic trend of their rotten roots. Crime was still a factor in Equestria, leading to the police ponies in the major cities, and as firearms were expressly illegal to anyone outside the police or Royal Army, civilians had nothing to defend themselves with (the new weapon for solving hostile disputes was pies, strangely effective at knocking out combatants, as shown in the Appleloosa Stand).

At least things weren't as bad as back in Zebrabwe, where major political upheaval happened everyday, and Princess Celestia did nothing to stop the civil wars that kept popping up but try and talk, despite the lies told to her face...

Abruptly, Di'ac's thoughts were cut into by a trooper pony nearby saying, her voice full of alarm "What in Equestria is –that?-" The Major snapped her head up, eyes boggling and jaw dropping as she spotted the object that had so many of her troopers astounded. For once, Conway also had nothing to say as he gaped in turn, the magic shield over his head fizzling out as he broke his concentration.

The machine was in the sky, not so much resembling a giant bird as some boat that some stupid pony had decided would function up in the air. A rounded partition of glass graced the front, and machinegun barrels poked out from underneath it. Doors opened on the sides, exposing more guns in the closed bay behind the glass and under two fat, stubby wings that looked like they had no business being on something that flew. Mounted next to the guns were bulging pods, the heads of rockets peeking out like snakes from a den, vipers ready to strike. The thing was held up, seemingly, by the two enormous disks positioned over one another, mounted to the machine's back. The entire craft had a shark-like feel to it, something evil and malicious, ready to strike at any time, its mottled brown metal skin dully reflecting the little sunlight that was shining through the clouds of smoke and snow overhead.

There was no doubt about it. About what she was seeing.

The gyrocopter buzzed overhead, as if not even paying Steed Square any attention at all, before peeling around and heading off to the north once more, from whence it came. The entire encounter only lasted sixteen seconds, but it seemed a lifetime to Di'ac, who had to force her jaw shut and the jitters in her spine away.

Sergeant Conway, meanwhile, was a little more shaken up.

"What was that? What the BUCK was that?"

Drab, however, reacted in a way more fitting to a soldier, immediately reaching down and, after fumbling with the tuning knob for a few seconds, found the correct frequency, reporting "Three Charlie to Command. Come in Command. This is a priority radio call, hostile aircraft spotted overhead. Repeat, we have a gyrocopter in the area."

Major Di'ac turned to look over at the dog barricades, a frown on her face as the howl of hundreds of gleeful canines came to her ears, a sound she would be more than happy to forget as she realized the inevitable truth.

"Drab! Order all squads to their posts and send the word! We're closing shop and avoiding that bird!"

Swiftly, trooper ponies turned around, manning their posts once more as medics and their aides began hefting the wounded out. With the intact

soldiers manning the trenches, however, it would take forever for the injured to be hefted to the garrison, and the dogs were attacking now, pouring out past their barricades even now.

The roar of an engine came to Di'ac's ears, and the zebra turned her head to look out towards the west, at a row of abandoned factories, just in time for a steam wagon to come crashing through a cart, machine gun firing and its trooper escort moving into cover, laying down fire to let the machine through.

"Well, would you look at that sight. Conway was for once actually right..." she muttered, cocking her rifle before grasping the bit-trigger in her teeth.

It was going to be a long withdrawal...

Chapter 7

Knock-Knock

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

71st Royal Army Battalion Garrison

Radio Room

"Chief Star, maybe I'm not making myself clear. You and your officers are outmatched, outgunned and outnumbered. You need to abandon the precinct and fall back to the garrison immediately, as well as turn over all command authority to me."

"Colonel, I wish you'd have some faith in my officers. This is their home, and they're going to hold it –because- it's their home, not because some idiot in a beret behind six hooves of concrete tells them to."

"Star, most of my recruits are from this city too! Don't you dare put down my troopers! As for you, my scouts estimate your building will be surrounded in ten minutes, and that gyrocopter-"

"I highly doubt a Colonel with no real authority in a position he was –given- has the right to speak like he knew what he was doing to a pony who actually climbed the ranks himself! My officers have dismissed your claims already, and as for this 'gyrocopter', I highly doubt its existence. Your troopers are simply seeing things and panicking. I strongly recommend-"

Without another word, Eagle Eye dropped the radio headset, turning away in disgust. The fact that Chief Star could stay so deluded and such an idiot voluntarily was staggering to the mind. And to think that Mayor Caesar had been about to hand command authority to him mere hours ago!

Said mayor was currently standing behind the colonel, nervously glancing about at the whirlwind of activity around them, the drone of ponies as they relayed messages and dictated standing orders and protocol. So far, they were holding their perimeter, but as shown in Steed Square, the dogs were

slowly closing the noose around the garrison, and the battalion was taking heavy losses.

Eagle turned to Caesar, who nervously asked "Did you reach the Chief?"

"No," replied the Colonel as he clopped past, intent on finding another mug of coffee. "Just some bucking idiot who's about to die."

As he left the radio room, he ran into Lieutenant Razor, standing in the hall with a stack of files under his arm. Razor was an oddity in the Royal Army, not because of his name, but his species. Zebras who enlisted were accepted with open arms and introduced immediately to the service so long as they were Equestrian citizens. Sure, the culture clash got in the way sometimes, but there had been no major incidents. Dragons, on the other hoof, were another matter altogether.

Razor was green-scaled, most of it hidden beneath his neatly pressed and recently steamed blue uniform, with a red row of spines going down his back, causing the only disruption in his uniform aside from its general shape (trousers, for example. You could count the number of tailors who made trousers in Equestria on one...never mind) Razor was also no baby, for he stood at least a hoof and a half taller than Eagle Eye, and was forced to hunch through doorways.

But despite his physical differences, Eagle wouldn't have traded him for anypony else. Dragons were famous for being able to apply themselves to organizational tasks, and many famous accountants and entrepreneurs in the Kingdom were dragons. Of course, being handy with jewels and enormous piles of coins helped out in that area as well.

"Colonel. I assume your call did not go well," Razor said, automatically falling into step with his commander, paging through the file as he searched for some paperwork.

"Do you have to ask? The idiot's convinced he can hold the entire Industrial Sector all by himself. Meanwhile, he's got half his officers in the meat grinder, a few hundred more overseeing the evacuation to the Residential Sector and the rest are either hiding or just plain dead!"

"Colonel, I'm sure it's not that bad. Now, to get your mind off of that. I have the report from that scout team you sent to the harbor." Razor cut himself

off as he ducked under the doorway into the garrison's command center, filled with maps and charts, as well as the master map of the city plotted using on-the-dot information regarding troop movements and known enemy positions (blue for friendly units, red for enemies. Understandably, there was an enormous mass of ugly red and not so many scattered blues left). A wide window graced one side, looking out over the garrison in all its neglected, stone-washed glory.

The high concrete walls of the facility were especially gray and bleak today with the new snowfall, and the grounds below had turned into a twisted, muddy mess. Soldier ponies and steam wagons were constantly going out, loaded down with equipment, and their wounded and damaged counterparts coming back for repair and medical treatment. The med-bay could service two-hundred wounded ponies, and it was already up more than half. Dogs didn't really take prisoners or leave survivors.

The service pad in the corner was playing host to the flow of Pegasus ponies coming down, rearming and taking off for another combat operation. Eagle Eye had ordered constant air support from what little they had, and it didn't help that their small stockpile of heavy munitions was already old and outdated, but they made do with what they had and went full steam like they had a real logistics train flowing back to Canterlot.

The battle had been raging for less than five hours now, and already the city had been caused such enormous devastation. Blasts from ordnance and artillery boomed in the distance, flattening buildings and carving holes in the roads. In the center of the yard, three heavy artillery pieces had been set up, their guns elevated for long-range. Dozens of spent shell casings littered the mud around them, discarded and forgotten as they were pulled from the breeches to be replaced by new rounds. Sixth Company was the battalion's logistics and fire support group, and Captain Tancy was a lifetime professional, like Eagle Eye. She knew how to run a tight crew, and kept her ponies on a strict routine that was most definitely paying off now.

As he approached the window, Eagle fixed his gaze on the six hulking, stationary forms over by the main gate, machines that, at a glance, could be mistaken for steam wagons. But these creations were no mere transport, oh no. The latest in Equestrian technological prowess, these wagons came with a cannon-armed turret mounted up top, extra armor, and more powerful steam engines. Battlewagons, as they were called,

represented the height of Equestria's war gear, a sad fact when you thought about it. The Hegemony and even the Matriarchy had been fielding so called 'tanks' for at least a decade now, and the canines had even used them in their impromptu (and unsuccessful) invasion of Zebrabwe five years ago. The fact that these machines had only just been distributed to the garrisons around Equestria in the last six months or so was grave news indeed, especially with what Eye suspected was happening even now, beneath the disguise this attack gave.

Finally, Colonel Eye sighed and looked back at Razor, waiting patiently by the master command table, file open and ready for the briefing. "Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Right, sir." Razor instantly spread out several documents, a few of them actually photographs taken from the air. "As you requested, I had Viper element of Fourth Company fly over the harbor and recon the area. Unfortunately, only six Pegasi were left, meaning we had limited coverage. But we did find the gyrocopter and tailed it back to its original landing spot."

Razor pushed a large photograph forward, and the colonel frowned down at it as he tried to make sense of the image. Photography was a mastered technology in Equestria, but there was still little they could do to improve the quality of an expanded image. Still, despite the blurs Eagle Eye spotted the gyrocopter, the harbor, the boats docked there, and finally...

"That's a ship. A big ship."

"Yes sir," Razor agreed, looking down at the report before him. "An old Hegemonic cargo hauler. They originally pulled into port saying they were here to pick up a shipment of gems to take back to Canida. Approximately six minutes after the port authority cleared them, the first attacks began."

"Chance of coincidence?" Eye said, raising an eyebrow to show his apparent skepticism that this was the case.

"Not very likely, sir. Especially since that gyrocopter was seen landing on the cargo elevator. Perfect fit." Razor slid the picture to the side and made a mark with a nearby quill on the large map stretched over the table, designating the ship's position in the harbor. It was positioned just right to get a good view of the Industrial Sector from the water, parked at high anchor and untouchable for the time being.

"But why tip their hand now?" Eye muttered, frowning as he stared at the photograph, his narrowed eyes fixed on the blurry aircraft. "They could have kept that thing hidden and let the dogs massacre us and we wouldn't have known any better."

Razor shrugged, looking nonplussed, his default expression. "As for that, I can only guess. They made no attacks on their viewing of the area, and all teams who reported it stated no sign of any insignia. It could belong to the diamond dogs of the area and they simply needed to find something..." Even the dragon didn't sound like he believed his own words, so the colonel didn't bother to correct him.

"No attacks? Then this was one high-profile hay of a scouting mission..." he muttered, checking over several sheets of the documents Razor had brought. As for the diamond dogs coming into possession of a full-blown CAH-221 Falcon, he very much doubted that. There were no markings, as Razor had said, but Eye saw the picture clear as day; a plausible deniability mission. A loophole through which someone could escape national backlash.

"Tell me about these soldiers spotted in the city," he said, pulling another photo over with a hoof. In it, the bullet-chewed remains of one of the armored dogs lay on a street, blood leaking out of several wounds and staining the white fatigues a sickeningly deep crimson. "They certainly fit the bill."

"Of course, Colonel. As you can see, the dogs in question wear no insignia, but the body armor is a dead giveaway, as well as the advanced equipment. This is all the latest in Canid equipment that we know about. RKH-61 rifles, J2F sidearms and CM100 grenades. These guys are packing some serious gear."

"And any conclusions about the diamond dogs themselves?"

Razor glanced up, a worried look passing over his face. If the dragon was actually admitting to some stress, even without saying it, then the situation was bad indeed.

"A few corpses were brought in and examined, but I have something to show you in these pictures. This one," he indicated one photograph of a large, bulky dog in a battered, black leather vest studded with cracked and

broken gemstones. This one dog had died of a fusillade of rounds in the chest, rendering his torso into a bloody mess. "Is a dog collected by the police a few months ago, when that eastern pack carried out a few robberies. They sent us into the hills after them."

"We lost two soldiers in that raid," Eye muttered, gritting his teeth at the thought of that idiot Iron Star.

Razor continued, already knowing too well of the rivalry and animosity shared between the Colonel and the Chief. He pulled another photo over, one more recent. This dog was splayed out over the bricks of Stalliongrad, half his head gone. Instead of leather and gems, however, he wore a simple cloth vest, devoid of any ornamentation. Eagle Eye frowned as he studied the picture, seeing a collar but no gemstones anywhere. Strange. Diamond dogs loved decorating their clothing with valuable gems.

"This one is from today. Upon looking at his neck, this was discovered."

A third photo was added to the pile, showing a patch of exposed skin, a place where the fur had been shaved down to the scalp. Tattooed on the skin was a series of numbers and letters, written in the Common Language. There were about sixteen numbers, spelling out some kind of code that Eye didn't understand, but knew Razor would identify for him.

"That is the code for Kennel Island, the Hegemony's premier military prison for deserters, war criminals and other dishonorables that they just can't execute. Every other corpse recovered today has the same tattoo, in the same place." The dragon glanced up at the colonel, and the realization went unsaid, already figured out by them both. The connection was just all too obvious.

Colonel Eye nodded, looking over their collected data and putting the numbers together in his head, adding them all up to a gut-wrenching equation at the end.

"So, we've got all the earmarks of a Canid black op. The diamond dogs are all war criminals, armed and sent into the city en masse from the ship. Promised their freedom, maybe? Either way, low amounts of survivors expected, and they'll be released in Equestria, so it's no skin off Canida's hide. They're watched over and directed by actual soldiers, either the Hegemonic Army or some super-secret-doesn't-exist group, and given real-

time command from their base of operations in the harbor and fire support and recon from a gyrocopter. We've got all the signs that this is a definitive military action, probably a shadow strike with the criminals as a flimsy cover and no insignia as a way to deny it, but what's the target? What are they after?"

An explosion boomed off in the distance, drowning out even the continual drum roll of the artillery in the yard below, an ill portent of what was to come.

The grim reality of war struck Twilight once more at the garrison. Sergeant Conway had told her she no longer had to worry, that everything was okay and she'd be safe once she got there. No place in Stalliongrad was more secure, he'd said. But inside these walls, Twilight felt more exposed than ever. After passing the hustle and bustle and escaping the chaos of combat, the concrete and steel around her felt...alien. She didn't belong here, nopony belonged here, in this cold and unnatural environment of rock and metal.

Yet it seemed to be the one place she'd seen so far that seemed at least moderately safe from the dogs. Never mind the hulking presence of the armored machines near the gates, never mind the artillery booming in the center of the yard, never mind the hundred or so ponies running around trying to sort things out or standing at their post, watching fervently out as the city burned. No, the reason this place seemed to be shelter was thanks to the limited amount of damage to the walls themselves. They were aged concrete, a few with holes in the plaster, but the layers underneath were intact, standing strong against the elements. She knew those walls wouldn't fail.

Or maybe she was finally going nuts and over examining things.

She giggled softly to herself, smiling as she muttered "Twilight Sparkle, you have officially lost your mind..."

"Uh, Twilight? You feeling okay?"

The mage glanced down to meet the worried gaze of her purple assistant, looking up at her from beneath his too-big helmet as they strode down the main hall, led by Short, Gunn and Conway. Apparently, the Colonel had standing orders for the troopers to bring her and Spike before him as soon

as they set hoof on base. Major Di'ac, polite as she was, refused to enter the halls for the simple reason that she needed to tend to her wounded and organize the survivors to fall in with the base's defense personnel around the walls and in the trenches outside, but Twilight suspected that it was because the zebra couldn't stand to be near the arrogant unicorn. Personally, she'd never seen a mage more full of himself (as a rule all unicorns tended to have at least one small bit of self-importance in them), but at least Conway appeared to be able to back up his swagger with some potent battle-magic, shields and bolts far stronger than her own and packing potent lethality.

Conway was now striding up the stairs, leading the group to the next floor as more ponies in armor and battledress rushed back and forth past them, some wearing helmets, some wearing caps, but most of them wearing some kind of bandage, either around their head, leg or peeking out from beneath their vests.

It seemed strange to her that a wounded pony would want to be up and around when they'd just been injured (but then she thought back to Applejack and Big Macintosh and their dedication to Sweet Apple Acres and her doubts were blown away) but she voiced her opinion anyway. "These ponies got hurt in the fighting, didn't they? Why are they still running around?"

Short didn't say a word, obviously still chafing from his outburst, but Sergeant Gunn answered for him. "No such thing as 'sit down for a minute.' There's things to do, and with the Square gone the dogs have a direct line to us." For the first time since she'd seen him, Gunn glanced worriedly at Maple and Azure (and a small look over at Short) before his demeanor fixed itself and he continued "Hundreds, possibly thousands of enemies are steaming right towards us, Miss Twilight. The odds are stacked against us with our backs to the wall. Best hope those reinforcements of yours get here soon."

Twilight gulped, glancing down at an equally anxious Spike before saying "I think we'll see the colonel before I send anymore information to the Princess. He probably knows more about what's going on here."

The baby dragon nodded, eyes still shifting around as he replied "Good idea. I don't think I'd be able to get half the words these ponies are saying spelled out right."

Gunn had met Colonel Eagle Eye once, back when he'd first joined the battalion. An accident with an ammo dump had put the lives of the sergeant's (back then a private) squad at risk. Gunn had, without hesitation, leapt forward to shield a nearby recruit, saving her and two others from harm. Fortunately, he and the rest of the squad came out with only minor wounds, the worst being his broken femur. Afterwards, he'd been awarded an instant promotion to corporal and the Valor in Service medal for bravery at the risk of one's life, all awarded to him by the Colonel himself. It was a big deal, Gunn had been told, as he'd saved the lives of six other ponies, his own sergeant included. That kind of rescue was something to be admired, the Colonel had said.

And now, here they were, with destruction on their doorstep and the city in flames, meeting for the second time under very different circumstances. Gunn meant every word he'd said to Twilight about their chances. If things carried on like this, the dogs wouldn't need to worry about strategy or organization. They'd already smashed the 71st's defensive line to pieces. All they would have to do now was crush them under sheer weight of numbers.

A tactical officer stepped forward, jerking Gunn out of his pessimistic mental ramblings, as Sergeant Conway saluted to her, saying "We have VIPs for Colonel Eye. He requested them immediately."

The blue-uniformed mare glanced over at Twilight before her eyes flitted to examine each trooper, gaze sharp and quick. When her eyes settled on Gunn, he straightened, feeling his spine snap into a line and his neck jerk back as he looked into her icy blue eyes.

"Alright," she said, nodding. "Sergeant Conway, you're dismissed. The rest of you, with me."

The unicorn seemed a little baffled by the turn of events, and frowned as he moved around to block the tactical mare from leaving him alone. "Uh, excuse me-" He glanced at the pins on her collar. "Captain. But I brought this group in. It's thanks to me that they're safe."

"You and six-hundred troopers," said Azure smoothly, her voice carrying no sting to it. Conway and the captain looked sharply at the blue draft horse, but while the unicorn was furious, the mare had a small smirk on her face. "That'll be quite enough, Trooper," the Captain said coolly, and Azure had to suppress a smirk of her own. "Yes ma'am," the big mare said, nodding as if in apology. "My apologies for speaking out of turn."

Conway tried once more to assert his importance. "Ma'am, all due respect, these are my charges. I'm supposed to protect them and bring them to the Colonel."

"Which you have. Magnificent that you were given this job three hours ago, and only left the garrison in the last hour and a half, after we received word that Victor squad was incoming." At this, she turned to Sergeant Gunn, frowning as she asked "Second company?"

Gunn blinked, caught off-guard before remembering that he was essentially now the senior officer of his unit. A saddening thought, but a duty he shared with Lilac, who was currently outside seeing to their wounded. He cleared his throat, replying "Annihilated, ma'am. Our casualties have been nearly one-hundred percent."

The mare nodded gravely. "Then it's as we feared. With Second Company gone and Third withdrawn to the garrison, First Company is the only one actively fighting out there, and we haven't heard from them in an hour." The Captain fixed Conway with an icy glare as the unicorn tried to speak again, but the battle mage simply shut his trap and finally slunk away, duly chastised.

"This way," the Captain repeated, leading them quickly through the command center to the other side of the room. A dozen other tactical officers were reviewing reports and maps, trying to plot out positions quickly and strategize with their swiftly diminishing force. Gunn had heard over the radio that the police ponies fighting alongside the troopers had either been wiped out or broken and run when the line collapsed. In Gunn's opinion, that was the reason –why– the line had broken. Whatever had happened out there, however, it meant only one thing; the dogs could no longer be contained in the Industrial Sector with the battalion whittled down to half strength in the past few hours of fighting. Already, there were reports of fighting in the Residential Sector and City Center, and even the wild

rumor that the National Medical Institute had been leveled. Even with the butchering the dogs had been handed, they still had more than enough troops to cause mayhem across the entire city.

At last, they all stood before the stallion they'd traveled through the chaos and carnage outside to get to. Colonel Eye stood tall and impressive before them, his blue uniform taut over his black coat and strong muscles, his equally dark mane cut military short under a blue beret. He stood at a large table, discussing something in a hushed tone with (of all things) a tall green juvenile dragon, standing heads and shoulders above even Gunn and Azure. Gunn knew about Razor, of course, but he glanced back at Twilight and Spike's faces (currently plastered in shock, Spike's a little more excited than the unicorn's) and smirked before turning back as the Captain halted, snapping to attention and declaring "The VIPs, sir. Twilight Sparkle, Spike and their escort."

Gunn and the other troopers also snapped to, determined to look presentable despite the grime, gunpowder streaks and bullet holes adorning their armor and uniforms. But the colonel was at least sensible enough to look past the mess thanks to the battle outside (unlike some officers Gunn had met who demanded perfect neatness even after a two-hour skirmish) and nodded, making his own salute and saying "At ease, gentlecolts." As the troopers let their hooves down, Colonel Eye traced his gaze across them, examining each one briefly before coming to Twilight and Spike. There, his gaze lingered, his expression blanked, but it was obvious to Gunn that he was forcing it to be so. And he knew why. Many ponies had died to keep her safe, and even now the unicorn began to squirm under Colonel Eye's scrutiny.

Then, abruptly, he turned away. "Get us some coffee, Lieutenant," Eye said to Razor, and the dragon nodded, closing two files on the table and leaving silently, exiting the room with a brief hunch to pass through the doorframe. The colonel, meanwhile, simply nodded to Twilight, approaching and holding out his hoof. "Miss Sparkle," he said, his keeping his voice at a neutral tone. "I'm Colonel Eagle Eye, commander of the 71st and all armed forces in the city of Stalliongrad."

"Pleased to meet you, Colonel." Twilight replied, briefly shaking his hoof as she tried to dispel the feeling in her gut that the only reason this stallion was being so nice was that he wanted something from her. Her copy

of *'Reading the Mood for Dummies'* was niggling in the back of her mind, spouting out all sorts of things from body language to tone of voice, and there was definitely some kind of underlying hostility with the colonel. Regardless, Twilight felt the need to keep her mouth closed, rather than attempt to reconcile whatever problem there was, instead simply unbuckling the ill-fitting helmet, letting it fall to the ground. Spike, meanwhile, said nothing. Not even the fact that he'd been ignored could convince him to speak up, for fear of earning the ire of the commander before them. Instead, he simply slipped behind the mage, eyes wide.

The colonel finally broke his gaze from her, moving to stand before the table as he turned to his soldiers. "Gentlecolts, I appreciate the strain and sacrifice it took to bring Miss Sparkle and her assistant here, but it may have all been for naught. We're at a crossroads here, one that isn't looking to have bright horizons down either road. We have reason to believe that this attack," here, he gestured out the window at the smoke roiling from the Industrial Sector stretching out over the horizon. "Is nothing more than a smokescreen for an actual Hegemony attack."

Normally, in most small-time novels or cheap movies, this would be the part where everypony on screen or on paper would gasp in shock, astonished by this new turn of events. In reality, however, the soldiers managed to keep themselves restrained, left to blinking rapidly, dumbfounded. Right on cue, another explosion blossomed out in the city, causing the boom to reverberate through the command center, underlining the Colonel's statement.

Eye seemed to barely notice, instead looking the squad over once more. "I'm sure you're all eager to get patched up before the dogs come rolling over us. Therefore, I relieve you of your assignment to watch over Twilight Sparkle, and order you to get what recovery you can. With any luck, what I dread is coming won't...but until I see proof that we won't be defending these very walls within the hour, I'm not willing to take the risk. I'll need every pony possible to man the battlements."

Chapter 8

At the Gates

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

71st Royal Army Battalion, 1st Company

Forward Positions, assisted by elements from 2nd Company

Golden Ox Hotel, Dining Room, 1st Company Field HQ

"Captain Sanders?"

A white face slipped into his field of view, one filled with curiosity, worry and just a little annoyance. Sanders frowned, looking up from his chart at his second in command, Lieutenant Dandelion. She was from what remained of Second Company, and was senior to any of his First Company officers by at least a few years. As such, he saw it was the right choice to place her as his number two, despite the fact that he knew almost nothing about her, and it was impossible to radio Command for a background check. Instead, he had to make do with what he had.

"Yes, Lieutenant, I'm listening."

Dandelion snorted in obvious disbelief, her matted blonde mane plastered to her head and neck with sweat and grime as she tilted her head to the side, looking at him doubtfully.

"Okay, fine," Sanders admitted, holding his hooves in the air in a 'surrender' gesture. "I may have missed some of the finer parts. Why don't you walk me through the reports one last time? I swear, I'll listen."

The lieutenant watched the dun-colored stallion closely, suspicion and disbelief in her eyes before remembering rank and clearing her throat, turning back to the reports she had in front of her, once more dictating off the numbers on the sheet.

To be honest, Sanders had heard her perfectly well the last few times she'd gone over the massive amount of information. He had feigned ignorance, however, because he needed to hear it again and again to make sure he hadn't been hearing his own pessimistic thoughts in his head. If Dandelion was to be believed, the life of First Company, the battalion and by extension the city, were all about to be ended very shortly.

The news Dandelion had was grim indeed. Pinned with their backs to the water, the unit was surrounded on three sides by thousands of dogs constantly trying to breach their positions and crush them. Fortunately, the buildings leading into the harbor provided excellent cover and forced the mongrels into kill zones, allowing minimal manpower for maximum effect. But the company was running low on ammunition, even for their rifles. All their attached steam wagons were destroyed, and they had to rotate their Section Five detachment mages to allow a few to rest every so often and recover from the use of so much magic. Casualties were mounting and the dogs were always pressing in, cutting off some ponies from their squads and even entire platoons at a time from the main body of the group. Sometimes these small ragtag survivors would fight their way back, but always a few ponies short.

The mare finished her briefing again and looked at Captain Sanders exasperatedly, undoubtedly ready to lecture him on paying attention to his subordinates, only to find the good captain watching her intently. She blanched, bowing her head and waiting for a reprimand. Fortunately for her, Sanders was a former academy lieutenant himself, and understood ignorant superiors quite well.

"Is that all, Lieutenant?"

A silent nod was her reply, obviously not trusting herself to keep professional and not spout out apologies.

"All right, then. Here's my new plan."

With the sweep of a tan leg, the table they were sitting at was suddenly swept clear, documents and bullets flying in every direction as he cleared a space before setting down a hastily drawn map of First Company's positions, launching immediately into his new idea on how to dig in far more effectively, a bewildered Lieutenant Dandelion barely holding on as she tried to process everything at once.

71st Royal Army Battalion Garrison

Command Center

Twilight Sparkle was no military strategist, but even she could tell that things were looking even worse on paper than they were on the ground (a rarity, Sergeant Gunn had informed her humorously). After dismissing the soldiers to be patched up, Colonel Eye had turned to Twilight and Spike, and here they were now, at the master tactical map of the battle at the unicorn mage's request...and she suddenly didn't want to see it.

"As you can see," Colonel Eagle Eye began, standing before the map right now. "We're not having the best of luck. I initially deployed First and Second Company to find and engage the enemy. To our best knowledge, Second Company has taken enormous losses, and First Company has fallen out of contact near the harbor."

The Colonel pointed these areas out, but they were fortunately already marked in red pen, clean and precise. Spike was taking notes on several pieces of dispatch paper, preparing a report to the Princesses from his seat, which happened to be his now removed helmet. His spirits had been raised slightly at seeing that Lieutenant Razor, Eagle Eye's aide, had returned with a tray full of coffee mugs. The green dragon had distributed them to the troopers, then the Colonel, and then offered one to Twilight, who hesitated. Normally, she would have turned the drink down, especially at this time of day, but considering the events that had occurred today, she felt that one might keep her sane, and accepted the caffeinated drink, as did Spike.

A glance over her shoulder revealed that, of the squad, only Sergeant Gunn remained in the room, his coffee mug set on a table and sipping at it occasionally. The dark blue stallion had finally removed his helmet, also setting it on the ground, as well as his gun yoke and saddlebags, though he kept his body armor on. The black ash and mud caking his face remained, but the clear line of where his helmet had been revealed his short clipped black mane once more, and the battledress shirt was plastered to those enormous muscles of his, easily able to rival Big Macintosh's...

Twilight snapped her head back around, desperate to bring her attention back to matters at hand. This was a war zone, as archaic as the term was, and she needed to get this information to the Princesses! Well, Spike needed to, but she figured it would be bad appearances to not know about her own message.

Fortunately, the exchange only lasted seconds, and Colonel Eye was just moving on to the next part of the map, one dangerously close to the garrison.

"I deployed Third Company as our defensive bulwark to keep the way into the garrison and City Center open to retreating units, and Fourth to provide air support throughout the city with Sixth on long range support. Fifth Company was, obviously, split up to support the three on the line. Afterwards-"

"Woah! Hang on!" proclaimed Spike, scribbling furiously before pausing and asking "How do you spell 'bulwark?'"

He finally reached her, laying there on the snow-covered yellow grass, ducking as a volley of rounds whizzed over his head. He leaned down, his muzzle nudging her side to see if she was alive still. His nose came away bloody, and he felt his lungs sting as he took a sharp inhale of breath from the cold air.

"Trooper down!" he heard himself yell, yet he could not remember giving his brain the order to say it. "I need a medic over here!"

His neck strained as he slowly pushed her onto her uninjured side, hearing her grunt of pain. Three neat, bloody holes were punched along the mare's ribs, and he felt his heart sink before he quickly scampered to her head, a hoof at her jaw and the other pushing her goggles up. Her eyes squinted open, looking up at the stallion above her, and he sighed as he saw she was still conscious, his breath misting the cold air as he said "Sandy...hang on. I'll get you outta here. Where's that medic?"

His head snapped around, glancing at the battlefield around him. This was only supposed to be a routine patrol, dangit. How could things get bucked up so fast? Overhead, a griffon flew by, the carbine sputtering in its hands

before a shell from an Equestrian recoilless rifle vaporized the flying creature. He covered Sandy as he felt debris and pieces of flesh and bone bounce off his neck and body armor. They were getting out. No matter what.

The coffee sucked. But Short knew that was how it went in the Army. Bad, bitter, watery coffee was a staple of service, a standard that was proudly adorned and the last thing a soldier would even think of correcting. Currently, his mug was resting on the table before him, and he'd lean forward every few minutes and take another gulp, grateful for the caffeine to keep him awake. Coffee was a big thing in the Stop family, especially given the long hours and early days they all had in their professional lives.

The mess hall was, surprisingly, not as empty as Short thought it would be. Recovering wounded, medical ponies on break, logistics personnel with bags under their eyes, even a few other troopers like him were all sitting around the room, trying to reconnect with the lives they'd been living scarcely a day ago. Short had volunteered for every mission offered since he'd come to Stalliongrad, seventeen of them in four years, and he'd seen more death and destruction in these last few hours than in all of that time. The memories of those cold, dark hills still surfaced time and time again.

He blew across the top of his coffee, feeling the frown on his brows tugging at his face. He felt exhausted, his sleep deprivation not helping out his battle fatigue, and he could feel the negative thought stumbling around in his mind. He'd already snapped at Twilight over a small thing, who knew what he'd do next?

Like maybe not talk to her? Dangit. He had to apologize, he reasoned as he took another sip, feeling the aches in his neck. The things he'd said and the way he'd seen her hurt, he knew he'd screwed up. Now he had to fix it, one way or another. He turned his attention to the corner as the tape player somepony had set up began turning out a scratchy but still discernable beat. Something from Zebrabwe he'd heard called samba. It had a slow beat to it, unlike the other songs he'd heard, and wondered idly if it was some zebra's mix tape.

"Hey, soldier. Mind if I share the table?"

Short had to swallow hard to prevent himself from spitting out the mouthful as the object of his thoughts seemingly materialized out of nowhere at his flank, choking for a second before he turned to her, coughing as she watched him, a mixture of humor and worry on her face.

"What?" he gasped, trying to buy himself some time to recover as he felt the air bubbles slide down his throat. Twilight cocked her head to the side, an eyebrow raised. "An acquaintance of mine told me that no one licks alone. Obviously, you're drinking and not hitting the salt, but I'm hoping the rule still applies."

Rubbing his throat with a hoof, Short nodded, jerking his head to the table. "Sure."

The unicorn mare stepped up, glancing around for a stool. When none proved to be nearby, she decided to simply stand at the table like Short, smiling a little awkwardly. "Well, you're talking to me, that's something at least."

"Yeah... Short replied, reasoning that his voice didn't sound like it had been scratched with –too- much sandpaper and clearing his throat. "Yeah. It is."

The silence stretched between the two of them for a few minutes, a strange little divide that had broken the quick friendship they had been building a mere hour ago. Now, neither could meet the other's eyes, glancing at everything but the pony across the table. The low murmur of conversation in the background and the slow, soothing beat of the samba filled the gap, giving them ample fodder to concentrate on as a distraction. Short was suddenly incredibly fixated with the cigar marks on the table, while Twilight glanced at a couple a few tables over, an exhausted looking Pegasus sitting next to a zebra, the latter dressed in the battledress of a trooper and comforting the former, obviously an aviator. Just as she contemplated stepping over to speak to them, the Pegasus smiled up at the zebra before leaning over, and the unicorn's eyes went wide as she turned back to Short, a small tinge of red on her cheeks.

"So...still in your gear, I see. Everypony else is unloading in the barracks."

Indeed, Short (like his sergeant in the Command Center) still wore his battledress and armor, having removed his gun yoke, saddlebags and helmet, all three at his hooves under the table. The layer of grime in his

coat was still present as well, turning him from grey to a sickly mottled black-and-white color, like coal left on the fire for a few minutes.

He shrugged, eyes moving from his coffee to hers for a second before he leaned in, sipping his drink again. "Didn't feel like taking it off. If we get stormed, it'll be right back on anyway. Maple and Azure can go roll in the hay all they like, I've got nothing to be clean for."

The mage blinked, straightening her neck as the names registered in her mind. "Wait, what? Those two? They're -involved-? But-"

"Didn't see it, did you?" Short smiled knowingly. "Took me months to figure out. Never figured Azure would be one for the brainiac type, but it's not like Maple's a complete nerd, at least."

Twilight's jaw almost literally dropped, the shock evident on her face as she attempted to process the information running through her mind. Azure, the big strong draft mare, and Maple, the scrawny and nervous kid...were *intimate*? It wasn't possible! That, of course, led to other thoughts, images about just what the couple might be up to with such limited time. Suddenly, the soft music in the background became her worst enemy, like something out of one of her trashy romance novels, and she felt the heat in her cheeks rise...

At least, that's what she thought until she heard Short's guffaws and looked up, realizing she'd been tricked! Outfoxed by a single thought! She gawked at him, eyebrows raised and blush gone before she grinned and chuckled. "You idiot!"

"I gotcha!" Short quipped, rising onto his rear hooves and doing a small dance of celebration, drawing out his victory for all to see, minute as it was. Fortunately, they didn't get much more than a few glances, some raised eyebrows and mutterings about 'too much caffeine.' Finally, however, they both had to come down from their humor high, small smiles still evident on their muzzles as they quieted down, listening to the tape play another song, this one a little more upbeat.

"Thought you were prepping the note to the Princesses?" Short finally asked, taking another sip of coffee. Twilight nodded in agreement, suddenly feeling a light rumble to her stomach and remembered she hadn't

eaten since she'd gotten off the train, what felt like years ago instead of earlier this day.

"I'm letting Spike take care of it. I realized halfway through his initial setup that it would be a lot of note taking and very little of me actually writing a letter. So, I asked the Colonel if I could get something to eat. Speaking of which..."

Ten minutes, a glass of water and one corn on wheat sandwich later, Short finally mustered up the courage to say "Hey, listen. About what I said earlier. I just kinda snapped. Y'know, the pressure of the attack, and the lack of sleep last night."

Fortunately, Twilight accepted it with no undue haste. "Water under the bridge now, trust me. All forgiven. It's just good to have somepony around who understands."

Abruptly, Short's demeanor shifted from morose to wicked, a smirk quickly on his muzzle and a glint in his eye. Twilight was almost shocked by the appearance of a second mood swing, but quickly felt mounting suspicions as she traced back her wording. She couldn't think of anything she'd said to enact that kind of reaction.

Fortunately, Short had the habit of cutting straight to the chase, alleviating her worries...only to replace them with a whole new set. "Speaking of having someone...I notice you've been a little sweet on Sergeant Gunn."

Oh, he was joking again. She smiled, chuckling as she shook her head and said "Ha ha, very funny. But it's too soon to use that joke again."

But Short's smirk dropped, his own head shaking as he replied "No, I'm serious. You've been doing little things here and there, but it's got him a bit flustered, confused. You mean to tell me you're not –trying- to flirt with him?"

"What? No! I just met him a few hours ago! We've talked a bit, nothing more!"

"Sometimes that's all it takes. Little word of warning, though..." Short glanced around, frowning before saying, under his breath "If you're not

actually interested, watch your wording in the future. Gunn's had a...very rocky past."

"Rocky?"

"Don't tell him I told you about this, but the Sarge has been in the battalion for near on ten years. He's seen quite a few friends die before him, and he takes it hard. The troopers under his command are his responsibility, almost like they were his foals. Soldiers die in war, sure, but Gunn sees it as a failure on his part."

Twilight bit her lip, glancing at the radio only out of partial interest as it switched songs on the tape once more, then looked back, feeling a little guilt. She –had- known what she'd said could be misconstrued as trying to get intimate when she was simply being nice, and now she realized just how emotionally distraught the sergeant might be.

"So...you think that's how he sees it?"

Short shrugged, wiping at his brow absently, his leg coming away with more grime. "I'm not sure. He's a hard stallion to read. Just be careful, that's all. I know how hard it is to be the pony that loses something like that."

"You mean you and baseball?"

Short flinched, his gaze snapping up to Twilight once more, all hard angles and accusatory staring. She, however, stood rock steady against the emotional onslaught of his stare, all the anger and bitterness she had detected earlier back once more in full force. She'd thought over what he'd said at the train station and how he'd avoided her question. He'd been proud to speak of his family and the sport, but the problem itself lay not in the act or tradition itself, but in –himself-. His anger at himself for something to do with it. She was, in essence, guessing with that last comment, but it seemed to have gotten the effect she was looking for. Not only did she need to take him off topic (thank Celestia for that, at least) she also wanted to find out if some of his bitterness may lay in his distant past as well as recent.

They were quiet for a few minutes more, just glaring at each other across the table, listening to the buzz of background noise. Short, his eyes burning

full of an accusatory anger that was boiling from some previously undiscussed well of remorse, and Twilight, her expression calm and collected, though that was far calmer than the bundle of nerves she was inside. Had she said too much? Was he finally going to say he never wanted to see her again? This conversation had been awkward from the start, but she had pushed it in this direction.

Finally, Short opened his mouth, about to speak-

When the PA system blared with Colonel Eye's voice. *"All units to battlestations! Repeat, all units to battlestations! Hostiles sighted at the perimeter! This is not a drill! All units, report to your stations at once! Both medical shifts are hereby on active duty, and all soldiers capable of holding a rifle are to get to the trenches immediately!"*

Short was immediately up, flipping his helmet onto his head and reaching up, tightening the hoof-friendly chin strap before heaving his saddlebags over his back, the gun yoke now firmly in position. He glared over at Twilight as the mess hall's other occupants streamed past them, the pitch of activity now changed as they blew out the door.

"This isn't over. You've dug up a can of worms, Twilight."

With that, Short pulled up his face mask, sliding the goggles down in the same motion, turning him into just another trooper out there, fighting for his nation...and his life.

"You've got to get out of here."

She seemed adamant on that fact, resisting all his attempts to help her up, haul her away from this brief border spat. He never should have requested to transfer Sandy into his squad, was a complete idiot about that fact. Now, here they were, in this situation.

He was pulling her away over his shoulders now, in an assisted carry as he glanced around. "Medic!" he called, even though he knew there wasn't one coming. "Sarge?" he called out, frowning as he attempted to get his head on straight and find his bearings. They were separated, that much was a fact, but how far were they from friendly lines?

Another griffon flew overhead, then another, and another, all three heading southeast, back towards the Royal Army outpost.

Buck. How many had they lost here? And where would it go now? Actual war, or just swept under the rug like so many other incidents like this? The Colonel was out of his mind for letting the Mayor tell him what to do...

Abruptly, something dropped, right in front of him, clattering off the rocks. His eyes widened behind his goggles. "Grenade!" he yelled out of reflex, dropping to the ground and throwing his hooves over his neck. Suddenly, however, Sandy's weight left his shoulders, and it took him a horrible, agonizingly long second to figure out what that meant. He spun around, just in time to see the wounded mare throw herself –right onto the grenade–.

"SANDY, NO!" he yelled, but too late. The explosive detonated, mere meters from him. Had Sandy not done what she did, the blast would have killed them both. As it happened, the mare was thrown into the air, crashing back down to the ground a few feet away.

"Sandy!" he cried, galloping up and tearing his face mask off, shoving the barrel of his rifle aside as he rolled her over again to see her wounds. This time, however, he knew she wouldn't make it. Her vest, already weakened by the bullet holes, had been ripped to shreds over her belly, exposing the flesh beneath. It wasn't pretty.

But she was still alive. Barely. He turned her face towards him, watching those eyes open one last time.

"Sandy..." he said, though it was quieter this time, more of a plea than a call to her. But it was a plea that went unheard as she weakly shook him off, her breath coming in wet, bloody gasps as what was left of her heart and lungs tried to keep her going.

"You need to...get out of here. You're...the last one of the squad left. Go find the lieutenant, tell him...tell him what happened here."

She coughed, spraying blood over her jaw, and though he leaned forward to help her, a hoof placed on his chest stopped him, not through physical strength, for hers was gone, but through the unspoken request: let me die with some dignity.

She looked up at him, one last time, and he could see himself reflected in her eyes.

"You need to live, Lock. You need to...live..."

"Sergeant?"

Gunn's head jerked up, knocking into the handle of his coffee, spilling it on the floor.

"Ah, manure!" the sergeant cursed, debating whether to clean it up or pull his equipment on, but a hoof on the shoulder made him look up at Eagle Eye, the pony who'd awoken him.

"Yessir. What can I do for you?"

"You alright?" asked the senior officer, frowning. "You kind of phased out on me."

Gunn nodded, slowly, trying to keep his grips with reality intact. "Yessir. Just being haunted by some ghosts today, is all."

The Colonel nodded, his hoof patting Gunn's shoulder briefly before coming down. "I understand. Get to your squad, I'll clean up the coffee."

"Thank you, sir," Gunn replied, snapping a salute before slamming his helmet down over his head, turning and cantering down the hallway.

Time to leave the past behind and live in the present. There were troopers counting on him.

Chapter 9

In the Trenches

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

71st Royal Army Battalion, 3rd Company

Battalion Garrison, Defensive Trenchworks

They were coming. The third, and last, forward outpost had just pulled out, and they were barely a block away. All of the posts were in different locations in an arc around the garrison, each an extra mile from the fortress, and with this last one, the dogs would be right on top of them. Major Zo Di'ac snorted, watching her breath mist up once more in the cold air. The snowfall was coming down heavily, blanketing everything in a layer of white powder that, at the very least, hid the trenchworks marginally.

While the garrison was a very dominating fortress, it's main flaw was the lack of actual defenses. Machine gun towers were at each corner, and heavy artillery boomed from inside its walls, as well as the service pad, but there was little else. As such, the Colonel had ordered several rows of trenches dug in a circle around the garrison with a single road for friendly hoof and vehicular traffic. The trenches themselves were formidable, given more time and concentration than the defenses in Steed Square. Each trench was topped by sandbags, and the first two rows had several strings of barbed wire strung out in front of them. Bunkers holding machine guns and recoilless rifles were hidden among the fortifications, and each trench held a multitude of troopers as well as a few mortar pits in them. But was it enough? Final count told that all the garrison's able-bodied defenders amounted to about three-hundred and fifty soldiers at last count, and more than half of those were troopers. The rest were a mix of exhausted Pegasi, wagon drivers and unequipped artillery troopers and other auxiliaries, most of whom were unable to participate in the grueling trench battle that was to come. The reports from the outposts told of at least a thousand dogs incoming, probably more.

The six battlewagons had spread out in front of the garrison's main gates, their cannons primed and aimed out into the still intact neighborhoods around the garrison. Steamwagons were positioned at the other two gates on the sides, their machine guns not as lethal but certainly still formidable. Troopers and supply runners streamed in and out of the gates behind the wagons, delivering supplies and more fighters to the trenches, where their blue helmets helped them fit against the white and gray background. She could see the troopers moving through the fortifications, their heads low and their steel caps bobbing, a stream of flesh that was supposed to hold back the juggernaut coming at them. The garrison's field engineers had already laid a field of mines out behind the trenches, at great risk to dogs that had run ahead, eager to get to the slaughter early.

Di'ac glanced behind her at the mortar crew, setting up in the pit they occupied. The portable tubes hadn't been broken out for fear of impeding speed, but now that they literally had nowhere to go the Colonel had ordered them handed out like candy, and they had thousands of shells ready to load and drop on the enemy. She glanced down at the aged ordnance, noting their faded labels, yet the way each still shined underneath the dull appearance of age.

'Old they may be, but their use has not faded to we,' she thought to herself, remembering that though Equestrian weapons technology was far behind Hegemonic arms, they had still managed to hold the enemy this long with these odds. That, in itself, was something worth celebrating. They would stand their ground and fight until the very end to keep the main bulk of the enemy out of City Center, where the already feeble remnants of the police force were ready to break under the strain that the raids into the area was causing. The smoke on the horizon told of a destroyed police precinct, though their headquarters in the Center remained intact. A force without a leader was simply a rabble, however.

The radio pack Drab had brought crackled to life, and the Colonel's voice said *"Major Di'ac, report."*

She glanced at Drab before she leaned down, depressing the chin pad with her jaw, squinting as she replied. "Colonel, I am here."

"Fourth Company's reporting that the forward elements of the dog force should be visible any minute now. Have you got all the personnel needed?"

Needed, no. Available, yes. Di'ac glanced back, seeing a few troopers finally scramble into the trenches, the giant gates behind the battlewagons finally sliding shut on their steam-powered mechanisms, closing with an ominous thudding sound as the two plates of iron locked together.

"I have all we are. Here's hoping we live long enough to see the stars. Di'ac out."

She turned back, sliding her helmet back on before righting her rifle-yoke.

Time to command. She turned, barking out orders left and right, guiding troopers first one way, and then another, snapping at a mortar crew when the loader pony dropped a shell on accident, scrambling to grab the bit-handle.

Time for one last march.

71st Royal Army Battalion

Garrison Command Center

Colonel Eagle Eye knew their reckoning was coming. He knew that in the next hour, whether they would live or die would be decided, here and now. He squared his jaw as he looked out towards the trenchworks beyond the garrison walls, able to view all from his window. For the first time since the fighting had started, the artillery was silent, their crews taking a brief rest before the real fight, their guns being recalibrated and the last few dozen shells hauled out and prepared for the heavy fighting ahead, for it was risk everything or lose everything at this point. Pegasi flapped in and out of his sight, all the ponies he could muster up that weren't immobile. He'd ordered them put on stimulants, knowing full well that any more strain would kill several from exhaustive collapse and extreme cardiac arrest. He didn't care at the moment, for he'd made up his mind. If the garrison was overrun and the only way to survive was to run, he would stay where he was and order everypony else to retreat to City Center and relocate to the police HQ. He'd relieve himself of command and pass it to Major Di'ac. She was a more experienced field commander than him anyway, and knew how to make the hard choices without lamenting over them later like he was now.

The blood of dozens of ponies was spilled over his hooves, and gallons more were going to be poured on them. But he'd made his choice, his chance for redemption. He wore combat armor, tight-fitting and uncomfortable in the years since he'd zipped a suit on, and had grabbed a rifle-yoke as well. He'd sell his life dearly, for it was no noble death for a soldier to simply give himself to the end. He'd fight as hard as his troopers had done since the attack began. They'd held their ground, despite their lack of actual battle experience, and they'd done him proud.

The clatter of hooves resounded behind him, and he turned, peering back to spot Twilight dashing into the room, paying no attention to the now-one-eyed guard at the door who tried to stop her. Spike was hot on her heels, for once without the look of exuberance and joy as he glanced over at Razor, currently bent over a map and writing calculations on a notepad. He had also ordered Razor to line up the next deployment and present his charts to the Major if it came to that.

As Twilight trotted over, a look of twisting anxiety on her face, Eye turned to her, finally taking his gaze off the coming battle. Or, given the situation, the coming graveyard seemed far more apt.

"Miss Sparkle. Spike. What can I do for you two?" If it were up to him, he'd have them both air-lifted out, but he possessed no air chariots, and he doubted there was a spell to make unicorns fly.

"Has the attack started yet?" the mage queried, taking up position next to the Colonel to overlook the field, her eyes peering intently. Eagle shook his head, turning back to the glass. "My forward scouts are retreating with the dogs on their heels. It'll begin soon enough."

A pause stretched between the two (three, Eye reminded himself. Spike was right next to Twilight) as they watched the battalion dig in. What was left of it, anyway. The force below was a mixture of full-time soldiers, reservists and a few civilian volunteers who had been given a crash course in equipment handling and sent out there. The Colonel wasn't happy about the prospect of having trigger-happy civilian ponies out in the trenches, but a jaw that could bite a trigger could still be used, and he accepted those who stepped forward.

"Is there anything I can do?" the purple unicorn finally asked, her eyes still fixed straight ahead. "Anything to help?"

Eagle turned to her, frowning. "You sent the message with the updated sitrep?"

"Yes sir."

"Any reply?"

"No."

"Then I'm afraid that the most you could possibly do at this point is either get down into those trenches yourself or get the hay out of the city."

Five Minutes Later

The Garrison's Armory

The unicorn-made helmet fit her more comfortably, thanks to the hole drilled in the top for her horn. It set low over her brow, and though she was unused to feeling the blue steel on her head, she knew that going back out there without it would be a death sentence. The armor was a little snug on her as well, though she supposed it was because they didn't have time to find her exact size.

"Alright, little filly," said the quartermaster, a gruff, older mare with a patch over one eye and a nasty scar across her face, her yellow flank decorated by a small treasure chest Cutie Mark. "You're all suited up. Armor, helmet, extra vittles, goggles. You want a gun-yoke? Most mages take them as backup."

Her automatic response, and the right one to her, would be to turn it down. Twilight didn't want to kill anything or anypony. But then, what was she doing down here, playing dress-up and valiant heroine in this get-up? If she wasn't going to kill an obvious enemy to save Equestria, what kind of pony was she?

She looked up, nodding quietly. The quartermaster, a sergeant major from the insignia on her vest, nodded back understandingly, turning to the weapons rack and selecting a seemingly random yoke from the dozens of others.

"At least you get to go fight," said a voice from her side, which a quick glance would reveal showed came from Spike, looking grumpy as always. "I have to stay behind and help out in the command center." Twilight knew the pouting baby dragon routine was just an act, a taste of normality in this otherwise alien day, and she appreciated it, knowing just how worried for her he was.

"Spike," she replied condescendingly, keeping the act going. "You know they don't have armor in your size, and you can't even handle any of the weapons. What're you gonna do, launch yourself out of a mortar?"

"Could work," Spike replied, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "Dragon artillery. Let 'em get a taste of these!" He flexed his biceps menacingly, and it took Twilight a second to realize he wasn't joking.

Before she could reply, however, the sergeant major was back, and she drawled "Oh, Ah don't know about all that. Why don't Ah just stick you in a bucket and hang you from Miss Sparkle's vest here?"

And just like that, Spike's faked enthusiasm turned into real wariness. "Actually," he said, slowly backing towards the door as he stared at the quartermaster with wide eyes. "Razor –was- saying something about needing some help...with...stuff...Bye Twi', goodluck!" And with a scramble of movement, the little purple dragon was out of the room.

The violet prodigy chuckled as she watched her dear assistant leave, feeling a little sorrow that she may not see him again. She had no doubt that Spike was out of danger, not so long as Colonel Eye was there to watch him. The fact that she was sticking her neck out into the trenches, however, meant he might be the one facing loss instead.

"Ah know that look," said the quartermaster, stepping around and slipping the gun-yoke over Twilight's neck, aligning the rifle on its gimble and pulling the belt of ammunition out of the can strapped to the other side, speaking between clenched jaws. "That's the look one has when they're not sure they'll come back."

Twilight glanced over at the other mare, only slightly surprised. She supposed it might be obvious, as she hadn't been trying to conceal her thoughts very well. Still, maybe a discussion with a soldier who'd seen it all might help out.

"Tell me, Sergeant...uh..."

"Marigold," the quartermaster replied, startling the mage for a second. "Ah know, not the most intimidating of names, but that's what happens. Anyway, Ah know just how you look, darlin', because I looked just like that every time I shipped out. Ah always made sure there was a mirror nearby when Ah said goodbye to my foals, and as soon as they were gone Ah looked at myself, and Ah always had the same expression."

With a clean snap, the rifle took the belt, allowing it to drape across the front of Twilight's vest, through a few loops designed specifically for that very function. Marigold straightened up, turning the unicorn around and tightening a few straps here and there, making sure the mage was ready to go.

"Just remember, Sparkle. You'll be fighting for your country out there. Win or lose, live or die, you'll do all your loved ones proud. Ah know you're not a real soldier, but from what Ah hear you've got the two things needed above all else, and you've got 'em in spades; guts and luck. Lots of both. Especially the latter, that's the important one."

Twilight nodded, turning back to Marigold and trying her best at a salute. It earned her a chuckle from the one-eyed Southern mare, who turned the unicorn back around, shoving her a bit. "Work on that. You're still a bit stiff, Ah can tell. Now go out there and kick some flank!"

Garrison Trenchworks

Trench 1-A

Short should have known that he'd get put out on the front line, but he hadn't expected to literally be right in the very first trench, the first one to be hit when the dogs attacked. Still, he had no complaints to be voiced, and the other troopers huddling with him in the muddy slush that was a result of the snowfall would have hushed him quiet again.

The dogs could be heard, out in the distance, howling and barking and firing wildly as they came closer and closer, obviously thirsting for equestrian blood. Smoke boiled away in the distance, and the heavy artillery had finally opened up once more in the garrison's walls, pounding

the canine advance remorselessly. But, without Pegasi spotters and sophisticated adjustments, the mortars had neither the targets nor the range to do the same. Not yet.

He glanced around at his squad. Maple, amazingly, wasn't his twitchy, jittery self, instead remaining steady and staring at the ground, his eyes blank. Short was worried for the colt, worried about the trauma that may have been inflicted on him these past few hours, but there was nothing he could do now. Azure was still the rock-steady pillar of strength the squad relied on...the complete squad, anyway. She peered over the lip fearlessly, the big guns on her back primed and ready to fire. Her blue coat was stained with mud, just like everypony else, but on her it seemed more tragic, for some reason, blotting out the blue star of her Cutie Mark.

And Sergeant Gunn. Still solid and dependable, up on the edge as well, glaring out into what would become a charnel killing ground. Tactics like this hadn't been used for centuries in warfare, but it was all they had, and they all bucked up to them, Sergeant Lock Gunn even more than everyone else. Whereas everypony else was afraid of war, Gunn embraced it, let himself sink into the violence and mayhem and become a killing machine in the midst of the chaos. Short had seen it more than two-dozen times before today, and he had no doubt that if anyone would come out of this alive, it would be the sergeant.

Abruptly, however, his ears were drawn to the squishing of moving hooves, the grumble of discontented troopers forced to move aside, and...

"Excuse me! Oh, excuse me please, coming through!"

Twilight?

Sergeant Lock Gunn had lived through many events in his life. He was the proud eldest of two little brothers, Stock and Barrel. He'd served for over a decade in the Royal Equestrian Army, survived over a dozen battles and killed who knew how many enemies of Equestria. He'd lived in the hills for weeks on end, in the cold and bitter winds that threatened to skin an unwary man, and lived a life more fulfilling than any other pony could. He thought he'd seen and done it all.

But when a former VIP and good acquaintance suddenly began pardoning her way through a muddy trench, her battledress and armor completely

clean and her hooves stepping carefully (if absently) over puddles, his mind went blank.

Twilight was here, in the front trenches. She didn't belong here! Quickly, he turned, pushing his way through the troopers around him without a single word. Once the wave became apparent, they simply began parting before him, letting him get through with no hassle. Certainly, he was going faster than Twilight, and he reached her in seconds, whereas she'd needed a minute to get as far as she had. Which wasn't far at all. She was so out of her element, excusing herself and cautiously moving around troopers in the tight confines of the trench, it was almost painful to watch. Gunn knew he had to get her out of here, regardless of what she'd done earlier. She wasn't a soldier, and this was more than a brief scrap.

Finally, he reached her, standing directly in her path. Twilight, on the other hand, didn't seem to recognize him at first, for she muttered "Excuse me," before her helmeted head smacked into his chest, causing her purple rump to land in a puddle. She glared up, angrily, before recognizing the blue horse and blinking in surprise. "Sergeant Gunn. Oh, uh...sorry about that."

"You've got a problem," Gunn remarked, shaking his head slightly as she struggled to rise again. "Miss Twilight, you do realize that we're about to come under attack?"

"Of course!" she replied as she finally righted herself, and trace of a smile gone from her expression as her eyes hardened. "Why do you think I'm out here? Just to play dress-up and drink tea?" Gunn blinked in surprise at the steel in her words, deciding to tread carefully in the future. He may have underestimated her, it seemed.

"Look, the dogs are going to pour over us, and it's too late to send you back now."

"I can handle myself, Gunn."

"You're sure? Because-"

What he'd been about to say, however, died on the tip of his tongue as, with a high-pitched shriek, a white flare flew high overhead, soaring into the sky and illuminating the dark ground. Mere seconds later, a blue flare shot up from further back in the city, a spot of color against the gray, smoky sky.

"What are those?" Twilight asked, her voice low as all the troopers' eyes fixed themselves to the falling balls of light.

"Signal flares," Gunn replied, his voice full of confusion. "They haven't been used in war for decades. Even we phased them out after the wireless was invented. They usually-"

Once more, however, he was cut off as a great chorus of howls, shrieks and barks rang out through the city streets, bounding and echoing off the walls and creating ghosts from all directions. Troopers swiveled around, rifles at the ready, to meet a threat that turned out to not be there. After a few seconds, it became apparent that the threat was coming from forwards, and that-

"SCOUTS SIGHTED!" yelled a spotter from further down the line, pulling away from his tripod-mounted sighting scope. "COUNT AT LEAST ONE HUNDRED HOSTILES IN PURSUIT!"

"They usually signal a charge..." Gunn finally finished, his heart leaping up into his throat as he felt adrenaline shoot through his veins.

Like it or not, ready or not, the Royal Army had been found by the dogs.

Chapter 10

Under Fire

Radio Conversation Log

Originating from over Blind Horse Bluff, North-western Equestria

"Battleaxe, this is Katana Six-One. Just passed the last marker. Estimated time to arrival at Stalliongrad is one hour."

"Confirm, Six-One. Return to battle position. All units, prepare for aerial rotation, come to heading one-one-six. All units confirm."

"This is Longsword Element, we confirm."

"Falchion here. All units ready."

"Katana here. Just waiting for Six-One."

"Alright. All units, rotate. Course change, One-one-six."

"Battleaxe, Scabbard. Radio call from Canterlot. They've reestablished contact with the 71st, the situation's getting bad down there. Princess Luna is asking what's taking so long."

"You tell that prissy pony that we had to fly all the way from the north coast to get this far! She should be grateful we're doing this at all!"

"Uh, yes ma'am. I'll pass the information."

"They wanted help from the Matriarchy, they'll just have to wait for us to get there."

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

71st Royal Army Battalion, 3rd Company

Battalion Garrison, Defensive Trenchworks

Trench 1-A, Section 16

"HERE THEY COME!" rolled across the trenches, various troopers rushing to their stations, eager to finally have the tension and waiting broken but at the same time also dreading the slaughter that was to come. Rifles were cocked, machine guns steadied and mortars prepared, the crews standing ready with a chain of shells to drop. Gunn quickly nudged Twilight forward, pushing through the commotion of troopers hurrying to mount the firing step.

"If you're going to go through with this," he said over the commotion "You may as well get to your station!"

She said nothing, though this was from a lack of oxygen in her lungs as another trooper's rifle had accidentally knocked the air out of her. She allowed herself to be carried on, however, until Gunn dropped her unceremoniously onto the ground, her face splashing into a pile of muddy slush as the sergeant turned to regard the line. No one had started firing yet, but the reason didn't come to Twilight until she rose herself and spotted the dogs, still running straight at them. From earlier reports, this was nothing more than a probe, something to find the Equestrian defensive positions. Fortunately, the platoon lieutenants were relaying Major Di'ac's orders, calling out "STEADY!" every few minutes, an order to keep the high-strung troopers in line.

With a short, deep boom, one of the first dogs trod on a landmine, the explosive detonating beneath his paw and blasting him and several of his companions nearby into oblivion. Those taken by the shrapnel were discarded in bloody, ragged lumps. The edge of the minefield was a full four-hundred meters away, a little more than a quarter of a mile from the front trench. A rifle-yoke had the potential to hit targets at three-hundred meters, but only the remote chance. It was more advisable to engage at one-hundred and fifty, especially given the number of rounds needed to put the dogs down.

Behind the troopers, the mortars opened up, thunking their shells into the air. Royal Army pattern mortars could easily launch to a half a mile away, and the dogs charging towards the trenches were so close that the distance could be eyeballed. The high-explosive shells began bursting behind the edge of the minefield, wreaking horrendous casualties on the dogs not already killed by the mines, and yet the survivors still came on, despite the number they lost every second to the explosives.

Short growled, knowing exactly what the enemy was doing. By sending in a simple tenth of their force, the canine attack force could not only clear the way of any traps, but they could also expose Royal Army positions. Cruel tactics, to be sure, but it looked to be working, as twenty dogs had managed to evade death long enough to reach two-hundred meters, almost within effective rifle range. "Rifles ready!" barked a nearby lieutenant, and dozens of rifles along the main trench were cocked, their users peering down the sights. Twilight finally stumbled to her hooves, shaking her head and coughing as she glanced out at the charging enemy, quickly pulling her own rifle up clumsily. Short sighed, releasing his bit trigger and stepping over.

"Hey, Twilight?"

The mage didn't take her eyes off the enemy ahead, squaring herself into what she undoubtedly thought was an intimidating pose. "Yeah, Short?"

The stallion leaned forward, nudging a switch with his muzzle. "Your rifle works a hay of a lot better when the safety's off."

The mage blushed darkly in embarrassment, glancing at Short as the trooper gave her a small smile, retaking his position and lifting his rifle again, squinting down the sights.

"STEADY!" yelled the lieutenant as the dogs passed the one-eighty mark.

"C'mon already..." muttered Azure, the recoilless rifles on her back fully-loaded once more and her jaw itching to clamp the trigger. Next to her, Maple pressed himself against the trench wall as much as possible, his eyes wide in fright as he looked on at the charging horde that was getting continually smaller. Sergeant Gunn stood nearby, rock steady and emotionless as he listened to the crump of mortars, the explosions out on

the field and the howling of the dogs. Some in bloodlust, some in fear, and a lot in pain.

Finally, they passed one-fifty.

"FIRE AT WILL!" screamed the lieutenant. The order was repeated over the radio, but it was drowned out by all the rifles and machine guns letting loose at the same time. Recoilless guns boomed and snipers let their rifles fire on presighted targets. It was an overwhelming crescendo of noise and light, the muzzle flashes from the ends of the guns and the sounds they made flooding the senses and erasing everything else as every position on Trench 1-A let loose, followed second later by the elevated positions of 1-B and then by the snipers of 1-C. A wall of ordnance smashed into the dogs, eradicating them from the world and blasting their bodies to pieces, sending bloody chunks and globules of mud and ichor flying everywhere.

The gunfire only lasted thirty seconds, and by the end, no dog had made it past one-hundred and twenty meters. The battlewagons up by the gates hadn't even fired yet, and the heavy artillery was still silent. Pegasi flew overhead, ready to drop ordnance on larger hosts. As quickly as the action had begun, however, it was over just as quickly, shrapnel dropping to the ground like the snow around them, the blasted and bullet-ridden corpses of the dogs laying a very clear and obvious path through most of the minefield.

Azure drew herself up, spitting harshly against the lip of the trench. "Animals," she muttered as the recoilless rifles on her back ejected their empty shells, slamming a new pair into place. The draft mare glanced over at Maple who, unlike most rookies, had kept his head about him and actually aimed at the enemy rather than spraying bullets all over the place. Still, she noticed, the colt was breathing heavily, eyes wide and teeth still tight on the trigger, just a nervous twitch away from an accident. Gently, she bumped her weight into his flank, causing the brown colt to let go and look up in surprise. "Relax," she said, smiling easily. "You're alive. They're not. No reason to be stressing out."

Gunn scanned the battlefield once more, eye squinting through the sights as he looked for more enemies. But there was no more gunfire (aside from the occasional pop of a rifle) and the Pegasi were still high overhead, so the enemy had to be all dead. With another second, he exhaled at last, his

breath clouding in the snowy air, and pulled back, letting his jaw unclench and the rifle droop low on its gimbal. That hadn't been too bad, an even measure in terms of numbers, but the REA had the advantage in terms of firepower. Unfortunately, with the loss of so much of the minefield, they were going to have one hay of a time holding the next nine-hundred or so back. What was going on? Why didn't the dogs just swamp the trenches? It had worked across the rest of the city...

"First charge has been destroyed, Colonel," said Razor, listening to his own personal wireless set in the Command Center. Spike sat nearby, taking more notes on his dispatch pad, pretending to not look interested in the possibility of socializing with another of his kind.

Eagle Eye, however, was anything but pleased. He never took any delight from violence in and of itself, but he did have another emotion to replace pleasure, something with more meaning; hope. If the troopers could hold the trenches just like that for the next hour or so, the mythical air reinforcements should arrive...if they really were coming.

Abruptly, his eyes spotted a puff of smoke on the horizon, something rising above the rooftops from a few streets over. He squinted, trying to make out exactly what it might be...and then six more streaks of smoke joined the first in the sky, and his eyes snapped open in shock as he made the connection.

"INCOMING!" he shouted, galloping to the wireless in Razor's hand, depressing the speak button and bellowing "ALL UNITS, PREPARE FOR BOMBARDMENT!"

Too late. As the mortar shells fell on the Equestrian lines, at least a dozen ponies who'd stuck their curious heads over the trench line were blasted backwards, headless or simply in chunks. One colt was so badly wounded and screaming so horribly that a terrified trooper next to him fired a burst from their rifle, and the poor pony was silenced.

The bombardment continued, and Eagle Eye cursed, slamming a hoof to the floor. "Princessesdangit to hay! Where the buck did they get mortars?" He stalked over to the window once more, snatching up a pair of binoculars

as he did and lifting them to his eyes, glaring out at the dogs' positions, way on the other side of the neighborhoods.

There! Over the river, they were massing and preparing for another charge. A few hundred this time, most with automatic rifles, grenades, handguns. A few were making quite obvious tunnels below ground, no doubt to try and undermine the trenches. He'd have to get a notice to Major Di'ac about that. But he couldn't find the blasted mortars! And the shells continued to rain down! They were even falling inside the compound now, and the artillery gun wheeled around, the crew swinging a new shell into the breech and firing, the Royal Army mortars also opening up in a quick counter-barrage to try and destroy the enemy mortars.

He swept his eyes over the bridge once more, squinting at the mass of movement. Something big was pulling into position, and he had to zoom out a little in order to finally see what they were. When he saw, however, his heart practically leapt out of his throat.

Two dozen steamwagons were pulling into position to cover the dogs, painted in the black-and-white color scheme of the Stalliongrad police force. The insignia were defaced with crude graffiti, of course, but the heavy machine guns and armor still remained in place.

This day just got even worse, if that was possible.

Short found Twilight sheltered beneath a fallen beam, sprayed with mud and snow, her helmet being held in place by a hoof. Another shell slammed into the ground only a few meters away from their trench, and Short instinctively ducked as a shower of dirt fell onto him.

"Twilight!" he yelled. He had to make sure she was still okay. If she couldn't fight, she was useless. Plus, if anything happened to her...

He banished that thought, crouching down and nudging her purple side. His hoof met an invisible barrier, and she snapped her head up, very little fear in her eyes. Had she already accepted her fate, or was she just suppressing the terror? Regardless, Short gestured to her, yelling "You alright?"

"Never better!" she replied sarcastically, almost cut off by another falling shell, thumping into the mud and detonating flatly. Suddenly, a burst of machine gun fire, almost lost in the barrage, cut overhead, and Short pressed against the wall of the trench, listening carefully. Over the whistle of shells, the explosion of ordnance and touched off mines and the cries of wounded and dying ponies, one could, if they listened carefully, almost hear the rumbling of steam engines...

He rose up, ignoring Twilight's protests as he carefully peered over the lip of the trench. He was lucky, it turned out. Up on top, the shredded corpse of a unicorn lay, obscuring him from enemy eyes. But this and the fountains of dirt and snow couldn't obscure the fact that there was enemy armor pouring onto their position!

He dropped back down, shouldering into Twilight, hard.

"What the hay?" she snapped, her barrier taking the brunt of the blow and flaring purple.

"We need to move!" Short replied, looking back down the trench at Azure. She stood resolute as the big guns on her back thundered again, delivering high-explosive death to the dogs and their pilfered wagons. A little ways further, two ponies hefted and tossed a grenade between them, undoubtedly sending it flying far, but not far enough. Another shell slammed into the top of the trench, showering them all in dirt, and a long burst of bullets cut overhead.

"We're in trouble here!" Short yelled over the chaos, pushing Twilight along quickly as another shell impacted nearby. The dogs were getting better with their aim! If they were allowed to keep shelling the trenches, they'd soon have ordnance landing inside!

As the two stumbled along back to the squad, a deafening explosion rang out from friendly lines, the hiss of a launched projectile flying overhead and another, muted explosion. Short looked up once more, seeing the battleguns advancing, their cannons booming as they went. He was almost awed by the sight of an entire armored squad taking to the field, their heavy machine guns sending out a stitchwork of bullets towards the police wagons, one of which was already burning. He looked once more at the enemy charge to see Equestrian artillery and mortar shells exploding among their ranks, bombs dropped from Pegasi fliers and strafing runs

lighting up the darkening sky. Flames licked at the corpses of the previous charge as this one made it past one-hundred and fifty yards, still not bothered in the slightest by the amount of rifle and machine gun fire being poured out at them. The recoilless rifles, however, were beginning to have an effect, scoring hit after hit and destroying a few wagons here and there.

However, they were also providing large pieces of cover in the otherwise empty killing field that the Royal Army had so carefully prepared, and a large amount of dogs were making their way across. Even now, there was a charge heading directly towards their section of the trench!

"Twilight, up and fire!" Short yelled, grabbing the bit-trigger and straightening the rifle before clamping down, letting a burst of bullets away. Beside him, he heard Twilight shuffle around with her own gun-yoke before the staggering fire rang out. She still wasn't used to the recoil, it seemed, for the mage's weapon sputtered once, twice, and then one third, long burst that should have thrown her aim off. Abruptly, however, the ground disappeared in front of the dogs as a sheet of fire cut in a straight line before them, followed by a series of explosions that tore into the charging canines, setting them to either pieces or aflame.

Short ducked back into the trench as the mare fired off one, two more bursts before giving up and ducking down with him.

"How the hay did you know there were mines still out there?" he asked, barely able to keep the admiration and astonishment out of his voice. As a reply, Twilight simply smiled and replied "I didn't!"

Sergeant Major Wheatley Bread had never expected his squadron to actually see any action ever. Battlewagons were too precious a resource to waste hunting after outlaws in the hills around Stalliongrad, so he and the rest of the ponies under his command had to fill their time with maintenance. A lot of it, for there was nothing else to do. As a result, their vehicles were spick and span, shiny and ready to go, operating perfectly in the battle despite their lack of operation time.

The gun boomed again, dropping an empty casing into the shell basket below as the loader hauled another shell out, slamming it into the gun and closing the breech, a well practiced and choreographed routine. Bread

nodded in approval as he watched his crew at work, the gunner sighting left before depressing the trigger with his hoof, causing the entire turret to thunder and shake, the entire process beginning again.

"Target dusted!" the gunner exclaimed, pressing his eye back to the sight once more. "Sighting new target...acquired!" The shell slammed into place once more, the breech closing and the loader stepping into his corner to avoid the recoil of the gun, yelling out "She's hot!" The gun boomed again, dumping a third shell into a basket that Bread never thought would see anything close to full.

He was proud of his crew, alright. Their performance scores were absolutely the best of the squadron, which was even now sending their shells smashing into the front lines of the dog charge. However, Bread saw something strange in his own sight, something that had to be corrected. He rose, opening the hatch and peering out onto the flame-lit horizon. Where was it? He had it a second ago...

There! Flying through the smoke, something large and bulky...his eyes widened in fright as he realized the contours and shapes of the machine, ducking back down and yelling "Get us the buck out of here! Gyrocopter incoming!"

But too late. With a loud hissing sound, the attack craft let loose with a dozen rockets, spread out over the line of battlewagons. Four survived, one heavily wounded and unable to move, but the crew still alive. Two, however, did not. One went up when the rocket detonated on her main gun, causing the shell inside to go off and light up the entire magazine. As the rockets slammed into Bread's armored vehicle, one found the weak spot in between the body of the wagon and the turret, gutting it like a hen at a Canid Fall's Feast, spraying debris and shrapnel everywhere.

But the damage was not yet done. As the ponies on the walls and in the trenches attempted to retaliate with heavy machine gun and recoilless rifle fire, the gyrocopter nimbly avoided all the projectiles sent at it and came level with the garrison's Command Center for only the briefest second. Long enough to let loose another four rockets straight at the window. The glass was bulletproof, but not explosive proof.

Colonel Eagle Eye had just enough time to turn pale and mutter "Son of a bi-" before the window shattered and the Command Center was immolated in flames.

Canterlot

Royal Army High Command

Tactical Briefing Room

Princess Celestia had been completely unaware of Luna's pet project, a little something she'd done on her off-time when not involved in one of her other numerous hobbies. Only this time, the topic was something far more grave.

Royal Army Infiltrator Commandos. Also known as Project RAIC. So secret, no one in the civilian pony population knew of their existence. So secret, even Princess Celestia hadn't known.

Princess Luna was a strategist. Not a soldier. As much as she'd wanted to go on this excursion, she knew she would have to wait here as she sent her highly trained secret soldiers off to do their jobs. Do her dirty work.

But that didn't mean she had to sit idle on her tail and do nothing. Even now, she stood next to Major Montegro, previously General before she'd been demoted by Luna herself for not reacting immediately to the orders sent to Royal Army High Command. Instead, Montegro had wanted to correlate the evidence, get some Sky Corps scouts in the area and gather information. Luna had, in quite explicit words that left all the command staff bristling, informed Montegro of what the blue alicorn of the night thought of that plan. Of sacrificing an entire city while information was gathered.

Normally, Luna was a mare of information. But this time, she knew it was time for action. And so, she'd busted General Montegro to Major, four full demotions for failing to obey a direct order. And that order had been to immediately scramble every single RAIC trooper in Canterlot and have them onboard air carriers in less than an hour.

Air carriers worked exactly like the chariots that Celestia used to ferry herself and other important ponies around Equestria. The military version, however, was a touch more functional in both appearance and function. Square sides protected the soldiers riding, and an armored bottom defended the carrier from ground fire. The Pegasi pulling it also wore heavy belly armor for the same purpose, and there were even two Wonderbolts hauling the one the RAIC troopers were in, an unexpected development that was nonetheless useful.

Luna stood in the Command Center now, a headset perched over her ears, watching as the map was constantly updated, pins representing the RAIC troopers and other Equestrian military forces being moved around the map into different sectors. A flight of Sky Corps fliers from the 89th battalion were just taking off from Cloudsdale with an overland convoy of the 102nd from Manehattan following, but these wouldn't make it in time to be of any real help.

No, Luna thought as she glared up at the map, squinting at an assortment of green pins in the north, practically on the line between Stalliongrad's sector and Blind Horse Bluff. The real help would come from an unexpected source.

The real help would come from the 4th Airborne Division, a unit of some seven-thousand fliers. Dispatched hours ago from the Hippogryph Matriarchy's border outpost of Starhawk Point.

Chapter 11

The Desperation

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

71st Royal Army Battalion

Battalion Garrison, Defensive Trenchworks, Trench 1B

Major Di'ac couldn't believe her eyes. As the gyrocopter finally retreated from the battalion's retaliatory fire, the Command Center burned, long and bright, flames blazing from the broken window. She staggered forward a few steps, still staring before she realized what that meant. Colonel Eagle Eye was dead. So was Lieutenant Razor. And so were their chances of getting out of this alive.

No! She couldn't think like that. She was still here, and the troopers were still fighting. Most were too distracted to notice the horrible losses they were taking, horrible only because they had started with so few. Almost an entire platoon was gone now, killed just in this brief spat, and the dogs were preparing their third wave now, even while the second was still pounding at the trenches. The zebra turned, looking out over the battlefield again. The armored charge was halted for now, all enemy wagons either destroyed or simply disabled. Incredible. They must have gotten the police vehicles from roadblocks and other response areas, for the precinct had only fallen a short time ago.

Zo Di'ac strode forward, her brow low and her head ducking as she re-entered her trench, approaching Drab and tapping him on the shoulder, saying "Inform the battlewagons to press! And tell all troopers not to fall to less!"

A shell detonated near the lip of the trench, and the Drab raised his head once more to yell "We've been getting some suggestions to fall back, ma'am! What do I tell the platoon leaders?"

"You tell them we have nowhere –to- fall back to lay! This is our last stand, and we either win or we die today!"

She glanced up, suddenly spotting a trio of soldiers about to clamber out of the trench via the back ramp, and she bellowed out "Where are you going with such elation? I gave no order to retreat from your stations!"

"Buck that, ma'am!" yelled one of them, a corporal by his sleeve patch. "I've gotten the manure kicked out of me for eight hours straight! You wanna stop me, you'll have to-" He was abruptly cut off, however, by the crack of a rifle, and he went pale, his hooves losing all strength as he plummeted headfirst into the trench. All the troopers around stared, wide-eyed at Di'ac, but she hadn't touched her rifle. Instead, she simply stared down at the dead pony, her expression one of pity.

"Shoot you? Don't be absurd. But the dogs will gladly blast you down like birds." She snapped her gaze at the others, yelling out "All snipers, we have an enemy shooter in the windows! Find him and kill that dastardly foe!"

Northern Equestria

Forty-Five Minutes from Stalliongrad

Matriarchy Armed Forces, 4th Airborne Division

Mobile Airbase 16, AKA "Artemis"

The Hippogryph Matriarchy. It hadn't always been known as that. Hundreds of years ago, it was the Empire of Grafton, an aggressive, imperialistic state. The ancestors of today's griffons had hunted and eaten ponies and other equines because their favorite meat was horseflesh. But the horses had never gone down without a fight.

That had changed during the conflict centuries ago known as the Dragon Wars, when the Empire had invaded Equestria with the express goal of not only unseating Celestia and destroying the Kingdom but also to kill every dragon in the world, thus robbing their equine enemies of their largest and most powerful allies. With sword and spear, they clashed against the Equestrian lines, but the horse's golden armor and weapons proved to be back not only by iron constitutions but also steel alloys. Unfortunately for the Empire, there was another thing working against them. Sick of the

male-centered ways of life, a revolution of mostly female griffons and their male supporters took to the streets with a new invention, from a mostly primitive species to the north; dog crafted gunpowder. But they couldn't do it with this miracle weapon alone. Princess Celestia had divested enormous resources to arming and supplying the revolution, and thanks to this factor it was an extreme success. Once the Empire was shattered and the war declared over, the First Matriarch had renamed their land Hippogryph, in honor of the Princess and the amount she'd given to helping build the new nation. It was a product of both griffon and horse now, and would stay that way for years to come.

Except, in recent decades, things had gone downhill. Power hungry women on the Council had looked eagerly upon Equestria's lands for its abundance of resources and its wealthy economy. There were even some griffons who still felt the pull to taste horseflesh. There had been plenty of border clashes, overeager military commanders who felt war was coming over the horizon, but these had always been ended quickly and compensated for by the offending side, be it horse or griffon.

But Captain Gilda Axeclaw knew that if the dogs hadn't invaded Stalliongrad and the Matriarchy hadn't been called forward to help their old allies, in a few more years the griffons might have been flying to war against Celestia and Luna's forces (what little they were, anyway). As commander of Battleaxe Company, her aggression and drive to be the best had won her the utmost respect (or fear) of her subordinates, and a careful eye of Lieutenant Colonel Harriet Coldheart, commander of the 4th. After all, she'd perfected her flying skills young.

"*Captain!*" called the leader of the support squadron behind her, codename Scabbard. The Lieutenant there tended to stick to by-the-book regulations, and as such never said Gilda's name over the radio, especially not when flying. For more than one reason, this irked the temperamental griffon six ways from Sunday, and she found herself fighting her anger as she replied "What?"

"*Just got word from Artemis. The commander wants to see you.*" Another thing you weren't supposed to do was say the names or ranks of officers over the level of major on the radio, standard Airborne procedure. Again, however, Gilda was still frustrated. She knew who wanted to see her, no doubt. Could only be the Lieutenant Colonel.

"Roger that," she snapped, diving and pulling a loop to reverse her direction. Her own Lieutenant knew to take over, such was the ease of her command. She had contingencies and plans all in place should things happen, and in her years of serving, she'd never had a single one of them fall apart, so many backups did she make on the fly.

Griffons didn't have infantry, not in the traditional sense as compared to ponies or dogs or even compared to the French Republique's famous Foreign Legion. Being able to transition from air to ground, the Airborne was both the Army and the Air Force. Their armored vehicles could be dropped from either the infamous mobile airbases that made them as mobile and quick to react as they were or even hauled in by a squadron of regular griffons.

Regardless, her olive green body armor was pitted in places, with a large bullet hole representing a near miss from a smuggler's round that had nearly ended her life. Her standard issue scattergun hung from her vest, loaded and ready to fire. Being able to carry things meant they did away with such clumsy ordnance as gun-yokes, and all griffon airborne spent hours in practicing how to walk on their hind legs in combat. They were soldiers supreme, able to traverse any terrain...

And yet, she thought bitterly to herself, her body armor was just padded cloth and leather. Nothing like the layered synthetic vests or hard shell ballistic armor of the Equestrian Royal Army or the Canid Hegemonic Marine Corps, respectively. Griffon Airborne were all light infantry. Anything heavier, and they wouldn't be able to take off, for griffons did not possess the magic of Pegasus that allowed them to fly with such small wings. Every ounce counted on Airborne, and for that she resented Equestrian flyers with a passion. Or maybe it was for something else...

She shook her head clear as she coasted through a cloudbank, finally coming upon her destination. Artemis was one of sixty-two Mobile Airfields plying the skies. Whereas Canida focused on shock and awe tactics with enormous armies, Hippogryph was more adept at quick maneuvers with smaller forces. They had to, for Canida had six times the population as both Hippogryph and Equestria combined. There was a price to pay for that, however, as the Hegemonic coffers were constantly emptying and filling, civil wars plagued the land and their military was so large that upgrading equipment and tactics took months at best.

But a Mobile Airbase was entirely self-sufficient. It possessed an armory with a machine shop, a hydroponic farm, a freezer for meat, a water recycling plant, even a garage for two dozen tanks, easily able to be dropped through hatches in the deck, where they'd coast down on a parachute. The enormous assembly was square-ish, with sixteen enormous propellers to hold it up, connected to a massive pair of engines, made to power the entire thing. The Airbase possessed a training yard, a barracks, a classroom and a sophisticated radio suite.

The price for all this greatness was high, however. Mobile Airbases burned large amounts of coal, and even now a large tanker plane was depositing crate after crate of it on the deck, where the engines could burn it and keep it going. The twin plumes of smoke trailing behind the Airbase was also a dead giveaway, meaning that Artemis would never be a stealth craft so long as it ran on steam power. If Hippogryph could only master the kerosene fuel that Canida used, or found some way to produce smokeless coal like Equestria.

Gilda cursed again as she landed on deck, watching a squadron of griffons hustle past. She needed to clear her mind if she was to meet with the colonel. Matriarchy commanders, unlike Canid and Equestria officers, did not have a clear chain of command that led all the way back to a higher up in an office. Instead, each griffon commanded her detachment like sailors on ships; the captain's rule was law, no matter what. As such, Gilda never worried about what Matriarchy Command and Control would say. Simply what Lieutenant Colonel Coldheart decided to do with her next...

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

71st Royal Army Battalion

Battalion Garrison, Defensive Trenchworks, Trench 1A

Twilight rose once more, clamping on her trigger as she blasted down another dog. The first time she'd fired, she hadn't been sure she would hit anything. She hadn't been sure she'd wanted to. Killing another living being was, quite possibly, the hardest thing she'd ever done. It was even harder the second time. But now, with brass casings falling at her hooves by the dozen, it had become almost second nature.

The unicorn quickly fired off a magical bolt, smashing into another dog and sending the mutt flying backwards before her shield lit up once more with return fire, and she spun to address the problem, using her telekinesis to sweep the wreck of a steam wagon into another group of dogs.

Nearby, Gunn and Short had been forced to go rump to rump as both sides of the trench were breached, one by overhead chargers and the other by underground diggers, bursting out from the floor and walls of the muddy trench to grab out at ponies or toss out grenades or a spray of bullets. Needless to say, Trench 1A was getting torn to pieces, and it looked like their section was one of the few still holding out, troopers left and right either clambering out to fire from the lip of the trench, dying where they stood, disappearing down a tunnel or, worst of all, running away in terror.

Short paused, glancing back long enough to yell "Battlemages aren't so bad, eh Sarge?"

"Sure," Gunn replied, having tossed his last grenade into the startled face of a tunneling dog, sending both back down the passage. "So long as they're not military!"

Short had a reply ready but was forced to save it, for another dog came down on him from above, only to get a burst in the stomach, sending the heavy body flopping to the ground. Nearby, Azure pumped off another pair of shells into one of the few remaining steam wagons, cursing as one punched straight through before detonating on the buildings far behind it. She had to be getting low on ammunition, but with the chaos around them, there was no way they could retreat yet.

"Where's the lieutenant?" screamed Maple, hosing down another dog. For once, the colt's nervous tendencies were coming in handy, for he was snapping back and forth, up and down, downing enemy after enemy with his wild firing.

"Dead!" yelled another trooper nearby, seconds before a dog shot him in the back of the head, causing Maple, Short, Gunn and Twilight to spin around and fill the canine with bullets.

"What about the captain?" Maple asked next, twitching as a bomb dropped from overhead, setting the trench lip on fire and burning four dogs trying to climb over.

"Dead!" replied Twilight, slamming a tunneler back down into his hole and sealing it behind him.

"Then who's left?" Maple screamed, eyes wide as he jerked around spastically. "I think just the Major!" Short grunted, having just come out of a close tussle with a rather large dog in which the mutt had tried to slice him open with a rusty knife.

"We need to get out of here!" Gunn bellowed as another explosion vaporized a trio of nearby trooper ponies, a bunker further down the line suddenly shattering into rubble. "What the hay is the major playing at, keeping us out here? We're getting slaughtered!"

Trench 1B

"Major, you have to sound the fall back!"

Di'ac ignored Sergeant Conway, her eyes narrowed as she peered out from the ruined bunker she stood in. While the unicorn may have gotten under her skin all the time, thought way too highly of himself and generally tried to preen his own self-importance to everypony else, Zo knew at this point that the stallion was correct. The trenches were being flooded by the rest of the horde of scruffy mongrels, and the longer she stayed here, the more soldiers she would lose. The Colonel would have fallen back already, would have saved as many lives as possible. Yet she'd seen many a skirmish back in Zebrabwe where retreating forces presented targets of opportunity for the enemy, and the concentrated on the fleeing rather than the fighting. Would the same happen here?

It didn't matter. As another battlewagon was mobbed by dogs before the crew was hauled out and hacked to pieces not more than sixty yards from her, she knew the 71st would break soon. The garrison, at least, offered walls and heavy weapons nests. The trenchworks were a barely recognizable killing ground now. Bunkers were split open like shellfish, bodies splayed in piles left right and center, barbed wire ripped up and strung out, craters dotting the landscape like the moon alongside the tunnels that were still popping up. The blackened wrecks of destroyed wagons provided high cover, and scorch marks indicated where the Sky Corps had made their bombing runs. In less than half an hour, this perfect

and still landscape had been rendered into a scene from a nightmare, and it was just getting worse.

Finally, she turned to Drab. "Sound the fall back. The garrison will be harder for them to crack."

Trench 1C

"We're falling back!" screamed a nearby trooper that Short couldn't see. "Retreat to the garrison! Fall-"

The pony was abruptly cut off, and Short could easily imagine his fate. He spun around, slamming his rear hooves into the jaw of the dog he'd been fighting. He heard a sharp cracking noise, and the mutt jerked spasmodically as he fell, leaving no doubt of his condition. Nearby, Azure fired again, spitting into the bloody, snowy slush below and calling "I'm out!"

"Go, then!" yelled Gunn as he turned to blast another dog to pieces at point-blank range. They'd been so close, the dog's skin had almost met the sergeant's rifle. "Everypony, get the hay out of here! Over the top, move!"

Almost as one, the squad reacted, with Twilight only a second or so behind. Short and Maple knelt down, allowing both Twilight and Azure to climb up onto their backs, standing and lifting the two mares up and over (Maple struggled a little under Azure's large bulk). Gunn hustled over, and the two stallions lifted the sergeant out as well before reaching up and being pulled by the rest of the squad.

But, before Azure could haul Maple completely over the lip, a tunnel erupted beneath the brown colt, and an enormous dog lunged out, reaching up and grabbing the young soldier's tail. The trooper screamed in panic, releasing Azure and pawing frantically at the ground, but his hooves wouldn't catch, the mud was too slushy. Swiftly, everypony rushed to grab onto some part of Maple, pulling at him as he yelled "PULL ME UP PULL ME UP PULL ME UP! DON'T BUCKING LET GO!"

But, though they struggled for a full minute to save Maple, something finally had to give. Azure's teeth clamped too hard, and she accidentally tore a piece off of Maple's vest, causing the dog to jerk on the trooper's tail. The

rest of the squad lost their grip, and suddenly had to focus on not falling back into the trench themselves. With a high-pitched scream of desperation, Maple fell into the tunnel, pulled backwards by the enormous dog until he was out of sight in the darkness. A rifle strobed once, twice...then nothing.

"Get a grenade down there!" Gunn hollered, pointing a hoof at the tunnel, but Twilight bit her lip, peering down at the darkness.

"But...Maple-"

"He's done for! Better to put him out of it quick if he's still alive!"

When none of the others moved, Gunn snorted, stepping forward and jerking Twilight's last grenade from her vest, twisting the safety and letting it drop over the lip. The explosive fell for what felt like eternity before it detonated with a flash, bringing the tunnel down on itself.

"It's called mercy, ponies!" Gunn yelled at the bewildered squad, his face set in stone as he looked each of them in the eye. "It's something the dogs don't have. Now move it!"

Twilight ran. Faster than when she'd tried escaping the rowdy mob chasing her for the Gala tickets. Faster than when she and Fluttershy had tried to trap Philomena the phoenix. Faster even than when she was charging the hydra. Bullets snapped past her head and the Pegasi were dropping more and more ordnance overhead, trying to keep the dogs off of the fleeing troopers. Up ahead, the last battlewagon boomed, its cannon report loud and deafening before a bazooka rocket tore into the turret, killing the crew and rendering the powerful vehicle useless.

The rest of the squad was galloping alongside her, Gunn out front and Short at her side. The loss of Maple had seemed to steel the others over, and they all wore expressions of tapped fury, each bent on murder...but only later. The walls of the garrison swept up before them, tall and inviting, the ponies on the towers raining fire down with the heavy machine guns. Just there, through the gates, the artillery cannon and mortars were still shelling the dogs, dropping rounds even as the few remaining troopers struggled through the gates. Only two steam wagons

were left now, driving in from the west, where that front too had been fighting their own share of the horde.

Suddenly, however, just as Victor squad crossed the threshold, the ground shuddered, fountains of mud and snow splashing up into the air, lines forming around the center of the courtyard...as the artillery gun fell into the ground, several mortars going with it, and all the ponies unlucky enough to be caught falling into the giant trap going with them. Captain Tancy's face was screwed up in fury, her lips uttering the commands her crew needed to hear, even as they all fell through the hole. The gun boomed one final time, one last act of defiance, before the dogs were all over the ponies, tearing them apart and gunning them down without remorse, without fear and without mercy.

"FIRE!" screamed Major Di'ac from somewhere close by, and every trooper and Pegasi in range did so, shooting down into the enormous pit. One of the steam wagons had managed to keep its grip, and it provided cover fire for its brother as the crew bugged out, scrambling up the sides and escaping. But many others did not escape. Twilight would later swear that those she saw down in the pit fought to the last, but she knew that was a lie. Most were caught unaware, and others tried to run, but all were killed where they stood.

Abruptly, something slammed into the unicorn's shoulder. No, not something. Some —pony—. Short was shoving into her, hard, and if she hadn't worn her vest, she would have some very bad bruising from the impacts. "Go!" he yelled, pushing her in the general direction of the traffic. "Inside, to the second floor! Move it!" The rest seemed to have the same idea, fighting these invaders from inside as they desperately battled their way through the doorways. Several held the doors open for their comrades, others held the stairs, firing back into the massed wall of slobbering, blood-soaked and vicious mongrels.

She and Short finally reached the top, and the both turned and poured fire down the hallway at anything that moved and wasn't wearing blue, the barrels of their guns getting so hot they began to steam in the cold air. Shell casings rained down as they both screamed incoherently, even Twilight so far withdrawn into herself to escape the ferocity of the outside world that she was running on autopilot, casting spells left and shooting into gray fur to the right. When her rifle finally ran dry, she simply fell back on

her magic, ignoring the pounding headache as she sent spell after spell flying. Nearby, Short, Gunn and Azure also fought, teeth and hooves flashing wildly as they kicked, bit, shoved and stomped down on the invaders, letting the troopers run past and take up positions behind them.

In reality, they only held the stairs for half a minute. But it seemed to take an eternity, time slowed down like it was pulled through molasses. Suddenly, Twilight could take in every detail, every sound, smell and sight. The chaos was in slow motion, dogs twisting around as they died in agony, troopers galloping past with overlong strides, bullets whizzing by as muzzle flashes half blinded her, so close were the guns going off. But, as with all things, it finally ended. No more troopers were streaming through, only dogs, and somepony screamed "FIRE IN THE HOLE!" a grenade bouncing by. Instinctively, Twilight turned away from the explosion, but a heavy weight slammed into her, driving the mare further down the hallway. The grenade detonated, and she was blind and deaf now, feeling and watching stone and bits of flesh rain down around her, watching the other troopers flinching away from the blast as well.

When she could finally see and hear, she realized the heavy weight was still on top of her, and she glanced back to find an equally disorientated Short Stop on top of her, his bulk protecting her from the fragments. Although it was completely the wrong time for it, the fact that their bodies were lined up perfectly in such an embarrassing position instantly set the mare's cheeks ablaze and her heart aflutter. What would everyone think, Twilight thought, panicking at how they must look.

Finally, however, Short rolled off of the student's back, letting out a groan as he hit the floor. "Sorry," he muttered, grunting as he righted himself onto his hooves once more. "Didn't think. Just reacted." He glanced back down the now ruined stairs as the silence finally pressed in on them all. No more heavy machine guns were firing in bursts outside, no more thump of mortars and artillery, no explosions of aerial bombs dropped. Dead silence. Short glanced around, fearing the worst and seeing it as he looked at the faces nearby. While it had seemed like a lot, no more than twenty troopers had made it up this staircase to safety. They were all filthy, exhausted and covered in blood, but there was no denying it.

The fight was lost. They had been beaten.

Command Center

The flames were still burning hot, bright and fierce. They licked across paper and cloth, melted plastic and heated metal. The fire was unmerciful as it swept across everything, even the bodies of the soldiers who had died there, ripped apart by the rockets or the shower of glass.

A single scaled arm poked out from beneath a desk, unmoving. It did not burn, as dragons were fireproof, but proof of the creature's demise was obvious.

Spike glanced down at the sundered body of Lieutenant Razor, remorse and grief strong in his dragon heart. These ponies were trying to defend their home, and for that they had all been killed like animals, slaughtered like meat to be served up to a carnivore. What was this insanity, this slaughter of the innocent? Equestria had been surprised, and the dogs had taken from them pound for pound in horseflesh.

He glanced down at the hoof over his shoulder. It was singed and cracked, but Spike knew its owner was alive. He'd checked for a pulse, and found one, if just barely there. The stallion's wounds were horrendous. But he had to get out of there, for this lone survivor to actually make it any long. To the medical ward.

And so, Spike dragged the unconscious form of Colonel Eagle Eye towards the door, laboring under the great black horse's weight.

Chapter 12

The Siege

Canterlot, Royal Palace

Diplomatic Negotiations Chamber

Princess Celestia Presiding

"By the Prime Alpha, these accusations are an insult and complete madness against myself and the whole of the Hegemony!"

Prime Minister Dale Mation of the Canid Hegemony slapped a white and black speckled paw to the desk, his expression furious as his black ears twitched absently. Mation had led the Hegemony for near ten years now, an admirable time but obviously still not enough to give him some patience in office. His hackles were raised and his golden eyes narrowed as he glared at the camera mounted in the Long Range Negotiations Room of Ottopaw, Canida's capital. Even now, centuries after Canida had formed their nation, the Prime Minister's accent still held a little flair of the French, another independent pony nation, from back when Neighpoleon had attempted to subjugate the entire canine race under his rule. Needless to say, it hadn't quite worked out in the long run.

Celestia grit her teeth as she glared at the television monitor in front of her, successfully managing to not let her emotions get the better of her. Ironical, really. The television was a griffon invention, and the camera a canine one. Even these small examples showed just how much Equestria depended on others for industry and technology. How far they had fallen from being the large, powerful juggernaut from back when ponies wielded lances to now where they weren't even able to protect a single city from utter destruction.

The alicorn quickly brought her mind back to the task at hand; getting to the bottom of this issue and defusing the current tensions before things got worse, if they could get worse at this point. "Prime Minister, no one is accusing the Hegemony of any such thing. The Matriarch was simply making an observation."

At this, a light chuckle emanated from another television set, this one on Celestia's left, with a video camera plugged into that one as well.

"Observation? Like I need to spell it out for you, it's happened several times before. Let's see, what about Viperia? Hmm? Sound familiar, two cities burned to the ground before they were stopped and Canida offered 'peacekeeping war reparations?' What about Zebrabwe? If it weren't for you and your welfare programs, Celestia, what do you want to bet that the jackals and hyenas would be running the show?"

Celestia gave out a quiet "Ah-haaa..." as she tried to consider just how much of a rock and a hard place she was caught between. Matriarch Scythia Steelclaw had been noted several times by Equestrian advisers as being a stubborn and blunt woman, and the uniformed griffon certainly wasn't holding back. Instead, she lashed out once again, her beak clacking angrily as she snapped "The Hegemony has, over the last few decades, brought a dozen minor nations under their control without a single major loss, except for Zebrabwe, through one form of invasion or another. If the 'mysterious rash' of diamond dogs succeeds in undermining the land, Canida steps forward to offer its troops in helping to clear them out –and then never leaves!- Or, if by some miracle the local troops are able to push the Droolers out, Hegemonic Marines are suddenly down at the beach!"

Mation bristled onscreen, a small growl escaping him as he retorted with his own rapid fire criticisms. "That's the pot calling the kettle black, Matriarch! Hippogryph has annexed several lands into their empire in the last century! What happened to the Kodiak Dominion, Matriarch? Bulldozed and refounded as a 'protectorate' state! Bet the bears don't feel very protected!"

"That's different, Prime Minister!" Steelclaw snapped, her talons digging furrows in the oak desk she sat at, wings unfurling in anger. "The Dominion chose to blockade two of our ports and refuse to let any trade through our shared borders unless we acquiesced to their demands, which would have been extortion! Meanwhile, the Hegemony continues to grow and nibble up islands and coastal lands! How long until you try and invade Prance again?"

"ENOUGH!" yelled Celestia, finally having had enough. She reared her head back, eyes blazing with the power of the sun behind them as the emotional dam she'd been trying to hold up finally broke. Panic at the

thought of another war after so many years that she was nowhere near ready for, distress at the thought of so many ponies dying, worry over the fate of Twilight and finally frustration at how these discussions had hit stonewalls repeatedly for the past four hours. Fortunately, both Steelclaw and Mation fell silent, staring at their respective screens.

"I have an entire city in flames, infested by canines wielding military equipment! Ponies are dying by the thousands and the only Army unit up there has been practically annihilated by now! Whether you accept it or not, Prime Minister, this –is- Canida's fault, one way or another, and I don't have time to sit here and dicker with the both of you, so SHUT UP!"

Around the Princess, papers swiftly began catching fire, spreading to the tables quickly. The floor turned blackened where she stood, and her entire coat steadily began turning orange from her fury. The nearby Royal Guard ponies simply stood there, unsure of what to do and unwilling to get closer to their monarch. Finally, however, the decision was made for them as all the rage suddenly seemed to dissipate from the princess, and she stood there panting as if she'd just galloped up to Stalliongrad herself. Cautiously, one of the Guards stepped forward and quickly stamped out the fires until the papers were nothing but smoldering ash before stepping away just as swiftly.

"Right..." Celestia gasped, standing up straight and clearing her throat, one of the forelocks that had drifted into her eyes pushed away by a minor spell. "I needed that. So. To business, then."

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

Army Garrison Command Center

71st Royal Army Battalion (Remnants)

As it turned out, things weren't as grim as they seemed.

True, it was depressing to only be surrounded by about a dozen other ponies, but the news coming from Corporal Drab's radio pack was slightly heartening. The battalion's Sky Corps detachment had scattered when the artillery had been overrun, with several Pegasi escaping to safety on the

rooftops. Apparently, a single Lieutenant Wingkins was left in command of them, and he had confirmed about ten of the flying ponies had survived the onslaught. Meanwhile, good news had come from another squad across the compound, trapped in the armory but managing to hold where they were.

And then the bad news. The infirmary, being on the first floor, was full of wounded troopers and unarmed medical staff. The nurse in charge (the doctor had been killed by a mortar blowing out a wall) had known they wouldn't hold out long, and decided to euthanize every single pony in the place, choosing to ease their pain rather than let them suffer. She and her other staff had just finished their heartbreaking task when the dogs had finally breached the doors. Then the line went dead.

Now, the twenty exhausted and battered survivors rested in the torn and wrecked concrete hallway above the ruined staircase, listening to the howls and barks of the horde still outside, trying to plunder what was left of the garrison's treasures. Not that there was much. Some bullets, a few gun-yokes, what few explosives were left. By the end of the night, though the diamond dogs would pick the entire place clean.

No word had been received from First Company, and Drab's radio pack was too damaged to try and boost the signal out to the harbor. Major Di'ac finally told the corporal to turn the radio off, and the cries of distress and calls for help fell silent.

The survivors were few. They consisted of Major Di'ac (battered and beaten but still standing tall, helmet off and her mane plastered flat against her neck) Corporal Drab (who had nothing to do now he no longer had his radio) Sergeant Conway (with nothing to say for the first time in his life) Sergeant Gunn (staring out at the chaos of the city through the damage of the walls) Azure (who no longer wore her recoilless pack due to no ammunition) Short (sitting against the wall, cleaning his rifle) and a few other lucky privates who had managed to be faster than their fellows.

And Twilight. Though at this point, she was seriously wondering why she of all ponies was still breathing, being the least experienced among these veterans and highly trained troopers. She looked around, glancing at each and every pony around her, trying to gleam some measure of understanding. With all the other officers dead, Major Di'ac looked to be the

only survivor with a rank over sergeant, and the rest of the survivors were all enlisted personnel. How did that happen? Were your chances for survival greater simply because there were more ponies around? Was it luck more than skill that dictated who lived and died in war?

She'd already removed and dropped her helmet and gun-yoke, unwilling and unable to wear them any longer. Besides, she was out of ammunition anyways, and what precious few bullets they had left were distributed amongst the more capable troopers, those who hadn't collapsed from the exhaustion of eight hours of heavy combat, or the mental strain of the calamities and horrors they had witnessed. Unsurprisingly, Major Di'ac and the last three ponies of Victor squad were still on their hooves, pacing around and trying to remain soldierly, rifle bins rattling with the last few hundred bullets left.

Twilight took the opportunity to study the major. Unlike Zecora, she did not have a spiral sun on her flank, the space instead taken up by a ragged star, its ends pulled back until it resembled more of a buzz saw than a celestial mark. Her stripes were also a harder shade of black rather than the gray that Ponyville's resident immigrant wore, and the major's general shape was larger, bulkier. If one was unfamiliar with zebras, Major Di'ac would have slipped into a crowd easily. Twilight, however, had met the ambassador to Zebrabwe in Canterlot, an elderly stallion by the name of Zerabi, and had seen his staff as well. It had taken her a few days, but Twilight could eventually name different zebras just by looking at their stripe pattern. Di'ac was a totem of strength and stability, even as lack of rest sapped at her muscles, and she was what the survivors of the battalion needed right now. Though her words with the military mare had been few, Twilight decided she liked Zo. A little rigid, surely, but she would like to spend some time with the commander back where it was safe, get to know her a little better.

Her gaze shifted to Azure, another strong mare. Without shells for her recoilless rifles, the draft mare had shrugged off the rig, leaving it sitting in the corner as she stretched out, muscles bunching up immensely. Twilight's eyes widened at such strength, for she'd only ever seen such power on Big Macintosh back on Sweet Apple Acres (when she'd been stealing glances seemingly a lifetime ago). Azure's cutie mark, obstructed before now, now showed a red boxing glove, surrounded by white stars, and Twilight couldn't fight the chuckle that rose from within her. Of course

Azure would be a boxing mare. She had the build and determination for it, after all. The object of her study suddenly relaxed, yawning and shaking her white mane out, and Twilight suddenly found herself staring at a spitting image of the tricky illusionist unicorn known as Trixie (albeit if Trixie was an Earth pony and twice as big with actual courage). She felt her jaw drop before she shook her head.

No, couldn't be. The chances of that...it was just a coincidence. Right?

To distract herself, she traced her eyes over to the immense form of Sergeant Gunn as he stepped directly in front of her. Still in full uniform and battlegear, he held himself high and alert, ever vigilant for danger. He looked the biggest mess out of everypony, though that might have been because he'd been struck by a flying, burning beam in the trenches. He was covered in the same amount of grime, but ash and charcoal had mixed into his black mane and blue coat, causing a mosaic of grime that would have helped disguise him by pressing against a building. However, despite his signs of fatigue, his silver shield Cutie Mark was, miraculously, untouched. She stared at it a moment longer before realizing where her eyes were drifting, and she turned back to stare down the ruined staircase again, seriously considering Short's words earlier.

Obviously, Lock had some kind of attraction to her, and the prodigy student needed to figure out if she shared them. Short had told her he was emotionally scarred by his service, and she didn't want to add heartbreak to that. As such, she needed time to assert whether this desire to stay by the squad's side was simply because it was the right thing or if she felt like staying near Gunn...or being near-

Twilight's thoughts were interrupted by the flop of a heavy weight next to her, and she snapped out of her mental quagmire to glance next to her, finding the gray-furred form of Short Stop himself, sitting in a very odd pose next to her. She'd seen a unicorn named Lyra do the same as him back in Ponyville, back up vertically, rear hooves dangling over the edge and resting back onto his forehooves. It was rather strange.

He sighed, snapping her examination once more, and looked at her, smiling sadly as he asked "Holding up?"

She shrugged, glancing out one of the holes in the wall at the carnage outside. "As much as anypony, I suppose."

He chuckled, but she knew he didn't find any humor in her comment. It just seemed the natural reaction, she supposed. "Yeah...after all that stuff out there... 'nuff to make a sane pony go mad, eh? Wonder ah didna go crazy mahseff all that time ago."

There it was again, his slip into another accent. Only, this time it seemed to be on purpose. As if he was actually trying to do it, instead of failing to cover up a speech problem. She looked back at him, blinking in confusion as she tried to frame the question correctly. Before she could speak, however, he sighed, smiling sadly and saying "This is how ah normally speak. Mah Pa, he a'ways say ponies judge bah the way y' talk first of all. Taught me t' speak like some city-colt."

Her jaw dropped as she realized that Short's accent was even more pronounced than Applejack's. The farm mare had always told the unicorn that her father had been born down south, but she'd never visited. The pieces swiftly assembled themselves, and she spluttered out "You're from Savanneigh!"

Short blinked in surprise, trying to catch up to her level of thinking as well. "Am ah really so easy t' figger out?"

"Well, no." Twilight admitted, frowning as she mentally retraced her steps. "Sergeant Gunn told me. He said you were one of the only recruits he knew of that wasn't local to the battalion. What you said earlier –did- sound like Applejack."

"Who?"

"A friend of mine...back in Ponyville, she runs a farm called Sweet Apple Acres. Her accent's not as bad as yours, but she told me about her father's birthplace. Savanneigh, down in the southeast. They're really isolated from the rest of Equestria."

"It's true," chuckled Short, reaching up and pulling his helmet off, running a hood over his short mane in what had to be embarrassment. "Though, it's mos'y self-maintained. We like what we do, the way –we- do it, an' even Princess Celestia won' change my kin."

Twilight chuckled in return, grateful to finally have a break in the horror that she had been living through. She finally realized what Short was doing,

socializing like they were waiting for the train. He was distracting her, drawing her mind away from the nightmare and into a place where she could finally relax and recuperate, and in her fatigued state she found her multi-tasking capabilities to be hindered, if not fully stopped, and it took her entire mind to focus on what Short was saying.

"Mah family plays baseball. Plays it with a passion, like it's our first-born foal an' there isn't an' thing that could keep us from 'em. The true sign that you're a Stop is when you start playin' professionally. Hay, ah got a baseball playing ancestor goin' back ever since the sport was invented. Mah Ma, mah Pa, even mah little sister. They all played in the big leagues, mah sister still in the circuit."

Twilight's smile faded as she saw the obvious gap, and she leaned a little closer, shuffling to reposition herself. "But not you?"

He sighed, still staring down at the first floor below. "Not me. Ah nevah had mah shot. Nevah got outta the minor leagues. Ah had talent scouts watchin' me, o' course. But then somethin' happened, which kept me out forever." He looked up at her now, and she finally got the first good look at his eyes that she'd had all day. Blue, bright blue, and filled with energy, curiosity...and sorrow. Twilight found herself drawn to those eyes, being pulled into their depths like a hollowed out glacier that somepony had dropped her into with a pair of wings, allowing her to enjoy the ride and not worry about the plummeting fall to the bottom...she blinked, and he looked an inch to the side, breaking the split-second connection. She felt her cheeks heat a little, grateful he couldn't see the blush under the grime.

Short continued, his eyes glazing over as he went back into his own memories, recalling the events.

"It was a few years ago, right here in Stalliongrad. Ah was playing fer a small time team, the Savanneigh Sharks. We'd been on a hot-streak fer weeks, pastin' tha Canterlot Cavalry an' even tha Manehattan Mashers. All that stood in our way of Junior Regional Champions was tha Stalliongrad Sluggers. They was good, too. But we thought we was better. Thought we'd just stroll in 'ere an' take that cup right out from under their muzzles. Woulda gotten a lot of us noticed an' probably recruited fer the big time teams, place was swarming with scouts. But it weren't no easy fight, lemme tell you." His accent was becoming stronger, his proper grammar slipping

as he became adjusted to his born tongue once more, more confident with the pronunciations and the effortless way the slurring dialect just spilled off his tongue. "We fought back 'n forth, heavin' and huffin'. Hard game, that one. Finally, though, it came down to th' ninth an' we was down by two. Now, we had two other colts on the plates when ah stepped up myself, but we'd already gotten two other strikes. Ah was in the worst place possible, th' snap pitch to decide whether we won or lost. Fortunately, ah didn't have much time to worry about it." He smiled, sadly, holding up his right hoof for her to see. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with it, but Twilight knew that it would be the key to the next part of his story.

And it was.

"Colt was nervous, ah could tell. Ah also hadn't seen him on th' plate fer tha entire game. He hadn't got his bearings straight, an' he was fresh, but the Stalliongrad coach had rotated him in fer a reason. Anyway, he panicked, an' tossed it wildly off mark an' way too hard. Ah wen' down. Hard, on this ankle. An' the bone just snapped clean in two."

He looked at her again, dropping the hoof. For long minutes, he didn't say a word, simply stared at her with an expression of...what? Sorrow? Regret? Anger? It was impossible for the mage to tell, and she bit her lip nervously, but didn't say a word. At this crucial stage, she felt anything she would voice would simply dissolve the bridge of trust Short was building between them. So, instead, she stared back, inching a little closer until she nudged up against the young stallion's side, feeling his body heat through her vest and letting him know she was there for him.

Finally, he began again, all traces of his accent gone, his voice strained and wavering, his face somehow still rock solid. "After I got out of the hospital, my parents tried to make me feel better. Like I hadn't failed. But the major leagues are strict about bone injuries. They don't take chances, and one accident screwed me over for the rest of my career. I was feeling so down, I hiked out to wander. Wound up going to the Royal Army garrison in Savanneigh, home of the 7th Battalion. And I saw what I was really meant to be there. My Cutie Mark may have laid down what I was special at, but I couldn't do it anymore. So I put my physique to use before I lost it and enlisted as soon as I could,"

He smiled again, a little more confidence instilled in his voice. "I traveled to Stalliongrad before I signed up. Didn't want anypony back home to give me any special treatment, back where my family was legends. Here, I was a nobody, somepony else who just filtered into the ranks. And I found my new special talent. Here, I learned that I could be all I can be, and I loved every minute that challenged me to it!"

He looked at her with a new enthusiasm, something he hadn't possessed even before he began speaking with Twilight. She smiled back as she saw the new sense of wonder in his eyes as he recalled the emotions, replayed the events. Now, she knew, was the time to say something.

But she didn't so much say it, at first, as show it. Without reservation (though with burning cheeks) she leaned forward and quickly pecked Short on the cheek, withdrawing just as fast before saying "For what it's worth, you turned out pretty good, Short."

As she watched his bewildered expression, Twilight finally had an answer for herself, and something she needed to say to Gunn. Turned out she wasn't sticking around just because it was the right thing...

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

71st Royal Army Battalion, 1st Company

Forward Positions, assisted by elements from 2nd Company

Golden Ox Hotel, Dining Room, 1st Company Field HQ

Word had finally been made official, as it turned out. The garrison was gone, and with it was also the Colonel and their only hope of getting out alive. But Captain Sanders ignored the dread closing in on him, instead channeling it towards his intense hatred for the dogs, the mongrels, the animals who had rained such devastation on the city. He studied the map once more, frowning at the reports scattered around him, most scribbled out hastily by mouth or with a spritz of unicorn magic. The reports were clear, at least. The dogs had finally stopped advancing. What was left of them had devolved into smaller packs as their largest group fell on the garrison, and though there were easily still a little less than half of the

original deployment in the Industrial Sector, they were no longer united and pushing. In fact, according to the company's scouts, the stupid creatures were even fighting amongst each other! Wasting good manpower, ammunition and initiative in pointless squabbles over what they had conquered.

The line was holding, and he still had over a hundred battle-capable ponies maintaining the perimeter. The wounded were being patched up at field triage in a café a few streets over, and there was no further sign of any more pushes in their direction. Sanders let out a laugh, running a hood over his head and knocking his cap off, where it fell without notice. They'd weathered the storm, and even though there was no way to counter-attack, there was still a Royal Army presence in the city to meet the liberation forces that even now had to be coming within visual sight of the city.

He laughed again, sweeping an enormous stack of papers off the table. They'd done it! With the troopers keeping the ring intact and the dogs no longer pushing, they'd held a single spot in the city for reinforcements to rally at. And at the most important place too, right in spitting distance of the very cargo ship that had come in under false colors to kick off this entire sneak attack! The dogs were going to be caught with their pants down, and half the city was still intact!

Sanders was so relieved, however, that he was still dancing when Lieutenant Dandelion entered the room, staring at her superior going loony in the center of the dining room. Sanders, fortunately, caught on quickly and composed himself, coughing lightly to try and dispel the awkwardness.

"News, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Captain." Here, Sanders saw that she had a rolled up sheet of paper poking out of a saddlebag, and his brow furrowed as she stepped over to the table, hooves clopping on the hard wood, and took out the sheet, a concerned expression on the mare's face. "It's not good, sir."

Northern Equestria

Over Stalliongrad

Matriarchy Armed Forces, 4th Airborne Division

Mobile Airbase 16, AKA "Artemis"

Office of Lieutenant Colonel Harriet Coldheart

"Incredible! From the reports, I'd thought the entire city had been put to the torch, but somehow those ponies held the mutts back long enough!"

Gilda nodded, her expression neutral as she too looked down at the floor, at the reinforced glass under her claws that showed the city, stretching out in all directions. Of course, Artemis had taken up position over the center, appropriately (and uncreatively) named City Center. Scouts and forward units dispatched down there found traumatized police ponies and wounded Royal Army troopers holding city hall, if just barely, against a small force of a hundred dogs. With a few aerial bombs, several strafing runs and two airdropped Featherweight light tanks, the canines had been destroyed, and the most crucial target secured. But Gilda had also learned that the police headquarters was empty, sacked and looted, nothing but corpses and debris left inside. The positions outside City Center were also abandoned, the supposed main line at Steed Square overrun. The strangest thing was to see the dogs shooting at each other, of course, but once Coldheart had found this was not an actual military invasion she had recalled all units to City Center, to hold the place until a decisive attack plan could be formulated.

Hence, why Gilda was here, and not out tearing the mongrels to ribbons with her claws, dropping grenades on their heads or blasting them with her scattergun. For now, the 4th was deployed to maintain a perimeter and relieved the drained troopers of their responsibility. Eight entire hours, and they'd held the dogs in the Industrial Sector. In fact, the scouts were even reporting Royal Army radio signals coming from the harbor, indicating another holdout force there.

But what did that matter, Gilda thought snidely, when they had lost their command center? The garrison was a wreck, the defenses overturned and the soldiers guarding it dead. No survivors had emerged as Artemis had

flown overhead, and no survivors were coming out now. Who else but the Matriarchy possessed mobile airbases? No one, any ninny knew that. And since ponies were smarter (only by a little) than complete ninnies, she knew they were all barking dead.

"Colonel, I recommend we evacuate all Royal Army personnel from the Industrial Sector and commence heavy bombardment procedures. It's the only real way to get rid of the infestation, we both know that." Gilda Axeclaw was cruel and cold indeed, but she also knew that someone had to bring up the idea eventually, and it was the only way forward.

Sadly, Coldheart nodded, watching the city for another minute before the colonel turned to her desk, saying "Very well. We will commence heavy bombardment as soon as evacuation is completed. I also want a force sent to take out that ship, make sure they can't escape."

Gilda rose, slamming a claw over her chest in salute. "Yes, Lieutenant Colonel." She placed a slight emphasis on the junior title, a nudge at Coldheart that the older griffon didn't even seem to notice, so enraptured was she by some reconnaissance report or another.

The hallway ahead was dark, dreary...and loooong. Spike huffed in irritation as he pulled and tugged, trying to haul the Colonel's unconscious weight. He should have realized a horse of Eye's bulk would weigh a lot, but in the rush to escape the fire he hadn't really considered it. He was paying for that error now, though, as his muscles strained to keep pulling the stallion towards salvation.

Finally, however, Spike had to stop. Huffing and puffing, he fell to the floor, a quick rest before he tried again. He was beaten, dirty and irritated, feeling a few glass shards stuck in his purple scales.

"War sucks..." he growled, brushing his arms off, trying to find the translucent slivers. As he did so, however, a noise caught his ear. The faint hash of static over a radio, coming from another direction. Curious now, he stood, toddling over to a nearby door that seemed to have been left ajar. With a heave, the door swung inward, and Spike found himself in the abandoned radio room, facing dozens of glowing lights from systems with

such a minimal power requirement that even with the main power offline they could still function.

And then, he heard it again.

"Major Di'ac, this is Cobra Six! Repeat, we are seeing an aircraft overhead of enormous proportions. The Matriarchy's here, Major! If you can hear us, please respond, give us orders! They're not even coming over here, and I think I can see the bomb bay doors opening!"

Chapter 13

Praying on a Miracle

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

9th Hegemonic AOT (Advanced Operations Taskgroup)

Current Mission: Espionage and Resource Retrieval

Cargo Ship *Pride of Ottopaw*, Docked in Harbor

His paw was currently toying with the lit cigar, turning it from side to side for his examination. Fine Viperian tobacco, it was. He loved this brand, though they were expensive as all hell. That was the price of good taste, he supposed. If he had to sacrifice a few extra coins to get good taste, well then it had to be worth it. He raised it to his lips, taking a deep pull before letting the smoke waft out from between his jowls. Cigars were, after all, for relaxation, not for relieving an itch. You didn't simply pop outside for a quick five minute cigar, you smoked it for an hour and enjoyed the scent of it.

Another perk of command, Major Ulrich Boxer supposed, was the ability to essentially screw the rules and regulations, which he did only so long as they fit the task at hand. For example, he was supposed to be below decks right now to maintain absolute secrecy on this operation. But he was out in plain sight, where any Royal Army trooper with a spotting scope or marksman yoke could spot him. But he knew that it wouldn't change anything. The fact that his dogs below on the signal interception machines had picked up several transmissions reporting dogs in winter camouflage and black combat armor meant that the jig was up. The need for secrecy was no more. And yet, his soldiers were so loyal that a constant pair of bodyguards followed him everywhere.

Most dogs in the Hegemonic Armed Forces could never even dream of even laying eyes on one of the fabled Special Forces teams. The majority of the military was concentrated in the Army, the next in the Fleet and Marine Corps. The Hegemonic Air Service received the fewest soldiers of all the branches, simply by process of needed manpower. But one actually

needed to possess incredible skill and not simply sheer luck to become one of the fabled Black Ops. Operators were covert, stealthy and lethal to the core, able to kill without a moment's hesitation. Cruel dogs, but then again, the Hegemony survived based on cruelty giving way to mercy.

The diamond dogs were an example of that. Thanks to their poor selection in breeding choices and failure to maintain the Lines, they had not only overpopulated their designated territory, but also become the pariahs and outcasts of the world. Fortunately, there were many of them, and criminals were generally so scruffy and savage that they could easily be folded right into the flocks of mutts and mongrels. Which gave birth to Canida's most successful foreign policy ever designed.

It was simple, really. Diamond dogs were released into the target nation by the thousands to spread disorder and compromise the land itself, divesting the soil of resources and workable fields. The target's military would respond on all fronts, of course. The inbreeds weren't very able fighters, but they had numbers on their side to compensate for their lack of skill, as shown in this very battle. Thus, when the target nation was on its knees, the Hegemony came along and offered to 'help drive out the infestation.' By that point, the target was usually begging for assistance.

But not here. Not Equestria.

Major Boxer sighed, letting out another puff of smoke as he leaned against the gunwales of the ship, staring out idly at the devastation before him. Estimates were that the police officers and Royal Army troopers in the area would be wiped out within two hours. Projected casualties for the criminals released from the cargo hold were, of course, very high. But no one in Canida had even imagined that the Royal Army could last an entire eight hours or that they would hold off the half-wits until reinforcements arrived. Which meant that, although it had been a long shot even at the beginning, completely destroying Stalliongrad was out of the question. Most of the idiots had already begun fighting each other, rather than the enemy, desperate to hold onto what they had.

"Ah, well," Boxer said out loud, glancing down at his cigar cheroot before discarding it over the side. "We got what we came for and kept the ponies distracted." At this, he turned back, stepping past his lupine soldiers to the edge of the open cargo hatch, peering down into the depths. Where once

there were many smelly and unwashed canine bodies all packed together and awaiting the chance to earn their 'freedom' there was now a heaping pile of gemstones, towering almost up to the deck where the support crews worked. They'd had to relocate the gyrocopter to the emergency landing pad on the deck itself rather than land it down in the hold, so many riches had been pilfered from Stalliongrad's storehouses.

Boxer's mission had been a complex, multi-layered beast, a chimera so ugly that it had taken him several nights of study to understand even part of it. Fortunately, his trial was almost at an end, and he and his operators would be extracted soon with their prize. Boxer looked up, narrowing his eyes at the bulging shape on the horizon, long ago forced to the surface by the harbor's shallow waters. There, in the distance, was the swell and shape of a Beluga Class Submersible, with the numbers CNV-1108 stenciled on the conning tower. A single submarine wouldn't be able to haul away all the gemstones, of course, but perhaps Commander Garret could be informed of the situation and the ship turned around once more. All he knew was that he had to wait for orders from Canida.

Unfortunately, Boxer thought as he looked up at the Matriarchy contraption floating above the city hall in the distance, waiting around might just be what got them all killed.

71st Royal Army Battalion, 1st Company

Forward Positions, assisted by elements from 2nd Company

Golden Ox Hotel, Dining Room, 1st Company Field HQ

Dandelion had been right. This was –not- good.

"Lieutenant," Sanders said, his tone even as he attempted to formulate his thoughts without betraying his emotions. "Tell me why I'm seeing a submarine in the harbor."

To her credit, Dandelion let of her emotions, becoming the balancing factor to Sanders' calm façade. "What do you think, sir? The dogs decided their rabble wasn't enough and sent in real soldiers to finish the job!"

"Stand down Dandelion," Sanders snapped sharply, grateful she could at least be the one freaking out so he wouldn't lose his composure. "You want to fight, get to the front and send back Lieutenant Cotta to take your place."

That shut her up. Lieutenant Terra Cotta was one of Captain Sanders' original platoon leaders from 1st Company. Even though she was relatively experienced in the battalion, she had been in it for two years less than Dandelion, and had been disappointed when Sanders had handed the second-in-command slot to the lieutenant from 2nd Company when the time came.

That did the trick. Dandelion checked her temper, clearing her throat to show she was ready to work again before continuing with the briefing, pushing the photo to the side and pulling another recon report from her saddlebag.

"Our detachment from 4th Company reports that the submersible emerged in the harbor twenty minutes ago, out on the very edge. The water must be too shallow for them to navigate safely, or they wouldn't show themselves like this. The numbers on the hull are unknown, mostly because we don't have a handy list available of Canida's units."

"Does High Command even have that list?" Sanders asked sarcastically. Celestia had no need for spies, and without an Air Force no top secret recon flights had gone overseas in decades.

Dandelion continued, ignoring the captain's tomfoolery.

"We have identified the shape, though. Beluga Class, meant for underwater transport more than attack. She's limited to the flak guns on her back and a cabinet of decoys for arsenal. Which means, sir, that she's either coming in with a whole lot of Canid Marines, or-"

"Or she's here to pick something up, I get it Lieutenant." Sanders squinted at the newly developed photograph, hurriedly rushed and especially grainy. That was the problem with Equestrian technology, he supposed. Too far behind. And now their laxity was catching up with them.

The floor shook with tremendous force as something impacted several miles away.

Army Garrison Ruins

71st Royal Army Battalion (Remnants)

When the ordnance began dropping, they weren't too far away from the garrison, sending shakes harder than the worst earthquake through the foundations of the structure. Twilight was suddenly sent rolling over, slamming into Short and knocking the both of them into a wall. Bits of concrete and masonry rained down upon them, and everypony was crying out in alarm, trying to stifle the panic.

"What's going on?" yelled a nearby trooper. "Did the dogs find an artillery battery or something?"

"Dear Celestia, I hope not..." Twilight murmured, ducking her head again as another tremor shook the building. "What do we do if they can flatten us from miles away?"

"Let's go!" yelled Gunn, shooing the two down the hallway, somehow staying on his feet as the next explosion rocked the hallway. "You can sit and think about what's trying to kill us when it's not trying to kill us anymore!"

With that, the trio fell silent as the motley group of survivors galloped away, sprinting down the hallway. Outside, ordnance fell at an increased rate, with even higher yields than the largest explosive that the Royal Army had in their stockpiles anywhere, much less what was left here in Stalliongrad. The group turned another corner, still barreling along down the passageway. While they had destroyed the staircase, there was at least one other that went to the ground floor, which would allow them access to the relative safety of the armory, a hardened room where they could hole up and stay safe.

Hopefully.

Ahead, the two forward troopers smashed through another set of doors, opening up the hallway beyond to reveal an enormous hole in the ceiling, undoubtedly where either a mortar or a stray rocket smashed into the building. Chunks of concrete lay on the floor, and as Twilight picked her

way quickly over the pieces (some as large as her head) she glanced up through the hole at the darkening sky, but couldn't see anything due to a combination of smoke and the darkness outside. Besides, it wasn't as if the gyrocopter was the thing chucking ordinance at them. She had heard enough weapons fire in the last twenty-four hours to know for a fact that there was a difference between shells and rockets.

Another door was shouldered open, and the group continued pummeling through. Ahead, the fire of the still blazing command center burned hungrily, devouring everything flammable inside. By now, the sickly scent of burning horseflesh had drifted through this hallway, and everypony began coughing and retching, even Major Di'ac and Sergeant Gunn. She felt her eyes burning and tearing up, realizing she'd left her goggles back with her helmet as she ducked low, desperate to avoid the smoke. Because of this, however, she noticed what nopony else had, in their haste to escape, and halted, staring into the room before her, jaw dropped and dumbstruck.

It was Colonel Eagle Eye! Here, in the radio room! What was he doing here?

"Hey!" she yelled, but her voice was drowned out by another blast, the others too busy trying to wrestle through the next set of doors. Cursing, she turned, stepping inside and coughing, harshly, trying to see where the hay she was going. At last, however, she finally reached the colonel, dropping to her knees and pushing at the larger horse feebly. When she couldn't get a response or turn him over, she automatically checked for a pulse in the neck. She felt herself exhale in unexpected relief as she found the heartbeat under her hoof. Still alive, then. For now, anyway. His wounds were so bad, a collection of burns and cuts that made her wince as she wondered just how the stallion had survived. It was a shame she knew no healing magic...

The mage realized that she could hear no radio traffic, and the mage perked her ears up before peering around the overturned table before her, bracing as another quake struck. Her first real look into the pit gave her a small shiver at the gloomy atmosphere of the room, completely dark save for the greens and blues of the various radio sets. Judging by the lack of corpses in the room all the operators had left before the dogs had come around. Then they were probably dead, if they'd gone out to fight as well.

Suddenly, a scuttering! There, under a counter! Twilight narrowed her eyes, glancing down at the colonel and realizing he wore a gun-yoke. Leaning down, she carefully took it off him, wincing at the burnt flesh still stuck to it as she slid the weapon on, adjusting the rifle to her size.

A clatter of hooves on concrete suddenly sounded behind her, and what meager light was being cast from the hallway was blocked as Short was suddenly filling the doorway. "Twilight! Let's go!" he hissed, glancing around the dark room. "The radios are all useless except for the wireless, and nopony's talking!"

"Shh!" she snapped back, eyes carefully tracing over the shadows before her. "I thought I heard something..."

Carefully, oh so carefully, she crept into the pit, rifle up and aimed into various corners. Catching on, Short followed as well, his own rifle pointing in the other direction to watch her back. He stepped so carefully, the loose bullets he had in his rifle barely clanked in the box magazine.

The creature had been rather small, so she supposed it could have been a rat. It had seemed larger than a mere rodent, though, but not large enough to be a dog, not even a smaller breed. As she finally found herself in the center of the pit, Twilight oriented herself so she was looking at the panel from whence the movement had first come, creeping forward towards it, her mind working and her hooves stumbling as another quake rocked the ground. Short stepped up beside her, rifle up and at the ready.

"Check underneath," he whispered, eyes still flitting from shadow to shadow. "I got your back."

Taking a deep breath, the purple mare slowly descended to her knees, squinting as she looked under the panel, trying to peer through the darkness. However, she got her answer at last as a familiar voice murmured "Twilight?"

"SPIKE!" she yelped, snapping up straight and slamming into Short, who had started to turn at the sound of a voice. Needless to say, the impact caused them both to fall over backwards, Short on his back and Twilight belly down on top of him, right in the center of the radio pit. As soon as they both got their wits about them, however, they each realized just what a compromising position they were stuck in, muzzles only inches away.

"Uh..." she started, unsure of how to continue. Fortunately, Short had at least part of his faculties about him.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Turned and...and well..."

"Yeah..."

Unlike before, however, the two of them didn't separate for several long seconds, just staring blearily into each other's eyes...

Before Spike, having crawled out from under the panel, cleared his throat loudly.

"Can this wait until later?"

"So no one's left alive but us?"

"Pretty much. There's maybe another twenty or so just ahead, and about five, maybe ten trapped downstairs in the armory. That's where we're heading right now."

Twilight stopped talking as another blast went off, shaking the whole building again. "Where –did- they get artillery?"

The colonel had a leg hooked over both her and Short's shoulders, dragging the unconscious commander down the hallway. Judging by the fact that there was no pony ahead, the group had moved on without them, eager to reach the shelter of the armory. Short was keeping quiet, his eyes hidden once more behind tactical goggles. Twilight, on the other hand, finally felt something buzzing through her other than fear and despair, something that seemed to tingle a little where Short had touched her. She didn't feel it where Eagle Eye's leg was draped over her, and it was beginning to concern her a little.

Spike glanced back at Twilight, in the lead to keep watch for anymore fires. His expression was one of confusion, even under the chars on his scales. "Artillery? You-oh, no. That's not the dogs, and those aren't cannons."

"What?" asked Short, breaking out of his stupor with a dumbfounded tone. "You're kidding. That's not us, I know we don't have anymore heavy artillery around."

"No! It's the Matriarchy."

Twilight stopped abruptly, forcing Short to do the same lest the colonel fall from his shoulder. "Wait, the griffons are here?"

"Yeah!" Spike nodded enthusiastically. "I heard one of the surviving Pegasi talking about a mobile airbase over the city. The griffons are bombing the manure out of the Industrial Sector to get rid of the dogs, starting with the storehouses and the garrison!"

"Explains why they're getting closer," Short remarked, heaving Eagle Eye onto his shoulder again with a grunt. "Let's go, pick up the pace!"

71st Royal Army Battalion, 1st Company

Forward Positions, assisted by elements from 2nd Company

Golden Ox Hotel, Dining Room, 1st Company Field HQ

"Yes, Colonel Coldheart, I understand...yes ma'am, I am quite aware that you outrank me...What?...yes, ma'am...ma'am, I understand that, but I must respectfully request that you stop your bombing and shift all your attention to the harbor...no, Lieutenant Colonel, we're holding out just fine..."

Captain Sanders groaned impatiently into the headset connected to the wireless radio, and Lieutenant Dandelion bit her lip, hard, trying to work out what the griffon commander might be telling him. The fact that the Matriarchy had effectively taken over the entire battle and all Royal Army remnants was bad enough, but they'd also gone ahead with an extensive heavy bombing campaign from their mobile airbase over the Industrial Sector without even consulting to check for survivors!

Sanders sighed again, a hoof rubbing at his eyes. "Ma'am, listen to me, please. There is a submarine that we greatly suspect belongs to the

Hegemonic Fleet...well, when did you last send scouts to the harbor?...that explains it, ma'am. My lookouts tell me the sub's been in the harbor for almost half an hour and it's docking with the cargo ship *Pride of Ottopaw*...Uh-huh, the one we suspect...Yeah, it's a Beluga Class...well, we suspect she's probably taking on cargo from the ship or offloading more troops...what?...Oh, it's right here, hang on." Sanders pulled the photo over, squinting at the numbers on the conning tower, trying to discern what the hay they might be. Dandelion cleared her throat, and the captain glanced up at the mare, frowning before she started mouthing the code. Once Sanders caught on he nodded, turning back to the mike. "Okay, I've got the numbers. Ready, Colonel?...It's CNV-1108, that's Celestia November Valentine, dash one-one-zero-eight. You got that?...Great. Okay, yeah. REA Seven-One Alpha, out."

With that, Captain Sanders pushed the headset off, letting it clatter to the floor as he sighed, his head following the pattern, setting his forehead against the radio pack. He remained like this for several minutes, and Dandelion bit her lip even harder. It had been the captain's intent to convince the griffons to stop bombing the Industrial Sector and concentrate on the developing situation at the harbor, but from what the lieutenant had heard, Sanders had just been bulldozed by senior rank and the general not-give-a-care-about-the-lower-echelons attitude that this Coldheart seemed to exhibit.

Fitting name.

Finally, Sanders raised his head, his expression cross. "Uh...I take it the Lieutenant Colonel wasn't in the best of moods, Captain?" Dandelion asked, nervously. She'd been figuratively tiptoeing ever since her earlier outburst, and wanted to make sure Sanders wouldn't try to replace her with Cotta. That self-absorbed...

"No," Sanders replied dully, his voice monotone. "She didn't even take me seriously, just said she'd look into the situation. That, in layman's terms, means she doesn't care and will keep doing what she wants till the cows come home."

Army Garrison Ruins

71st Royal Army Battalion (Remnants)

Garrison Armory

"There you are! Was wondering if we'd have to launch a search party!" Master Sergeant Marigold looked no less for wear as Twilight, Short and Spike pulled Colonel Eye inside. The second they were over the threshold, two troopers on either side of the door slammed the reinforced steel shut, dead-bolting it and taking up positions around the entrance.

Twilight had to admit, cramped as the armory was with thirty or so ponies crammed inside, it definitely felt a lot safer than the upstairs hallway, despite the danger of dogs burrowing underneath. Outside, the griffon bombardment continued, unhindered, as the ponies moved around in the dim light from the single battery powered lantern hanging from the ceiling. Weapons and ammunition were being passed around, damaged equipment swapped out for intact counterparts and what wounded there were being treated by the single medic there.

"Everypony okay?" Twilight asked the overburdened earth pony stallion, huffing as they dragged the colonel over to the triage area. The white medic, splattered with blood from his patients and ash and mud from the horrific scene outside, snorted as he set to work on Eagle Eye.

"If you count 'okay' as numerous fractures, bullet wounds, second and third degree burns, hypothermia, severe mental trauma and dehydration being the norm, then yes. Everypony's okay." He pulled Eye's vest off, whistling quietly at the wounds he found along his commander's chest. "Dang. The Colonel's pretty thrashed."

"Will he make it?" asked a nearby voice, and all five of them assembled nearby turned to acknowledge Major Di'ac, staring down at Eye's wounded form with an emotionless face. The medic nodded, turning back to his work as he reached for the half-empty tube of burn salve.

"Yes. If I concentrate and he manages to stay strong, I should be able to patch him up and get some fresh blood into him in time."

Di'ac let out a soft sigh, still staring down at the Colonel, not saying a thing.

Twilight, however, didn't have time to beat around the bush. She pushed past Short, finally squaring up to the larger mare. "Major, I have some urgent news that you need to be aware of and must act on immediately. Where's Corporal Drab?"

Chapter 14

Cascade

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

Matriarchy Armed Forces, 4th Airborne Division

Mobile Airbase 16, AKA "Artemis"

Over the Industrial Sector, Engaged in Bombing Operations

"Colonel Coldheart! I'm getting a radio transmission from the ground!"

To say that Harriet was annoyed would be putting it lightly. She'd been deep in discussion for the past half hour, even as the bombs began dropping, debating their next move. Though the 4th consisted of several thousand hardened and able griffon soldiers, they could only cover so much of the city. They would need to decide where to place the majority of their strength in order to contain the dogs where the bombs could kill as many as possible. They only had so many, after all.

To say Captain Gilda Axeclaw was her preference for a second in command was to tell a blatant lie. Axeclaw's personal ambitions and goals for glory came with an immense drive and will, but also an immense arrogance and sense of self-importance. Like many other officers, Gilda seemed to only be using her service in the Legion to advance herself in society. Academy, to Officer Candidate School, to the Airborne Legion. Such a rapid chain of events that shaped the unsavory, if capable, soldier before her.

But enough thoughts of unwanted baggage. Harriet Coldheart turned, stalking over to the rail of her command dais and leaning against it, purposefully ignoring Gilda's irritated growl. "What have we got, Specialist?"

Ranks in the Matriarchy worked differently from Equestria ones. Though a lot was borrowed from the ponies (the griffons' military structure loosely based off their royal counterparts) there were many differences. Instead of

corporals, they had specialists. Instead of sergeants, they had wardens. The woman before Coldheart, Specialist Gale Windheart of the Heart Clan, was Harriet's own niece, albeit from another family of the clan. Still, she did not have any room inside of her for special treatment (nepotism was rife in the Matriarchy), and Gale oftentimes found herself on the lash of Coldheart's sharp tongue, simply to reinforce that the lieutenant colonel wasn't doing her niece any favors.

"Picking up radio signals from the garrison. Hang on, I'm still tuning to get the best quality."

"Don't worry about quality, Specialist. So long as we can hear it, it's good enough. Put it on speakers."

Windheart glanced over at her aunt, pausing only briefly before nodding, turning to the radio set before her and, after a few more minor adjustments, reached for the speaker set. Griffon radio technology had evolved past the point of squadron radio packs, and instead distributed short-range headsets to every soldier, just like the Canids up north did. This freed up the largest radio for long-range communications instead of sending messages between units, so the single radio on the table was the only large piece of communications equipment on the whole of Artemis.

"Putting it on speakers."

The room was suddenly filled with the static-ridden hash of the radio call, from somewhere down below the heat and dust and snow interfering with the signal. It sounded like a male pony, a stallion, and he was hurriedly calling out whatever message he had to send.

"-is Corporal Drab of the 71st Royal Army Battalion, Equestrian Armed Forces to the Matriarchy airship above! Cease bombing operations, we have survivors and wounded down here! You're going to kill us all! I don't think they're listening Major!"

"Try again, you must, for if you don't we'll be pounded to dust."

"Wait a minute..." said Gilda, stepping closer and listening harder. "That's a zebra! They're the only ones I know lame enough to rhyme all the time!...uh, ma'am."

Coldheart finally pulled her narrowed eyes off of the captain, turning to Windheart and asking "Is there anyway for you to check its authenticity?"

The Specialist shook her head, feathers ruffling slightly. "No, Colonel. The call was sent out on an open channel, so anything could have made it. I'm getting back radio codes associated with the 71st, though."

Coldheart paused, considering the situation at hand. The 4th had been provided with the portfolio from Canterlot Army High Command of the contingency wireless codes that Colonel Eagle Eye used. But those had been filed a month ago, and given the current state of the battle, the diamond dogs could have compromised communications. Just because something –sounded- like a pony didn't mean it was. On the other hand, if she ignored them and continued bombing, lots of innocent creatures could get hurt. But if she continued anyway, no one would find out.

"No," she finally said, moving away from the console. "We have no way to confirm if they are who they are, and any authorization codes could have been discovered at the garrison. Better to keep going, full steam ahead."

Just as Harriet was about to step away, however, that damnable Gilda spoke up, out of turn as always. The captain never did seem to realize that military procedure was there for a reason, and that reason was obviously not so it could be ignored. Coldheart bristled as she realized that no matter what she did, Gilda Axeclaw would never respect her betters.

"Hold on...I do remember that the Royal Army battalion's Two-I-C was a zebra. A Major Zo Di'ac, if I'm picturing the briefing correctly." She smirked smugly at Coldheart's glowering form, inspecting her claws casually. "The dogs wouldn't know that we know, and they aren't exactly smart enough to rhyme –all- the time. I think we've got our confirmation right there."

Lieutenant Colonel Coldheart had disposed of many rivals before. Idiot women who tried to move ahead of her just because it was the next rung in the ladder. But, as she swung back to hear Gilda's argument, she realized that for the first time she was considering getting rid of an underling.

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

9th Hegemonic AOT (Advanced Operations Taskgroup)

Current Mission: Espionage and Resource Retrieval

Dorsal surface of Hegemonic Fleet Submersible CNV-1108 *Seawolf*, Docked with *Pride of Ottapaw*

"Garret, shut up."

The Fleet officer stared, dumbstruck, as the ex-Marine turned special forces brushed off everything he'd been saying. Commander Michael Garret was a seasoned veteran, a dog who had worked his way up through the ranks. He'd –earned- this position, dammit! And that meant not being bossed around by those who were not only underneath him in rank, but also of a different branch.

"Wha-how –dare- you?" the Corgi spluttered, raising a small paw in indignation, claws wrapped in a fist. "You can't speak to me like that, I outrank you!"

"Actually, according to the Command Authority Amendment from ten years ago, all operations in which a special forces operative of the rank lieutenant or higher is present fall under the purview of the Black Ops," Boxer replied calmly. The Major was inspecting his own claws now, the cigar clutched between them. "President Chewchill himself suggested it after a wolf blocked him from an assassin's bullet, after the local Fleet officers ignored the wolf about potential sniper angles."

President Winston Chewchill. Now there was a tub of mixed grease if ever there was one. Chewchill loved to love himself, and as such spent most of his time lounging around, smoking cigars, drinking brandy, chewing on the finest bones and attending social galas from one end of the Hegemony to the other. But while it was fair to say that Prime Minister Mation ruled supreme in matters military and foreign, Chewchill clutched his power of internal affairs and the economy itself with an iron paw. Which was the main reason Mation even listened to the President at all.

And now, the luxury-loving bulldog was the reason Major Boxer was stepping onto the sub, whistling lightly as Hegemonic Marines streamed out

past him and the black-clothed wolves behind him, both of which were silent. How such a brash and carefree dog had reached the rank of Major, much less entered the Black Ops, was a mystery to Garret, but he didn't care enough to ask. Right now, he just wanted Boxer out of his sight.

"Alright, fine! What do you want, Major?"

Boxer grinned widely, exposing a set of perfect, sharp teeth that meshed together without a hint of a gap between them. He looked the very essence of a predator about to enjoy an easy meal; satisfied, yet bored that there had been no chase to catch it. The look sent an unexpected chill down Garret's spine, and he didn't know why. He'd battled sea dragons and hydras, after all. A single special forces operator shouldn't...shouldn't...

"Have we heard back from Captain Frost yet?" Boxer asked, his face resuming its normal amused passiveness. Garret snapped himself back to the present, shaking his head and replying "No. But the gyrodynes only left a few hours ago from the Recalcitrant. She's still waiting thirty-five miles out at sea, where the Royal Army Harbor Watch can't find her."

"Recalcitrant...Packmaster class Gyro-Carrier, correct?"

"Correct. She's set to receive the cargo from Frost's team, as well as yours."

"Well, Commander. You have two choices here, for I'm not leaving behind one scrap of cargo. You can either make a few trips, or get on the horn to Recalcitrant and ask her for some muscle."

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

Matriarchy Armed Forces, 4th Airborne Division

5th Battalion, 1st Company, Salamander Squad

Industrial Sector, Mining Guild Mineral Refinery

Warden Tempestia Bravencrest could brag about her veterancy. She'd served in two foreign wars, both of which were complete successes for the

Matriarchy, and had the honor of wearing the Remembrance Cross for recovering dead soldier's ID tags and returning them to base at the risk of her own life. She'd scored top in her Weapons Handling test scores time and time again, and was fit as a fiddle, muscles and sinews tight like a drum, mind as sharp as a steel trap. Power-Jumping (what the Legion called flying over obstacles with just enough power to make it look like one giant leap) came naturally to her, and her skill in close-combat was so extreme that she could gut any opponent before they had a chance to react to her first blow.

Bravencrest could brag for hours. Any other griffon, hell any other – creature- would. But not her. She wasn't proud of her achievements at all. The things she'd seen, the things she'd –done- disgusted her beyond belief. She didn't want to serve anymore, but a military term in the Matriarchy was a full ten years, a long-term commitment to the empire (oh, they might not have called themselves that anymore, but she knew that's exactly what they were).

For now, at least, there was no fighting. Her squad was holed up in this refinery, having just cleared it of dogs and ordered to remain here to maintain the perimeter while the bombing went on further to the south. It was a traditional griffon tactic, use numbers and maneuverability to force your enemy into a corner and then smash the daylights out of him with as much heavy ordnance as can be brought to bear. Bravencrest could attest to seeing it's immediate effects come through with some measure of success, for it made morale drop instantly and the enemy surrendered nine times out of ten. But there would be no surrender here...

"*Salamander One Actual, do you receive?*" That was Bravencrest's wireless, a headset that covered half her head, letting her hear radio calls from her superiors. All Airborne soldiers in the Legion wore them, and it allowed for greater tactical flexibility and speedy deployments without the need for the pause to confer. While Canida did have this technology as well, they rarely used it to its full potential, preferring to keep their soldiers in tight formation. Equestrian soldiers, at least, could work around their handicap, it seemed.

The warden reached up, keying her headset and replying "This is Salamander One-One, we're hearing you. Go ahead." The call would be

from Artemis, either from an officer up there or relayed from her own commander's outpost in City Center.

"Be advised, we're receiving radio chatter from the ground. Sounds like some Royal Army troopers survived in the garrison and need extraction. The colonel is rather doubtful, but is willing to look into it. The bombing will stop for five minutes, and you're the closest squad in the area."

"Understood," replied Bravencrest, nodding even though the radio operator was nowhere close enough to see her. "We'll find them. We'll pop a blue flare for pickup and a red flare if it turns out to be a ruse."

"We'll be attaching Ironwind 6 to give you support. Good luck, Salamander." With that, the line went dead, and Tempestia let out a huff of a sigh. Five minutes to get to the garrison, easily a mile away. That wouldn't give them much time to search, but it was better than nothing. But she needed to move fast, and they needed to move now.

"Alright, form up!" she called out, hefting her LSG-41 and grunting at the ammunition. While the magazine-fed automatic shotguns were the most famous and standard issue for Airborne Legionnaires, supporting weapons for being on the ground were a needed piece of kit. The Light Support Gun was an automatic rifle with a big magazine, meant to suppress enemy forces and let other Legionnaires with more accurate weapons get the shot they needed. Around the sergeant, her five squad mates assembled, ready to go. She sighed as she looked upon them, wishing (not for the first time) that she had her old squad from Kodiak. They'd been a crack team, a lethal machine of weapons, wings and claws. Only problem was, she'd gotten the Remembrance Cross because of them. Hard to give orders to dead women.

"Alright, ladies! Lock and load, check your shit and your sights! We're going in, and we're going in hard and fast. Word is there are survivors holed up at the Royal Army Garrison, a mile south of here. We are to move out in Jump order, secure the area and ascertain if the call is genuine. Watch your corners, keep your teammates in sight and whatever you do, don't freaking waste your ammo. Fire in short bursts, I'm not gonna say it again."

She could see the looks of eagerness in these young recruits' eyes, and knew her words would have no effect. Glory-hunting rookies always did things the stupid way, and she wondered which of them would get killed

first and how many it would take before the rest snapped into line. Two? Three?

Regardless, she knew she'd have to hold the squad together, and so she turned, extending her wings and leaping high into the air, out through the hole in the ceiling they'd made to get in, out and up into the night sky. The district was a mess, with fires burning everywhere and choking the stars off with billowing clouds of smoke, obscuring the rest of the city from sight. That could also be because Stalliongrad's power supply had been destroyed as well, but she wasn't one for guessing.

As she reached the top of her Jump, Bravencrest glanced over towards the south, at one of the largest patches of light she could see around. According to reports from battlefield surveillance, about two hundred Royal Army troopers with air and magic support had stood their ground against thousands upon thousands of dogs, and almost won. But they hadn't, and the garrison was crawling with dogs right now. How a single squad with tank support was supposed to clear the place and extract any survivors was beyond her, but maybe these ponies were supposed to have something to do with it.

Bravencrest felt the pull of gravity, and pulled her wings in tight to increase her falling speed, slamming into a rooftop on her specially constructed shock-absorbing leg frames, designed to take and channel away all force from impacts, allowing Legionnaires peace of mind as they performed their Jumps. The rest of the squad fell in behind her, arranged in a crooked line with their weapons up. Three possessed scatter guns, while another held a marksman rifle and another had a single shot grenade launcher. Not a very heavily outfitted team, but apparently enough to get the job done, according to Artemis.

The warden took off once more for the second jump, feeling the cold air sweep through her feathers and fur. Her simple leather vest was lightweight on her frame, but she could still feel the ammunition and other equipment strapped to it weighing her down. At least they didn't carry heavy packs full of gear like the ground forces of other armies, she considered. She loved feeling the wind move past her like this, no control over where she landed as she free-fell towards her destination. It was the one thing she loved best about the Legion, the chance to fly around the world and see new places, feel different environments on her face...

As she came back to earth again, this time landing on top of a bakery, her headset crackled once more. *"Salamander, this is Ironwind 6. We just passed the marker, less than one hundred meters from the target, over."*

Featherweight light tanks were halftrack contraptions. With the quick guidance of a front set of wheels, powered by treads that could conquer any surface, they were able to tackle even the most inhospitable surface and come out on top, and they were fast to boot. The only problem, of course, was their thin armor and light cannon, barely sufficient to clear out infantry with. Put a Featherweight against even an Equestrian Crusader battlegun (seriously? Battlegun? Why couldn't they call it a tank like the rest of the world?) and the battlegun would win. And yet, the Featherweight was the most commonly used armored vehicle in the Matriarchy...

As she took off again, Bravencrest replied "Roger, Ironwind. Keep a foot in the door; we're almost there, over."

Featherweights were crewed by four griffons, which at least kept the tank in working order. In those cramped conditions, however, movement was hindered by both close quarters and the griffons' wings. Tanker crews took extensive training not to unfurl their wings when they felt surprise or anger or any other strong emotion (avoiding what Pegasi slang designated a 'wing boner.' Honestly, how childish). In the distance, Bravencrest heard the cannon thump, followed by the explosion of the shell and the rattling of the machine guns. The dogs would be on that tank like...well...fleas on a dog. They had to get there and provide cover.

Fortunately, with Artemis no longer dropping bombs, the relative silence allowed her to pinpoint the sound of the tank over the chatter of infighting diamond dogs elsewhere in the district, and it was on her fifth Jump that she finally found herself splashing onto the muddy avenue next to Ironwind. She straightened instantly, LSG up and ready to go, expecting a wave of inbound dogs...

Only to find herself staring at an empty field. Ahead were piles upon piles of dog corpses, and beyond that were the ruined defense works of the Royal Army battalion. But there were no dogs charging them. Beside her, the guns of Ironwind were silent, steaming in the chill air as the temperature sapped the heat from their muzzles.

"Uh...Ward?" asked one of her rookies as the squad fell in alongside her. "Wasn't this place supposed to be swarmed with dogs?"

Bravencrest nodded slowly, tapping her fist on the side of Ironwind. In a moment, the hatch up top swung open, revealing the leather-cap clad head of the commander, a young one who squinted down at Tempestia with barely disguised irritation.

"What is it, Warden?"

"What the hell were you firing at? I can't see anything but bodies."

The commander shrugged, as if there was nothing to worry about. "Some scavengers. A few dogs were collecting weapons and ammo from the field."

The warden nodded, considering the situation before stating "Stay here and cover us. We'll go investigate."

Before the commander could answer, the sharp snap of rifle fire and the howling of several diamond dogs rang out, causing every soldier nearby to snap to, guns raised and ready. Ironwind's commander disappeared inside her tank, and the Featherweight lurched forward, rolling towards the destroyed gates slowly. Bravencrest didn't get on the commander for breaking orders, for she knew the situation had changed. She gestured to her team, and the squad fell in behind the tank, using it for cover as they hiked up the quarter-mile of killing field towards the garrison.

Up close, it was horrible on an unimaginable scale. Bodies (or pieces of them) were scattered all over the place, pony and dog both. Piles lay in and around the trenches, and other were tangled in the barbed wire defending these areas. Bunkers were split open, their guns lolling in the firing gaps. The Featherweight passed a destroyed battlegon, its barrel split open and peeled back like a banana, the burned corpses of its crew laying half in and around the wreck.

A squad of dead ponies lay next to the gates, established behind two sandbag embankments with heavy machine guns. At least two dozen dogs lay dead around these areas, and it looked as though the squad had run out of ammunition and were forced to hoof-to-paw combat before being

overwhelmed and hacked apart. At least they took the bastards with them, Bravencrest considered.

Finally, they entered the garrison, but it was just as horrendous as the outside. An enormous pit was sunk into the center, taking the Pegasus service pad, an artillery position and an entire brace of mortars into the ground, where their crews and whatever other soldiers were left had been slaughtered.

"Poor bastards..." muttered the grenadier in her squad, peering down into the pit. Bravencrest had to agree, glancing up at the wrecked and still smoldering command center at the top of the fortress. These soldiers had been cornered, and from what she could see the fighting had been savage, fierce. The ponies had taken from the dogs until their last bullet was expended, but that still hadn't stopped the canines. Such a bittersweet victory, she considered. For the dogs, at least.

Suddenly, from inside the garrison, a rifle cracked again, followed by a short burst. Ironwind, which had to remain at the front gates, wheeled its cannon around, tracking the sound. The warden raised a hand, gesturing for the squad to move inside. Upon entering, however, she found the site of another carnage, this one wrested on the dogs. More piles of corpses were gathered around, laying on top of each other as if someone had thrown them into these positions. But there were no pony corpses to be found.

"Contact!" hissed a private, and the entire squad brought their weapons to bear as a single diamond dog stumbled around the corner, running for dear life. Upon seeing the griffons, however, he skidded to a halt, eyes wide and afraid. Very afraid. Before the griffons could do anything, however, another shot resounded through the hallways, splattering the dogs brains on the walls and sending its body flopping to the floor. Salamander squad braced themselves, waiting with baited breath. Was this another squabble between the dogs? Or were there really pony survivors still in the garrison?

There was the slow, methodic ringing of iron shoes on concrete flooring, and the squad tensed up even more. Whoever this pony was, they were vicious and lethal, showing that they had no mercy in them. Salamander squad needed to be on their guard around this trooper. But now the hooves were joined by another set, and another, and another. Four ponies? Not a

squad, Royal Army doctrine stated that a full squad was nine troopers plus a sergeant. Then again, they'd been in some fierce fighting...

A tall, blue stallion strode around the corner, covered in head to hoof in grime. At first, the warden thought he was just a civilian, but she quickly realized that he was wearing winter battledress and blue body armor, his rifle yoke resting easy around his neck. He seemed unsurprised at seeing the griffons, and strode forward casually, stepping over the body of the dog he'd just shot. But he wasn't alone. Three others followed him, two earth ponies and a unicorn, all of them weary and battle-worn. Only the earth ponies were armed, however, and the unicorn didn't even wear a helmet.

"It's about dang time," said the blue stallion levelly. "Was wondering when you lot were going to stop bombing us and finally come rescue our sorry hides."

71st Royal Army Battalion, 1st Company

Forward Positions, assisted by elements from 2nd Company

Dawson Avenue, Receiving Survivors

To say that Sanders was shocked to see Major Di'ac was putting it lightly. To say that he was astonished to find Colonel Eagle Eye still alive and recovered enough to begin issuing orders from his stretcher was an understatement.

But to see the Army Sky Corps suddenly appearing on the horizon with a squad of large, muscular troopers in tactical body armor calling themselves RAIC troopers was too much for the captain, and when Major Di'ac asked if he would turn over command of the remnants to her he left her with it gladly. Let somepony else sort out this mess, he was getting some bucking sleep.

Twilight had to admit, the sensation of safety was overwhelming after a long day spent on the front line. 1st Company had done well for themselves, holing up here for so many hours. Now, with survivors being brought in from all over the city thanks to the griffons, their numbers had

swelled to just a little over two hundred serving on the line, with a few hundred others being tended to in several small triage areas.

Still, as she lay tiredly on the steps in front of the Golden Ox Hotel and watched the proceedings, she knew this wasn't over. Celestia may have been a beneficial monarch and deity, but even saints knew where to draw the line. Somepony would pay for this, and Luna would be the one to extract Equestria's vengeance. For now, however, she enjoyed her first real taste of safety all day, the salty air from the harbor helping her relax and realize just how tired she was. She'd barely been awake enough to listen to the briefing by Captain Sanders, explaining about the sub and the ship. Even now, General Spitfire of the 89th was working with Colonel Eye and Captain Tabbs (commander of the RAIC squad) on a plan of attack, the higher ranking Wonderbolt deferring to Eye's superior knowledge of the city, the dogs and overland tactics. The three officers were in constant radio communication with Lieutenant Colonel Coldheart onboard the flying airbase, deciding on a plan of action to put the screws to the real enemy here; the Canid Hegemony.

Twilight could hardly believe what she was hearing. Why would Canida attack Equestria? Princess Celestia and President Chewchill had been on good terms only a few years ago, and there hadn't been any major falling outs since then. There had even been the idea brought up and considered of Canida downsizing their military, but of course that was out the window now. But a Fleet submersible in an Equestrian harbor wasn't much in the way of peaceful action. Worse, the griffon infiltration team that had been sent to sabotage the ship hadn't been heard back from yet, and they were thought to be dead.

Twilight reached a hoof up, rubbing at her eyes. She was tired, confused, thirsty and shaken. Her mind was a jumble and her focus so shattered right now she couldn't even conjure a simple glass of water or lift a sheet of paper with her magic. Spike, at least, was her anchor with reality. Amazingly, the little dragon had seemed to shrug off all the trauma of the battle, and was as chipper and efficient as ever, caring for Colonel Eye even as the commander tried to run the entire war from his bed with broken ribs. Then again, if you survive a rocket attack, she supposed there wasn't much else that could phase you.

The door into the hotel opened behind her, and she glanced up, away from the train of wounded troopers and medics moving back and forth up and down the avenue, to find Short standing next to her. Her heart seemed to skip a beat, and she blushed lightly, though she knew she shouldn't have. What was happening to her, blushing like a school filly every time a particular stallion walked by? She smiled, hoping he'd come out to chat.

"Twilight...you better come inside."

"We've identified the submersible as the Seawolf," said Lieutenant Colonel Harriet Coldheart's voice from the wireless set Corporal Drab was operating on the dining room table. "Our intel says she's supposed to be in the Howlifax Naval Dry-docks, due for a refit to become an Orca Class Attack Submersible again. Certainly she's not supposed to be on the other side of the ocean with a Marine escort in tow."

"Then we can confirm that this is indeed a black op," said General Spitfire, resplendent in her blue uniform. Nearby, Major Soarin munched thoughtfully on a pie he'd undoubtedly smuggled in, and Colonel Surprise stood at the General's side, watching carefully and quietly. The Pegasus mare was the Wonderbolts' second in command, and from what Rainbow Dash had told Twilight she had the authority to command the entire 89th all on her own.

"But they've pulled up to that cargo ship. They're putting something onboard, and I don't like it," replied Colonel Eye from his cot, propped up into something resembling a sitting position by the stack of pillows behind him. The black stallion was a mess. Bandages covered his head and torso, his right foreleg was held in a sling and there were at least a dozen burns covered in salve that Twilight could see. It was a miracle the colonel was sitting up, much less giving orders!

As Twilight and Short walked in, her eyes snapped to the right, where Sergeant Gunn and Azure were waiting off to the side, at least marginally cleaned up. The commanders had called Victor Squad in to recount their various experiences out on the battlefield. Thanks to their testimony about the gyrocopter and a sniper named Quick Craft describing a Canid soldier she'd seen, the officers finally had all the proof they needed. Nearby, Major Di'ac noticed Twilight and shook her head, raising a hoof to her lips.

Twilight understood, and slunk around with Short to join Gunn and Azure off to the side of the dining room, watching the proceedings. Gunn was as stiff and martial as ever, while Azure seemed to be barely staying awake.

"We've gotten reports of Canid gyro-craft spotted heading inland. Whatever they're up to, the dogs aren't putting all their eggs in one basket," said Coldheart over the radio, continuing the discussion.

"That means they need some kind of carrier craft," said Spitfire, musing over that briefly. "But that's beside the point. We need to stop that submersible. Colonel Eye, how many soldiers do you have combat ready?"

Eye opened his mouth to answer before a series of coughs escaped his lungs, ragged and wet, and he cleared his throat before he answered, in a hoarse and scratchy voice "Barely two-hundred with about thirty armored vehicles, and there's still a few thousand dogs in the city. I'd rather not compromise what little defense we have left in case they decide to push, General."

"Fair enough," replied Spitfire, frowning at the map of the city before her. "With the Pegasi from the 71st incorporated into the 89th, I have a thousand fliers. So far as I know, 4th Division numbers about seven thousand, right Colonel?"

"Correct, General."

"Captain, you have a full squad of commandos?"

Captain Tabbs had, for the most part, kept off to the side, his scarred face kept emotionless and his voice silent throughout the proceedings. But he stepped forward exactly three paces and answered "Yes, General. Ten stallions, ready to launch."

"Hmm..." Spitfire raised a hoof, rubbing her chin, and Twilight felt a pang of apprehension at the Wonderbolt's musings. Surely she could be asking about all these numbers because-

"Then it's settled. We'll use –our- overwhelming numbers and completely swamp those two ships with an aerial attack. So far as we've seen, they've got no anti-air defenses."

"Beluga Class vessels are usually armed with only a deck gun, and the cargo ship has no obvious weapons. They pose no threat to us."

"I don't like it," said Eye, straightening up a little and grimacing. "So far, the dogs, and I mean the actual soldiers here, have been very adept at identifying our weaknesses and nailing us where it hurts. I've been fighting their soldiers for nine hours, and I can honestly say that I don't think they would just leave the two ships they were supposed to be keeping secret completely defenseless. This is a trap. I guarantee it."

"Colonel Eye, while your council is useful, we have no data to suggest they are expecting a counter-attack," replied Spitfire neutrally. "In fact, we have shown no evidence to suggest that we know they're there, or that we have reinforced."

"Besides," piped up Soarin as he pulled out –another- pie (Where was he keeping them was what Twilight wanted to know) "What can they do against eight thousand fliers? They can't have more than a few hundred Marines and spec ops there with them, and we haven't sent any scouts out to tell them we're here."

"Yes, but-"

"Honestly, the situation's too perfect for us to ignore. We've got the advantage in numbers for the first time all day, I say we use it."

"Lieutenant Colonel, I-"

Abruptly, however, the meeting was interrupted by another source, this one an outside influence. The dining room doors flew open, admitting one very haggard looking Lieutenant Dandelion, her saddlebags stuffed with papers and a bundle clutched between her teeth, a wild look in her tired eyes. The two troopers guarding the door outside obviously hadn't stopped her, though she could have simply used her authority to boss her way inside.

"Colonel!...uh...General? Uh..." she balked, frowning as she tried to think of who to report to. Eye saved her the trouble by waving with his uninjured hoof. "Over here, Lieutenant. What is it?"

"We've got a problem, sir. Another ship is pulling into the harbor."

"What? Do you have photos?"

"No need, sir. You can look out the window and see it coming straight towards us."

Chapter 15

Endgame

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

71st Royal Army Battalion (Remnants), 1st Company

Forward Positions, assisted by elements from 2nd Company and 3rd Company

Golden Ox Hotel, Dining Room, 1st Company Field HQ

There it was. Just like the Lieutenant said, looking up like some iron god of war. Twilight had never seen a ship so menacing before. Even though the cargo ship dwarfed it, the vessel was bristling with weaponry, from rocket batteries to conventional cannons to turrets that scanned the skies. It was long and slender, making good time across the harbor until it was practically within a stone's throw of the cargo ship, where it turned, presenting its port side to the harbor and dropping anchor.

"What...is that?" she whispered, eyes wide as she tried (and failed) to take in and accept the threat.

Almost as if the griffon was reading her mind, Coldheart's voice spoke from the wireless once more. *"That's an Assassin Class Destroyer. But what's it doing here is the bigger question."*

"Perhaps a little less melodrama next time, Lieutenant?" asked Colonel Eye from his cot, smiling over at Dandelion, who flushed as she realized just how her statement could be taken. "In any case, it's not good news. I've read about destroyers, they're built to be counter units, responding to anything that's in the water."

"Or the air," muttered Spitfire, cursing under her breath as she scowled out at the great vessel. Its prow and hull were knife-shaped, designed to slice through the waves and ram smaller vessels head on. "Typical! The dogs hit us with that big piece of iron when we have no maritime assets in the water!"

"Beg pardon, ma'am," Eagle Eye said, frowning as he tried to straighten up, grimacing as he bumped one of his broken ribs. "But the Harbor Watch isn't exactly a martial branch. They don't even get any combat training-"

"Yes, I'm aware. And how utterly useless!" the general snapped, turning towards the map once more, now ignoring the ship. "This changes our whole strategy. Unless we put that destroyer into the bottom of the harbor, we'll have no way to counter-attack. Then we might as well kiss victory goodbye."

"It does pose a very large problem for us," observed Coldheart over the wireless, her tone one of concern. The 4th was almost completely airborne infantry, after all, not the kind of force needed to take on a destroyer. *"Its arsenal is capable of taking out anything we throw at it, and we have no torpedoes or heavy artillery."*

"This is pathetic," Spitfire exclaimed calmly, pushing the map away. "Look at us, stalled by one single ship! It's just a boat! Surely we can take on – one- Fleet destroyer with eight –thousand- fliers!"

Twilight felt her face twisting in a grimace. It was a cold and heartless decision the general was declaring, but she supposed the Pegasus commander had a point. Victory here would only be won through overwhelming numbers, and right now that meant filling the skies with soldiers until somepony got through. She saw the general's plan perfectly, and knew that many hundreds, if not thousands more would die in the skies today before the battle was finally over.

What she didn't know was why Colonel Eye and Major Di'ac, being the two commanders in the room who had lived through the ravages of the fighting, weren't speaking out against such a plan of action. The major had been in that mess, after all, fighting next to troopers who'd battled just as fiercely and died to protect the city and all of Equestria, and the colonel...well, the fact that he was lying in a cot should have been all he needed to vehemently protest this plan!

Twilight stepped forward, mouth open and about to give her own thoughts on the issue when she found her progress halted. She glanced down, surprised to see a gray foreleg in winter battledress across her chest, and glanced up at its owner right next to her, an incredulous look on her face. "Short! What are you doing?" she hissed angrily.

The stallion in question wasn't even looking at her, but across the room! The indignity of it all, almost as if she was being ignored. But then he surreptitiously nodded, his eyes flickering back and forth for a moment. Twilight glanced over as well, frowning as she found herself looking at Major Di'ac, currently in whispered conversation with Colonel Eye. She frowned, her words of outrage dying as she tried to unravel just what the two might be plotting over there...

Abruptly, however, her attention was drawn back to the planning meeting as Soarin proclaimed "It's simple! Split our forces into four branches and attack from all sides! That way, we lessen the amount of casualties we take and guarantee that at least some of our flyers get close!"

"Keep in mind the need for reserves. We might not succeed on the first try, and we should keep a backup force just in case a second wave needs to be launched," Coldheart mentioned. Twilight clenched her jaw at the callousness of the situation. These...people, for lack of a better word, were only discussing casualties as a backup in case too many were butchered the first time! She couldn't believe how careless they all were of the lives they'd be throwing away!

Suddenly, Major Di'ac stood up straight, clearing her throat and coughing, once, to both clear the grime from her throat and get the room's attention. For a moment, only Colonel Surprise noticed, and turned to face the zebra. "Yes, Major. What is it?" Her voice was surprisingly soft, the kind of tone Fluttershy might have if she possessed a squick more confidence and authority about her. Twilight almost wondered if there was any relation, but realized that there was really nothing else similar between the Pegasi.

"I regret to inform that the Colonel needs to rest. I will take him to his room until he feels best."

Spitfire turned, her face mostly disinterested save for a frown, but she nodded. "Alright, Major. Get a squad together and take the Colonel to his room. His detachment is not part of this anyway."

Twilight had to bite her lip in order to swallow her anger at these words, feeling her rage brimming to the top. Rainbow Dash wanted to be like these...these...assholes? Spitfire was a stuck up, attention and glory-hogging snoot with no sympathy for those under her command, Soarin was lazy and incompetent and Surprise, for all her quiet, hadn't voiced a single

complaint to the future slaughter, condemning herself along with her fellow Wonderbolts. Ooh, when Twilight got back to Ponyville, she was going to disillusion Rainbow Dash so much that-

That...

What was wrong with her?

She felt a nudge as Short's hoof poked her shoulder, and she glanced up at the grey stallion, looking down at her with some concern. "You okay?" At her slow nod, he frowned even deeper, but seemed to at least take her lukewarm reply in stride for now. "Alright. C'mon."

He stepped across the room, and Twilight realized that the whole of Victor squad had assembled around Colonel Eye's cot, Sergeant Gunn and Azure on the front corners, with Short taking the back. Major Di'ac stared pointedly at her, and in her fatigued state, the mage almost didn't understand. Surely she could grab the last one, right? They didn't need her to do anything...right? And besides, why get an entire squad to lift a single bed? It couldn't be good for Eye's health...

And then she realized exactly why the entire squad, and the colonel, were all staring flatly at her. With a squeak of embarrassment, she scampered over, sliding under the last corner with a muttered "Sorry, sorry..." and heaving her side up. Fortunately, between the four of them the black stallion wasn't that heavy, and they departed for the stairs quickly, leaving behind General Spitfire to carry out planning the slaughter that was about to unfold.

9th Hegemonic AOT (Advanced Operations Taskgroup)

Current Mission: Espionage and Resource Retrieval

**Dorsal surface of Hegemonic Fleet Submersible CNV-1108 *Seawolf*,
Docked with *Pride of Ottapaw***

"You called in a destroyer?"

Boxer turned to Garret, his face drawn up in a snarl as he drew closer to the smaller dog, a clawed paw going to his hip and the pistol holstered there. It was a J2F pistol, a hefty firearm meant to be held in a hand thanks to its grip, and the heavy-duty slide ensured that the recoil was absorbed straight into the frame of the gun, thus decreasing the kick of the big bullets. Unlike most diamond dog operations, this one had been carried out with modern weapons in bulk to the dogs, several thousand handguns just like this one spread throughout the rank and file alongside the modern rifles, all in the hopes that such high-end weapons would help to tip the scales even further in their favor.

Now, that gamble was wasted.

Garret stood before Boxer with no fear on his face, staring up at the taller dog with something akin to amusement. "Now now, Major. Surely you understand why I called in such a craft. The Howloween Night is perfect for holding this harbor. Thanks to her depth charges and flak guns, she can hold off all threats from sea and air, and the rocket batteries can pulp any land target in range. You said so yourself, there's no more heavy artillery in enemy hands, so the ship is relatively safe. To top it off, she has a large cargo hold when she's carrying light on ordnance, so most of her sea mines were taken out to make room. What more could you want?"

Boxer almost shot the arrogant little son of a bitch right there. Just put a slug right between the smaller dog's eyes and splattered what minimal brains he had all over the back of his own submarine. At least –he'd- tried to keep a modicum of secrecy even when he knew the jig was up, keep it at least in the realm of deniability. A submarine in the harbor was something that wouldn't hold up if no more than a few hundred saw it, but a full-blown destroyer on the other hand may as well be a declaration of war! Canida never issued a declaration because surprise was more valuable than strength (which, coupled hand in hand with the Hegemonic military's actual strength was quite a potent cocktail). And thanks to this idiot, many future plans of covert invasion of Equestria had been foiled. Years of strategic surveillance and dozens of deep cover agents putting together all the strings for the plots, and now they were all a waste.

Boxer paused for another second before exhaling, his paw sliding off his holster. No, he still needed Garret's naval expertise. He may be a former marine, but he had no clue what to do about flyers in the air.

"Commander, when this is all over, I hope you find yourself a nice, cushy position up high."

The Corgi smirked, obviously taking the compliment at face value and seeing it as submission. "Why, thank you, Major."

At least there, the idiot couldn't do as much damage there as he had here, Boxer thought. Out loud, however, he said "When can we start loading cargo onto the Night?"

"Immediately. Just need to find some way to convey it, and I doubt your gyrocopter can do such a thing."

Boxer grimaced. "If only we had one of those gyrodynes like Frost's team received..." He shook his head. The gyrocopter was the only craft small enough to fit on the Pride of Ottapaw, and the larger prototype gyrodynes were far too expensive to risk on such a doubtful operation. "We have several inflatable rafts on board. We've been using them to sneak personnel into sensitive areas and extract the gemstones from the harbor warehouses."

Garret raised a single white eyebrow. "Inflatables, eh? And how did you get the heavier metals and large parcels across?"

Boxer grinned again, exposing his canines to remind Garret who was truly top dog around here. "We have two Eel Class Patrol boats. They were hidden inside cargo compartments, but now we've just taken to concealing them on the other side. My wolves can have them ready to go in minutes, and then we'll be able to get the remainder of the cargo to the Night while she holds off the Griffons." He glanced down at the Corgi with a skeptical look on his face. "I assume the Seawolf will stick around until the operation is complete?"

"You expect us to do otherwise? I have fifty marines aboard, many equipped with bazookas, loaded with fragmentation shells. We can handle ourselves until the job is done."

Boxer nodded thoughtfully as the Night aligned her rocket arrays, letting loose the first volley of heavy munitions to land in the city. No target in particular was chosen, no target need be picked. All that was required was for the ponies to be kept off balance and the griffons distracted until the

gemstones and precious metals were all safely aboard both military vessels. Then the two would both slip out of the harbor, away from this SNAFU of a mission.

And then, he'd bury Garret in paperwork and red tape once the Admiralty found out just who was responsible for the war that was sure to follow...or just literally bury him. Just as soon as they were back in Canida.

Golden Ox Hotel, Room 21, Second Floor

Twilight understood now why Colonel Eye had insisted on a second floor room, even though it was difficult to haul him up to. Thanks to the large window, he was afforded a grandstand view of not only the harbor, but also the dockyards, warehouses and factories that made up the portside district. Off in the distance, the cargo ship loomed like some enormous obelisk of metal, a tombstone on Stalliongrad's grave. Though most of the city was spared the destruction, the battle would drive thousands out and to the south, and many more would leave to find work while the factories were being rebuilt and machinery repaired. The city would never again be Equestria's sole industrial hub, thanks to the fact that most of its industrial might was leveled.

Nearer, the destroyer seemed to straddle the open expanse of the harbor, though it was actually smaller than Twilight had first thought. Its rockets were firing aimlessly, the rounds arcing lazily into random areas inside the city. Fortunately, none came too close to City Center or the Residential Sector, but 1st Company's fortifications were in danger, being close to the waterside.

Sitting between the two, the submersible was almost hidden by their combined bulk, almost an afterthought to underline the hectic day. The sky above was already beginning to grow brighter; a sure sign that daybreak was on its way, but not for many hours. And it was behind. Luna had already pulled the moon down earlier, but Celestia was late in bringing the sunrise. Twilight assumed this to be thanks to whatever diplomatic talks she was caught up in, but there had been no news of the outside other than what scant information that General Hurricane Spitfire had brought with her.

The panorama was lit by fires and lights, pointing out where the wrecks of many small fishing boats lay and where the mighty warship sat like a king on a throne.

"Quite a sight," remarked Eye as he yawned, grimacing as the action upset some injury or another. They'd all been pulling through the past day with little to no rest, and the colonel had to be the most uncomfortable of them all, swathed up in bandages and hopped up on various painkillers and antibiotics, coupled with a little unicorn magic (healing by spell casting often left the patient feeling dizzy and disorientated, a reason why a unicorn had to be extremely competent before being allowed into the medical community). "Take it in, troopers. Five minutes."

At this, Eye lapsed into another whispered conversation with the major, who bent her head low to hear him. You had to admire two figures of enormous physical and emotional strength, the ponies that had stood on the forefront and kept everypony going as long as they had. Sure, they'd hit some bumps and snarls, but sometimes that was unavoidable.

It occurred to Twilight that she hadn't written her weekly report to Princess Celestia on friendship. Yesterday she'd been wondering what to write it about, especially since she would be in Stalliongrad for the weekend and therefore away from her friends. Yet it had completely slipped her mind in the ensuing chaos (understandably, of course). However, even in this grim atmosphere, she suddenly found herself glancing around at Victor squad...her new friends.

Sergeant Gunn had removed his helmet, standing next to the window sill and watching the ships in the distance, his expression unreadable. The big stallion had stood as a pillar of strength for the squad, even when they'd taken so many losses and faced so many hardships. Nothing seemed to stop him when he had his mind set on a goal, and he had protected his squad so many times that he would have been considered a hero anywhere else in Equestria.

Nearby, Azure had a new recoilless frame laid out on the ground, checking the magazine saddlebags and carefully ensuring that the feed chain was oiled up to load the shells without any issue or danger of jams. Azure (Twilight only now saw that her last name was Cobalt, according to the tag on the back of her helmet) had shared the same kind of fortitude, a will to

survive and carry on no matter what was tossed at her, yet the easy-going way she handled things seemed to conflict wildly with such an ideal. She kept her head cool under fire and her aim sharp even when things were going wrong.

And Short. Leaning against the wall, Short was busy digging something out of his shoe, not caring for the dirt or the grime all over him. According to his story and just watching how he'd acted, Twilight had experienced firsthand the heart and passion the young trooper put into everything he did, how he pushed himself to one-hundred and ten percent just to prove to himself that he had what it took. His courage had saved the purple unicorn countless times, and she knew that if a bullet came her way he would leap in front of it.

She felt that peculiar tingle down her spine again, a buzzing in her limbs and head as she watched the young stallion. She raised a hoof to her lips again, remembering the hasty kiss she'd planted on his cheek. She still didn't know why she'd done that, but a part of her was waking up inside, a part that she had long pushed aside by focusing on her studies and striving to reach her goals. But now, with those things out of the picture and her mind in such a mess, there was nothing to restrict such feelings...such longings...

Twilight quickly stifled that out. She was an academic, Princess Celestia's favorite pupil and a shoe-in for a professor at the Canterlot University for the Study of Arcane Sciences. She couldn't act like some village filly, blushing and flicking her mane every time some handsome stallion walked by. Attraction would only get in the way, especially here, in a war zone.

The student turned her mind to the topic at hand once more. Though she had no quill and parchment nearby, and Spike was still downstairs attending to the general, she could already feel a message coming on.

Dear Princess Celestia, she began in her mind. I know I was excused from writing a report this week, but I felt that, given the circumstances, I had much to learn from such an experience. Such tragedy and loss has been suffered all around me, but through it I have found a new kind of friendship; brotherhood. The knowledge that those by your side will always be there to pick you up when you fall, shelter you from harm and help you through the darkest of times. Brotherhood isn't just something that's found, it's

something that's built, not just between stallions but also mares. Comrades in arms will always have a brotherhood, always be there for each other, always be strong for each other. And when comrades in arms can't be there for you, they are honored for all time for giving everything for that brotherhood, a solemn bond that is so strong as to even outlast death. In and of itself, that's another lesson; some friendships can last a lifetime, while others go on even longer. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle.

She wished Spike wasn't so busy serving the general so he could write this down and send it, bring back the only piece of her old routine she had left. Going back to Ponyville would never be the same again, she knew that now. She could never go back to the library and continue on like the world was a paradise. Outside of Equestria (and sometimes even inside of it) the world was a scary place. Her view on life had been forever colored over by today, and she knew that she would go back home a changed mare. Would it even feel like home again? Would she want to stay?

"Twilight?"

How strange. Short seemed to be out of focus to her, as if he was behind a pane of smoky glass from her. But his voice said that he was right in front of her. She could literally reach out and touch him if she wanted to. But she didn't. Not because she didn't want to, but she would do it not because she –did- want to...wait...she shook her head, already confused with her own thought process. It was only then that she realized, of course, that there were tears in her eyes, and she couldn't hold back a sniffle as she reached up, hastily wiping them away with an angry grunt. At first, she was furious with herself, crying for no good reason after everything she'd been through today. She'd been terrified, she'd screamed, she'd frozen up, she'd even killed, but not once had she cried at all. As she thought it over, however, she realized that with this being the first bit of time she had to think of the world outside and her old life, the tears poured effortlessly, as if she had lost all those things. It was kind of funny, really.

When she had finally cleared her eyes, she looked up to find Short standing nearby, helmet finally removed and a small smile of understanding on his face. "Hey, it's alright. You're with us right now. You're okay. You good?" She nodded quietly, and he nodded back in return, stepping away but not going far, standing at her side as the others watched her, looks of knowing (and satisfaction?) on their faces. All except one. Sergeant Gunn

was staring blankly at them, his eyes tracing back and forth, and she realized she had yet to talk to the blue stallion, explain that she hadn't meant for things to get so complicated. Unfortunately, now wasn't the time.

The colonel began the 'briefing' with a single statement to underline the purpose of such a clandestine meeting.

"General Spitfire is a glory-hunting idiot."

When he found that there were no statements to counteract his own, he forged on, confident that Victor squad also shared this opinion. "She's come to the frontline personally. That much I can respect. But she's only here so she can get some claim to fame, live up the Wonderbolts personality. Her and Coldheart's current plan is going to get a lot of soldiers killed, Pegasus and griffon. All for some stupid ship. What she doesn't realize is that the destroyer is not the real prize. Whatever the dogs came for will be onboard the submarine, its almost guaranteed." He looked upon each of them at this point, staring solemnly and watching their reactions. "I'm about to give you a direct order that will countermand what Spitfire will want me to do. She'll tell me to remain in place and keep our ground forces dug in, make sure her flank is secure. I will be asking you to commit what is tantamount to treason, disobeying orders and abandoning your post. But I'm entrusting you, Victor squad, to do what I think you're more than ready for."

Suddenly, Major Di'ac snapped her head around, but Sergeant Gunn had already beat her to it, his rifle up and pointed out the window, towards the skyline. Except that the skyline was now obscured by a large, winged figure, one that took up the majority of the space and stalked forward on two legs. At first, Twilight wanted to panic dash around and scream her head off. Surely it was one of Coldheart's soldiers, ready to report them all for insubordination! But then the rational part of her mind realized that Coldheart was far too busy to send spies. She had a glorious charge to prepare, after all.

"What's this?" asked the figure, stepping into the room and finally illuminating themselves enough to reveal a familiar face to go with the voice that Twilight knew she'd heard before. Gilda chuckled as she fell to all fours, her shotgun's barrel scraping the floor. "Sheesh, you can tell your

guard dogs to lay off. I just heard something interesting and thought I might investigate."

"And you are?" Short snarled, eyes narrowed as he took a step forward. The griffon rolled her eyes, mockingly. "Oooh, a pony trooper! I'm so scared! Screw off, horsemeat! I'm going back-"

"Gilda, wait!"

The griffon captain paused, wings outstretched, as she peered back towards Twilight, a smug smile on her beaked face. Her wings came down, brushing against her padded leather vest. "Well, well. Twilight Sparkle, here in the middle of the shit. Would you imagine that? I thought you were too bookwormy to even think of –looking- at a firearm, much less picking one up...though I see you aren't even wearing one." The smirk grew even more. "So why are you here...hmm."

"Why I'm here isn't important. You must have come here for a reason, Gilda. You didn't just hear us at the window."

The captain frowned, scoffing as she knew she was found out. "You and your lame friends, always robbing me of my fun. Fine. I thought the good Colonel here might be attempting something behind the scenes after the fuss he put up over the radio." Colonel Eye glared at Gilda, his secret plan already in danger of ruination by some loud-mouthed, blustering flying lion. Beside him, Major Di'ac quietly cocked her rifle, watching the situation carefully. Gunn and Azure silently moved behind Gilda, trapping her in a rough circle, in case she tried to escape or fight her way out. Gilda continued on, oblivious of her immediate danger as she said "So I came down here to get in on it. Coldheart isn't afraid to kill off political enemies, after all, and when she made a small mistake and I corrected her for it, I knew she'd want to get rid of me too. This stupid strike is exactly what I need to humiliate the good lieutenant colonel so badly that she'll be off my back and out of my way forever!" Gilda grinned again, up on two legs, obviously trying for size factor. "How's that?"

Twilight watched her for a second, her face blank before she too scoffed, stepping closer to the griffon. "A good story. But here's what I think." Here, she kept striding forward, all the way until she was practically muzzle to beak with the surprised woman. "I think you showed off too many times, and when the good lieutenant colonel made her screw-up, you showed her

up and made a big deal about it. Now, Coldheart wants you gone because she's had enough of your manure."

"Now just hold on a second, you little sl-"

"Furthermore!" Twilight continued, her tone harsh and her expression hard as she slowly began backing Gilda towards the wall. "I think you're scared! Scared of Coldheart's resources and the ease it would take for her to simply sweep you under the rug as if you never existed! So you decided to cruise around here, hoping to find Colonel Eye so that you can get a lifeline and keep yourself from going down!"

"Look, that's how it may be to you losers, but-"

"And so you're so desperate to find something to prove Coldheart wrong, you'll even go behind her back to find some flaw in her plan so humiliating and so horrendous that she'll have to fight simply to stay afloat with her career!" At this point, Twilight felt no remorse or guilt in her heart, unleashing her pent up frustration, confusions and emotional whip lash on the arrogant griffon. She'd backed Gilda right into the corner and down onto all fours, her face barely inches away. "Therefore, you need us oh so badly, but we –don't- need you! Stop playing like you're the superior one, Gilda! We can deny everything and get away with it, while you're on a time clock thanks you your pride and your stupid screw-up! Now sit down, shut the buck up, and listen if you want to save your hide!"

She huffed, backing off to give both of them some space, breathing heavily as she glared down at the dumbfounded expression on Gilda's face. She still felt furious, enraged and upset, but she also had the sensation of lightness, as if a great weight had just been removed from her chest and she'd been given a pair of wings. It felt good, she realized, to finally get everything out in the open. The tears earlier didn't seem so shameful anymore. One way or another, she was getting back home, even if she was never the same because of it.

Twilight turned away, still huffing as she stepped back to her previous position, next to a flabbergasted Short. A quick glance around the room showed that (aside from Major Di'ac, who hadn't known much about Twilight beforehand) everypony else held the same expressions, even Sergeant Gunn, whose jaw stretched towards the floor.

"Um...yeah...I needed that."

Colonel Eye began the briefing again, albeit watching their newest squad member carefully. He didn't hide it either, which made Gunn wonder how much the colonel wanted to keep this hidden and how much he wanted General Spitfire to actually find out. Surely it would flip the yellow Pegasus' lid if she knew what was going on.

"It's simple, troopers. The general believes charging the destroyer with everything we've got is the answer to our problems. Major Soarin is going to go along with whatever she says, and Colonel Surprise down there won't voice a single complaint either unless it has a remote chance of failure. These are Wonderbolts we're talking about here, the Air Force hasn't been in live combat in centuries and I don't think the 'Bolts themselves have either. In other words, they're just as fresh as rookies, no matter how much training they've received. So she's going with what seems right by the numbers, and Coldheart doesn't strike me as the one to give much care for the safety of her soldiers. But I can see the real picture, and so can the major here."

He looked around at each of them, eyes carefully scrutinizing their faces, looking for any shadow of doubt. Gunn knew that Victor squad was the closest unit that could be called upon right now, and any orders or mass movement would trigger suspicion in the new command center. So his ragtag team would be the one to pull off the colonel's crazy mission, even as exhausted and emotionally drained as they were. But Sergeant Lock Gunn knew they were up to it.

"Alright, then. Here's the goal; I want that submersible. Either you capture the Seawolf or send her to the bottom, I don't care. Just don't let her leave the harbor. If she gets to the open ocean, we'll never find her, and Canida can say whatever they like and cause a huge international red-tape diplomatic screw-over that'll take years for us to get out of and finally point hooves at them. No pony's listening to reason and the general's plan is just going to get a lot of soldiers killed. I've been yelling to get through red tape for years and just getting ignored, be it by High Command, Iron Star or even Caesar. The general doesn't want to include me, fine. So I'm going to do things my way this time."

Eagle Eye glanced out the window at this point, eyes narrowed at the two warships outside, sitting in the water like great, floating iron golems standing in the way of their victory. Gunn spared himself a second of laxity to look as well, feeling his hate rise once more. There was no question now that the Hegemony was behind it, but Canida could easily slip behind their wall of plausible deniability again if Equestria had no concrete proof, and a few hundred witnesses could be written off as a plot against Canida. Worse, the dogs might even try to spin it the other way around, as if –they- had been attacked instead.

"It won't be easy," Eye said quietly, and Gunn frowned, glancing at the colonel. Over the last decade he'd served, Gunn had never heard of any of Eye's plans falling through. Granted, most of his plans were for trapping outlaws and responding to border clashes, but the black stallion almost seemed exhausted, tired out, doubting himself immensely. But he didn't say these things. The colonel wasn't the sort for patronizing, and besides, he was still speaking. "You'll be heavily outnumbered, and I can almost guarantee your enemy will be far better armed than any you've gone up against already. But I know Victor squad can get it done. General Spitfire and Colonel Coldheart are giving us the perfect distraction, and once that sub's out in the water is where you'll catch them."

Now the colonel looked directly over at Sergeant Gunn, his face firm and his eyes full of grim determination and even...hope? "Sergeant, I believe this will help you out immensely. I don't dare speak of it in case Spitfire's agents are near, but you'll find what you need at Dock 13. Do get me?"

Of course! Why didn't he think of it himself! Dock 13's contents would definitely see them through the coming storm, even if it needed a little prep work first. He nodded, replying "Yessir, Colonel. I do believe so."

"Then good luck and Princess-speed to all of you, Victor squad," declared Colonel Eye, raising a hoof and saluting firmly, resisting the urge to grimace in pain. The squad automatically responded, backs held straight and heads high as they returned the salute, and Gunn felt a little bolt of joy at seeing Twilight herself honoring the colonel (and Gilda as well, though it took her a second to realize she had her claw to her chest at first in the Airborne Legion salute style) and they could finally make the real counter-attack that would end this battle at last.

Matriarchy Armed Forces, 4th Airborne Division

5th Battalion, 1st Company, Salamander Squad

Industrial District, Harbor Sector, Top of the Maximillion Company Storage Facility

"There you are," muttered Warden Tempestia Bravencrest as she squinted through her binoculars, eying up the destroyer in the distance. It wasn't too hard to spot, just follow the rocket smoke back to the great hunk of metal in the harbor. It was hard to imagine that the Hegemonic Fleet possessed fifty-two others like it, and impossible to picture the larger, more intimidating Mauler Class cruisers or even the Cerberus Class battleships. While Canida was definitely a power to behold on land, they made their presence felt in the water.

"We can take 'em," said one of Bravencrest's rookies to her side, and the Warden rolled her eyes. The brief firefights they'd had through the cities and the lack of losses in the squad had given the girls the confidence and swagger to boast loudly up and down the walls that there was no way Hippogryph could be defeated, even to the remnants of the Royal Army battalion. Needless to say, they hadn't received much in the way of positive reinforcement, but the girls just chalked it up to poor sportsmanship. After all, the Royal Army had failed where 4th Division was succeeding...despite the fact that the Equestrian troopers had been outnumbered almost ten to one and the police hadn't done much to even out the odds.

They had done an admirable job, to be sure, and the mongrels' numbers had been sliced by more than half even before the Airborne arrived, leaving little more than containment detail as the dogs finally broke down and feuded amongst themselves. But now, the majority of the division had been recalled from their encirclement of the Industrial Sector, thousands on griffons ordered to the harbor alongside the Pegasi of the 89th. According to latest intel, the detachment from the 102nd Royal Army battalion were only an hour away, which meant that the diamond dogs were Equestria's problem once more. Another two-thousand or so ponies with armored support might not seem like much, but thanks to the example set here by the 71st, it was easy to see that the diamond dogs –could- be beaten. It didn't help, however, that many griffon soldiers were bragging to the

surviving ponies about how much greater the Airborne was than the Army, and even how their comrades had died in vain. If Lieutenant Colonel Coldheart didn't do something soon, there might be a shooting war developing between 1st Company and 4th Division.

Tempestia cocked her head as the sound of wing beats came to her ears, turning to witness a flash of color against the gloomy, smoky sky. Reinforcements? There was plenty of movement going back and forth through the harbor, both griffon and Pegasi, as units lined up in position for this idiotic charge. To think that the commanders of two armies were ordering so many airborne soldiers to take on a destroyer...it was suicide, in the Warden's opinion. Still, if she had some more guns at her back, she just might make it.

The figures in the air tilted down, coming in for a shallow descent towards her rooftop, finally breaking away from the dimly lit landscape to reveal ten or twelve figures, all of them ponies. The Pegasi slowly set down on the same rooftop as her, and she raised an eyebrow as they finally separated from the smoke. She'd been expecting some of General Spitfire's flyers from the 89th, in their crisp and clean blue flight suits (not as extravagant as a Wonderbolt, of course, but definitely a sight more practical). But these Pegasi were filthy, their attire torn and their full-body armor pitted, scarred and in some places just plain gone. She turned fully now, sizing up the pony who stepped forward. He wasn't very large, and judging from his voice he was definitely young, but a single flashing bar on his chest distinguished him as a Royal Army lieutenant, an officer. Bravencrest groaned under her breath at the thought. If this pony had orders to take command, there was nothing she could do about it, as Coldheart's orders were to cooperate with the general's troops at all times.

"You Warden Bravencrest?" the lieutenant asked, stepping forward. Tempestia noticed that he wore a bomber's rig, complete with twin incendiary bombs. While she was thankful for the ordnance, she felt slightly wary around such old munitions. They always had a habit of breaking down and failing at the worst of time.

"Yes," she replied, saluting him briefly, though she was under no obligation to. He was from another nation and another military, superior rank notwithstanding, and not actually an ally. Therefore, according to doctrine she didn't have to. But she felt like it anyway. Officers always felt better when

they were surrounded by salutes. "I command this squadron. And you are?"

"Lieutenant Wingkins, 71st Royal Army, Sky Corps detachment. I've been ordered to take my detachment and assume command of your squad to replace a missing lieutenant."

"Missing is right," piped up one of the rookies Airborne from the back.
"Missing her whole head."

"Silence!" Bravencrest snapped, staring furiously at the whelp until the woman turned away, a bored look on her face. She turned back to Wingkins, a little more respect for him now. If he'd survived this attack so far, that meant he had some measure of skill or was just extremely lucky. The young mostly had little of the former and oftentimes barrels of the latter. "We'll provide what help we can. Where's the rest of your platoon?"

"Right here," replied Wingkins, indicating the ten ponies around him, all of whom still had their eye shields locked in place on their helmets. "What you see is all I've got left."

"Of fifty?" Bravencrest asked, amazed. She'd known the fighting was horrendously bad, but from what she'd heard some of them had come through alright. The rest, she only now remembered, would of course be far worse off.

But Wingkins was shaking his head, saying "No, Warden. This is all that's left of 4th Company. Of two-hundred and fifty fliers. Our own captain is missing in action himself, and we have to beg, borrow and steal from 1st Company just to get the munitions we need. I was supposed to be folded into the 89th, but now it seems I've been passed off to you. Now, I understand the difference between NCO and officer, so how about this; you keep your command and I'll try to keep up and not get in the way."

Victor Squad

"Operation Virus"

Industrial District, Harbor Sector, Royal Army Harbor Watch Station 6, Dock 13

Of the few remaining branches of the Equestrian military, the Army Harbor Watch was the most neglected. It was the Harbor Watch's job to keep an eye out for pirates and dangerous creatures approaching Equestrian ports and shipping lanes and report them, after which the Sky Corps would fly out and deviate the threat from its path. But the Harbor Watch was so neglected and under funded that they didn't even give their soldiers rifles. According to Colonel Eye, as Azure understood it, they weren't even given training on how to operate the machine guns mounted on their boats.

And what sad little things they were, as well. Tiny motor driven boats, each barely large enough to hold four passengers, flat-topped affairs that looked more like cargo rafts than warships. But the colonel had told Gunn to come to this specific dock, and as Spitfire's stupid attack was mustered, the squad had done so, a very reluctant Captain Axeclaw in tow (who didn't dare try to take command from Gunn. At least she had enough brains for – that-). Azure wasn't sure at first what they'd find to help them get out there and fight the submarine, but the answer became evident as soon as Gunn pushed the heavy door open, its padlock cleaved by a bit of Twilight's magic (poor filly didn't have much left in her).

"Wow..." muttered Short as he gazed upon their prize, stepping slowly around it in the dock house. "I thought there weren't any of these left in service anymore."

"Technically, there aren't," replied Gunn, examining a nearby machine panel's controls, his brow low and his attention divided between discerning the faded letters and explaining the plan to the rest of the squad. "They stopped production a century ago, and the Army finally said to scrap all remaining vessels a few decades after that. But from what Colonel Eye's told me, Captain Aweigh never got around to finishing with all of the 71st's boats. Fortunately, it should still be in working order. The cabin's closed up, the guns and engine are draped and the metal is mostly aluminum and stainless steel. Meaning that what the salt air can reach isn't corrodible. All we need to worry about is the dogs shooting at us."

The current vessel that the squad spoke of was a small, eighty foot cutter patrol boat, long and low, with a slim prow and a knife-shaped form meant for speed. At the back, a bulky, primitive (if quite powerful) steam engine had been revealed, fortunately an early smokeless coal model. The two heavy machine guns up front had also been covered, and while there were barnacles and moldy growths all over the craft, it was apparently still seaworthy. And seabound, as well.

"What are those?" asked Twilight, pointing up at four large canisters on the boat, two on either side. The unicorn had refitted herself in helmet and rifle, and had seemed all too eager to get back into the action, though that may have been Azure's imagination at work.

"Private Cobalt, would you like to answer that?" asked Gunn, a knowing smile on his face. Before Azure could say a word however (and she would have, being the squad's heavy weapons and explosives expert) the arrogant and insufferable Captain Gilda Axeclaw beat her to it.

"Those are torpedo tubes...I didn't think you dweebs still had them."

Azure glared at the griffon, who was facing away and scoffing at the antiquated boats, but the draft mare managed to hold her tongue. "Yes, they're torpedoes. Two pointing fore, two pointing aft. The explosive charge in them will have been rendered slightly less potent, but it should still be effective."

"Against what? A cardboard wall?" scoffed the captain, and Azure felt her temper rising once more. The Cobalt family had a bit of a grudge against griffons, her especially, but it wasn't anything to bring up now, not when they were just boiling down to the most crucial part of the fight. Instead, she practiced her breathing techniques again, remembering what her coach had always said in the ring; *"Remember kid, if you lose it you may as well throw the match. An angry fighter doesn't think straight, he just acts. You've got the strength, but if you don't concentrate you won't be able to put it where it matters."*

Fortunately, the sergeant managed to diffuse the situation, finding the crank that slowly let the boat down from the chains she hung from. The second she was on the water, Gunn had crossed over to her prow, tugging away the tarps and exposing the engine and machine guns. The aluminum deck was covered in greenish, slimy looking mold and mildew and the

remains of thousands of bird droppings, but Azure knew those would fade with the water. Short hopped on as well, grinning broadly from on top of the cabin in the center as he called "All aboard the HMS Scumbucket! First class express to Dogville!"

Nearby, Twilight giggled a little before climbing on board as well, giddily asking "Will there be dinner served onboard?"

"Of course, milady! All the lead you can eat!"

"Will you two stop horsing around?" barked Sergeant Gunn as he peered up from an open hatch. "We need to get this old girl moving. She's supposed to have a complement of ten, but we'll do for the five minutes we'll be piloting her." The dark blue stallion glanced over at Azure and Gilda, a cross look on his face. "What the hay are you waiting for, get your flanks onboard!"

As the sergeant disappeared, Gilda huffed, pumping her wings once as she leapt over the water, landing gracefully on the boat's deck. "Salty old warhorse, your sergeant," the griffon commented, flicking at a piece of mildew casually. Azure growled, backing up a few hooves before galloping forward and leaping over the gap. Needless to say, with her momentum and the heavy grenadier rig on her back, she landed less than gracefully, limbs in a heap and on her back. Gilda stood over her, grinning in obvious superiority. "The air, you were definitely not meant for. Loser."

Azure huffed, fighting to keep back her curses as she wriggled to her hooves, replacing her helmet. "Speaking of which, it would be nice – CAPTAIN- if you could at least get us some aerial cover. Since you don't seem to be good for anything else."

Gilda's grin persisted, however, despite Azure's acidic tone. In fact, the draft mare wondered if the griffon got off on the anger of others (wouldn't surprise her much).

"Oh, don't you worry about that, my little pony. Don't you worry."

9th Hegemonic AOT (Advanced Operations Taskgroup)

Current Mission: Espionage and Resource Retrieval

Dorsal surface of Hegemonic Fleet Submersible CNV-1108 *Seawolf*, Docked with *Pride of Ottapaw*

The first hint any of the dogs had was when a lowly bridge officer named Ensign Jowls started peering out through his field glasses at the harbor. So far, the bombardment was going well, rockets streaming occasionally from the tail of the Howloween Night, soaring through the thick, black night and landing somewhere in the city. True, more than two thirds of it was still intact, but Jowls hoped that it would be enough to keep the ponies and griffons out of the harbor. After all, who would be crazy enough to fight a destroyer with only aerial assets?

Jowls smiled as he tried to memorize the picture before him, every detail he could. Oh, when he got home and described this to his beloved Louise...but of course, he couldn't. That was the downside of being selected for secret missions, he supposed. No one could hear the glorious stories of his various conquests, and in his three years of serving under Commander Garret, the young ensign had nothing to tell his friends and family back home in Grrlin. Such a shame.

Jowls was still caught up in his thoughts when a heavy paw landed on his shoulder, and he jumped with a start to find none other than Major Boxer himself standing next to him, squinting off into the horizon. The rising sun was casting dim light over the snowy mountains around Stalliongrad, and even now it was still late, even though the time read six o'clock, meaning early morning. But Boxer was apparently not looking at the light show, for her pointed with a paw at the city, asking "Ensign, what do you see over there?"

Major Boxer completely creeped out Jowls. Always skulking about the ship in his black stealth gear with those two wolves accompanying him everywhere, all three of them silent as ghosts. And the other black ops personnel who'd come aboard were no better, keeping to themselves in small clusters and rebuffing all efforts by the Fleet sailors to socialize or object to their presence. Most of them were wolves, of course, but the rest were a mix of breeds. Most black ops were recruited from the Hegemonic Fleet Marine Corps, where the vicious fighting during boarding actions and

shore invasions made instant veterans out of even the greenest pups. Others were drawn from the Army Vector Packs, a group of operators who, while not quite Special Forces, dropped behind enemy lines with heavy enough equipment to give their opponents a headache.

But black ops personnel were another kind of headache altogether. Always so secretive with their plans and ready to betray their allies in an instant in order to keep 'the mission' preserved. Why, thanks to the major here, the holds of the Seawolf were full to bursting with stolen gemstones and precious metals. Worth quite a fortune and it would definitely be a big boost to the treasury, but Jowls didn't like how this mission could potentially go pear-shaped for everyone, especially himself.

So, he quickly followed the major's order, peering out through the field glasses at the harbor. What he saw didn't surprise him. "Uh...mostly wrecked buildings, Major. Some Royal Army fortifications. A few armored vehicles. And a nice little café that-

"No, you damn idiot! Up! Look up at the sky!" Abruptly, Jowls found his paws being yanked up, and he had to both bite back a bark and a curse as well as try to focus on just what the major might be looking at.

"I don't see -anything-, sir! There's no visibility through the smoke except for those...oh. *Oh!*"

The field glasses suddenly slipped from Jowls' shaking claws, smacking onto the thick skin of the submersible before sliding over the side, instantly forgotten in the water. But Ensign Jowls had bigger problems now. His jaw had dropped, his eyes were wide and he was shaking from head to toe, staring at the sky. Even now, more and more crewmen and marines were looking up, gazing at the gloomy pre-dawn sky in amazement as, from out of the gloom, a veritable tide of flyers seemed to soar down, wave upon wave of them converging on one point; the harbor.

"By the...Prime Alpha..."

"AIR ATTACK!" someone screamed, and suddenly howls split the air alongside yelps of panic and the sound of claws skittering on the submersible's metal surface as crewmen and marines sprang into panicked action, running for the conning tower or the nearest hatch, grabbing up weapons or ducking below to their stations.

Up topside, however, Major Boxer simply smiled as the Howloween Night opened up with its flak guns, spraying the sky with high-explosive incendiary rounds. He knew it was only a matter of time before the Royal Army got fed up with the punishment he'd been handing them. Now that his paws were tied and he had lost direct control of the diamond dogs, there was no better time for them to strike. He turned to one of his bodyguards, still smiling as he ordered "Launch the gyrocopter."

Matriarchy Armed Forces, 4th Airborne Division

5th Battalion, 1st Company, Salamander Squad, Cobra Element Attached

Industrial District, Harbor Sector

Participating in "Operation Virus"

As per her colonel's orders, Warden Tempestia Bravencrest joined the attack.

However, as per her captain's orders, she did not make a vector for the destroyer. Instead, she and her unit (squad? Platoon?) veered off, skimming along parallel with the harbor, following the numerous docks and warehouses. Captain Axeclaw had given her very strange orders indeed, but Gilda was another example of power hungry women in the Matriarchy with rank she didn't deserve. For as long as Bravencrest had been in 1st Company under the good captain's command, she'd known that one day that griffon would get in trouble and land herself in hot water. Her arrogant needling of Colonel Coldheart was famous, and everyone took bets on when the colonel would simply shoot Gilda herself. Whatever Captain Axeclaw was up to, Bravencrest knew it had something to do with getting her ass out of the crosshairs.

"*What are we looking for, Warden?*" asked Wingkins over the wireless, coming in riddled with static over the headset. Equestrian radio technology was years behind, and while radio waves were radio waves, Hippogryph headsets were never able to pick up Royal Army transmissions with much clarity. Fortunately, Bravencrest had been through enough battles in rough terrain to hear the radio break down any number of a dozen ways, and was

more than up to the task of compensating for it, understanding the lieutenant as if he'd spoken in her ear.

She risked a glance over at the destroyer, wincing at the sight. The sky was full of fire, every flak turret and heavy machine gun firing tracer rounds into the air, where the former detonated with a flash and the latter pierced several targets with each round. Already, the water was full of gryphon corpses, the occasional Pegasus spotted in between. Crimson blood began to seep out through the water, and Bravencrest had seen enough battles on the water to know that the sharks and sea monsters attracted to the harbor by the scent of the coppery red liquid would have a feeding frenzy. It was a scene out of some kind of horror film, but she couldn't tear her eyes away, even as she watched gryphons and ponies getting torn to ribbons in midair. Over in the distance, safe from harm, Artemis could be spotted overseeing the operation, and Colonel Coldheart was undoubtedly shouting into the radio at General Spitfire, who was probably doubly panicking back in the hotel. Even surrounded on all sides, the destroyer was a tough nut to crack, more than able to fend off the aerial charges, and what few munitions that were accurate enough barely made a dent on the ship if they hit, most sending geysers of water into the air. The fliers who made it through the cloud of flak and lead were met with marine rifles, claws and sharpened bayonets as the crew fought back fiercely. The fliers, in their lighter battle gear, were poorly equipped to go against heavy infantry like the hard-shell armor wearing dogs, and as such the ratio was staggering (especially to the Pegasi, whose kit was made for fighting from a distance in the air and not the close-knit hoof to paw battle on the deck). This was a battle that could not be won, not with their numbers and not the way they were doing it. Already, hundreds were dead and dying, and more were joining them every second.

It had to stop.

With a tempered anger, a suppressed urge to vomit and a new sense of determination, the Warden looked ahead, counting the dock houses that zoomed past. Seven, eight, nine-

There! Up ahead, an explosion! And zooming out of Dock 13 was a boat, a fast little number that zipped along on the water. Thanks to the dark substance covering her deck, the zipper was partially hidden on the water,

making it hard to see even if you knew it was there. Bravencrest had to admire the Royal Army and their ingenuity. They knew how to improvise!

She pointed, yelling to her unit "There! Dive, dive! We need to give them air support!"

"*Gyrocopter sighted!*" yelled one of Wingkins' fliers, pointing towards the cargo ship with his hoof. "*Bearing one-one-eight by six-four!*"

"*Roger that, Cobra-9. Warden, we'll peel off and engage all targets on and around the cargo ship!*"

"Affirmative, Lieutenant!" Bravencrest responded, already tucking her wings in close around her. "Salamanders, let's go! Time to provide some close-ass air support!"

Onboard Patrol Boat 116, newly christened *HMS Scumbucket* (unofficial)

This was absolutely insane.

Griffons didn't belong on the water. And yet, here she was, speeding along on what must have been the most cantankerous boat still able to float in the entire world! A wonder its engine still worked and a wonder the coal was still able to be burned! Or that the water hadn't turned tepid! Or any other thing!

Gilda could go on forever about how much she didn't belong here, but right now, feeling the rush of the wind in her face and tracing along her feathers, all she did was shift her goggles up, inhale deeply and yell "HELL YEAH, BITCHES! WHOO-HOO!"

"Hey!" snapped the old stallion from the wheelhouse. "Get your flank down from there and help! We need somepony on the wireless!"

The point of the matter was, Gilda knew she was far more useful in the air, with her other fliers, but adrenaline was causing parts of her brain to shut down, reducing her to a nod and a duck inside, squeezing past old Gunn and idiot Stop. The two were leaning over the same console, trying to make

sense of all the levers, buttons and gauges. So far, they'd figured out the throttle and firing mechanisms for the torpedoes, but everything else was beyond everyone on board, and while the loser Twilight watched the engines, that punk draft mare was up on the machine guns, just waiting for the order to open fire.

Finally, Gilda reached the wireless set, flicking several switches on. A harsh wail of static rang back at her, and she winced as she adjusted the volume, tucking the headset on over her ears (barely! The damn thing wouldn't fit regularly, so she was forced to wear it at an odd angle) and swiftly dialing in the frequency she'd ordered Bravencrest to use. One thing you could count on with that woman, she would always follow orders.

"Uh oh! I think they see us!" yelled Short as the gyrocopter screamed past, its machine gun chattering and its rotors chopping mere feet above the water.

"It's coming back!" yelled Azure, barely discernable on the ship's ancient PA system. Gunn glanced over at Gilda, a scowl on his features as he said "Well, at least we won't feel anything. This old girl's armor won't stop a full rocket barrage, but I –don't- want to end up on the bottom of the harbor! Captain, get us some bucking air support!"

"Yessir, Marshal von Douche," Gilda replied flippantly, finally getting some of her sass back. Over the radio, cries of "*There he is!*" and "*Roll, roll!*" rang out in Gilda's ears, and she made minute adjustments. Everywhere she went, however, it seemed she ran into horrible news. Either it was the disaster of an assault on the destroyer, or a moment from the pitched battle against the dog's defenses.

"There she goes!" yelled Short, hooves busy at the controls as he tried to find the proper switch for whatever it was he wanted to do. But sure enough, Gilda glanced out the front window to find that the Seawolf had disconnected from the Pride of Ottapaw, turning and steaming towards deeper water, its kerosene-fuelled engines spinning the propeller at full speed.

"Stop! Hammer time! Kick 'em in the rear!" yelled Gun, swerving to the side to avoid a burst of fire from the gyrocopter again.

"Roger that, Sarge! Firing both forward torpedoes...just need an angle...firing now!"

Azure's head was positioned just right to feel the compressed air as it exploded out of the torpedo tubes, sending the explosives zipping along through the water, straight at the target. The part of her mane outside her helmet whipped in the wind, and she cursed the lenient Army regulation mane lengths for mares. She knew she should have gotten it cut earlier this month!

Dragging her eyes from the twin streaks through the water, she glanced up just in time to see the gyrocopter spin past, out of control and on fire, skidding off the water's surface before smashing into the hull of the cargo ship, leaving a large hole where an advanced aircraft had once been, allowing water to spill into the ship's hold. Azure knew for a fact that, within an hour, a hole that large would send the ship straight to the harbor's bottom.

She had no time to cheer over the machine's death, however, for just ahead the old torpedoes finally made contact, twin plumes of water splashing up high into the air. The first had bounced off, detonating harmlessly out in open water, causing Azure to wince at the miss. The second torpedo, however, had struck dead on, catching in the propeller! Though the explosives, like she'd said, were far less potent now than when they'd first been placed in the tubes (some idiot had never thought to remove the weapons and ammunition from the decommissioned boat), the torpedo had done its job, zipping straight to the target and blowing the assembly to pieces! Even if the Seawolf tried to dive now, she had no way to control herself! Practically dead in the water!

Hatches flew open, and dogs in heavy body armor poured out, automatic rifles and combat shotguns barking in the gloom, sending bright flashes of light through the cold, icy air, bullets snatching the air all around her head. Azure ducked, slightly, clamping down on the bit trigger as she wheeled the machine guns around, spraying the back of the submersible with high caliber bullets. While most of the forms staggered under her ferocious, double-barreled rain of death, a few went down, and she cheered around her bared teeth as she felt the recoil through her neck, straightening a little

to see better and take the strain. The boat had slowed now, wheeling around the submersible's hulk as Short and Twilight both climbed up top, adding their rifles to the fray. Colonel Eye's recommendation had been to sweep the top first of the Seawolf's marines before going in, as the dogs would have the advantage in such a close range firefight.

Abruptly, another hatch opened up near the front, and a single dog, a smaller Boston terrier, scrambled out towards the deck gun, upon which a larger Labrador marine was already slamming a magazine into.

"DECK GUN!" Azure shouted, swiveling her machine guns around as the boat swerved from another angle. "Sarge, that autocannon will tear right through us!" Even as she spoke, the gun let out a series of thumps and cracks, and shells whistled past, detonating in the water and spewing up a stream of geysers in a line behind them as Gunn cursed, wrestling with the controls to give them every bit of tactical maneuvering room they had to work with!

A bullet smacked into Azure's helmet, ricocheting off with a loud screeching sound as she was thrown back into the turret, crying out in shock and fear. Fortunately, after a quick feel, the draft mare's head was still in place, but her helmet had quite a serious dent in it. "Ow!" she yelled out, wobbling to her hooves again as the boat swerved once more, this time to swerve out of the way of a pair of shells, launched from the destroyer nearby. Azure cursed under her breath. Dangit! The flyers were peeling off, rushing back to the safety of the harbor buildings after failing to get enough soldiers on deck before their morale was broken!

"SARGE!" she screamed, ducking as one of Wingkin's interceptor Pegasi zoomed overhead, dual machineguns chewing up the crew on the deck gun and spraying blood and gore across the dorsal side of the submersible.

"I see it!" replied Gunn as he pulled back on the power lever, practically abusing the throttle as he pounded it into place. And then, of all the crazy things, the sergeant actually left the controls and crawled up onto the topside! He glanced around, looking to each of his troopers (who stared back dumbfounded, all three of them) before he cocked his rifle, staring straight ahead...at the approaching submersible! "It's up to us, Victor squad!" yelled Gunn as the collision approach at top speed. "We get in there and we find a way to stop that destroyer! And no matter what, we find

the son of a bitch who started this whole danged attack, and we put a bullet in his skull! NOW WHO'S WITH ME?"

"HOOAH!" screamed Victor squad in return, rising to the occasion and gripping their weapons, ready to impact and face their destiny.

Fortunately, they didn't crash and die.

When the boat smashed into the side of the submersible, its hull crumpled, launching the high speed patrol boat high into the air and far across the harbor, where it smashed into the remains of a fishing boat.

Meanwhile, Victor squad had been lifted (more like rescued) by a very timely Warden Bravencrest and Gilda Axeclaw, who looked very shaky indeed but very much relieved to be off the boat in control of a mad stallion with a crazy crew! Twilight glanced up at the griffon pulling her along through the air, claws clutching her by the back of her vest, finally feeling, for the first time in her life, just why Rainbow Dash was so nuts about flying. The chill ocean breeze smacked into her face, and even though she wore goggles she could feel them stinging her eyes, smell the salt as it encrusted her coat and mane, hear the wind as it snapped past her ears...she closed her eyes for a moment, wishing this moment would never end.

Unfortunately, the gryphon Legionnaires dropped Victor squad to the deck, hovering briefly before turning away, soaring across the water. For a brief moment, Twilight felt a pang of regret and bitterness, having been robbed of her flying experience. Maybe if she could just remember that temporary wing spell again...then the destroyer's guns boomed, sending another volley of flak shells screaming past overhead. Two Pegasi and one gryphon were not so lucky, however, and the incendiary rounds tore them to shreds in midair.

Gilda hovered just above the submersible, her wings flapping powerfully to keep her aloft. "We'll fall back to the port buildings! That sub is too cramped for us, but you're all perfect sizes! It's down to you now!"

The squad nodded confirmation and turned away, beginning their hustle towards the nearest hatch. Before they got too far, however, the mage

heard Gilda call out "Twilight!" A quick glance back showed the Airborne captain flash her a grin and a thumbs up, yelling "You're cool, you know that? We should hang with Dash sometime!"

And with that, the griffon was gone. And Twilight, surprisingly, found herself considering the offer.

As she turned back, another dog clambered out from a hatch nearby, coughing and whining with their ears pinned back. Upon spotting Twilight, the terrier froze, eyes wide, before scrambling for the pistol at his belt. The unicorn didn't give the pup a chance, raising her rifle and putting two rounds into his chest, sending the dog plummeting back into the depths. Nearby, Gunn and Short also shot dogs coming up, this time marines, and Azure launched two grenades down into the depths.

"Go, go, go! Forward hatch!" yelled Gunn, and the squad immediately turned, galloping towards the destination to find their first big challenge; negotiating a ladder meant for two legs, not four.

The sub's interior was cramped, dark, and badly illuminated thanks to the beating she'd received at Victor squad's hooves. Valves bled steam into the air, gauges were cracked, lights had gone out and there were even small leaks throughout the entire vessel.

"We didn't do that, did we?" muttered Short, scanning a side passage as the squad traipsed past, his eyes focused on a rapidly-expanding puddle of water on the floor.

"Looks like we did," replied Gunn, up at the front as usual, watching the hall below as they passed over a collapsed staircase, the corpses of a rottweiler and a beagle at the bottom a grim testament to how effective their volley had actually been.

Overhead, a red light flashed in every room and passageway, a blaring alarm sounding out through the submersible. They'd seen dozens of crewmen run past where they were hidden, dogs panicking to stem the damage to their vessel while simultaneously avoiding the damaged sections and their potential death. So far, it also seemed that the marines were helping them out, proving that the armored soldiers were not above a

little manual labor to save their own hides. According to Colonel Eye, Twilight recalled, a submersible of this class needed around one hundred crew to operate, and the transport variant had facilities for half that many marines. That meant, due to the brief firefight up top, that there were far less combat personnel and far more in naval hands below. At least, Twilight reckoned, any fights down here would be short and lack any heavy ordnance whatsoever, save for Azure's guns (knowing the conditions ahead and the risk of puncturing the hull with recoilless rifles, the blue draft mare had switched out her equipment for a grenadier rig, fitted with two grenade launchers and a brace of fragmentation grenades, perfect for fighting in the cramped interiors of a submersible).

"Contact!" cried Short, a millisecond before a dog handgun cracked further ahead, joined by the boom of a shotgun and the rattle of an automatic rifle. The squad split, each one finding their own little bolthole to take cover in from the barrage of bullets. Judging from the high rate of fire and panicked shouting, these soldiers were either fleet crew or rookie marines. One way or another, they lacked the fire discipline Twilight had seen earlier with the soldiers topside.

"Clear them out!" ordered Gunn, and Azure swiftly poked her head around the corner that had sheltered her, clamping the bit-trigger twice. With two muffled thumps, grenades streaked out, slamming into the end of the hallway and detonating there with a deafening blast, a blinding flash and (Twilight knew) a storm of deadly shrapnel. The fire ended, and Azure called "Clear!" The squad moved up once more, and Twilight glanced down, reluctantly, as they passed over the remains of the dogs. She'd been wrong, there were two crewmen and one marine, but all three were splattered over the deck, blood spraying everywhere and what little was left splayed out in pieces, barely recognizable as once living, breathing beings.

Oddly, she didn't find herself disgusted or horrified by the sight. And that frightened her worse than anything else she'd seen today.

"Command center up ahead," Short muttered, taking up position in the next passageway, rifle aimed down the length of it as the others passed. True to what he said, the next hatch had a sign over it marked in bold white letters OPS COMMAND CENTER. It was shut, like all other hatches, but a wheel meant to be opened with a grip. It would have been impossible for ponies to get past, but Twilight knew she could open it for them. They had no

explosives to breach it otherwise, and could not waste time waiting for a member of the crew to emerge.

"Okay, Sparkle. Get it," Gunn whispered after the squad was in place to breach, rifles all aimed at the hatch and ready to fire. Azure's eyes were narrowed, her teeth visible on the bit-trigger as she readied herself, shifting back and forth slightly under the weight of the rig. Short's eyes were flicking back and forth, switching between hard determination at the hatch and concerned sadness at Twilight. Gunn, of course, stood rock steady. Twilight took a deep breath, summoning up the last of her magical reserves within her. She'd only have enough power to try this once, and they had to do it-

Crack!

A single shot was all that rang out, and a single shot was all that was needed. Every pony's head swiveled around to find, to their surprise, where there had once been nothing and no one down the passageway, there were suddenly ten, twelve, maybe even twenty large forms covered in black armor and fatigues, their faces hidden behind face masks, balaclavas and full-face visors. But the snouts made it clear who they were.

"WOLVES!" yelled Gunn, right before a storm of gunfire broke out. Unlike the first shot, which had been loud, echoing and seemingly cacophonous in the tight confines of the sub, the black clothes figures made no sound as their rifles fired. Instead of bangs and cracks, Twilight only heard a light rattle, like a bottles of beads being shaken hard. The ricochet of the bullets was louder than the reports, and sparks flew as the rounds bounced everywhere. Victor squad dug in hard as the wolves attacked, returning fire as best they could through the barrage of disciplined suppressing fire that came streaming out at them. The wolves were clever about the way they moved, however, and while one half kept the ponies suppressed and their heads down, the other half bounded forward, taking up new cover and joining the automatic storm of lead, allowing those at the back to move up. A rudimentary tactic, but one the wolves used instantly!

Twilight found herself pressed against the hull behind a strut, unable to move, unable to think, unable to even breath it seemed! Nearby, Azure popped her head out, screaming as she fired two rounds from her launchers before a bullet caught her in the neck, sending her spinning to

the floor. "T-trooper down!" the mage called out, trying (and failing) to leave cover and go check on the draft mare. A round zipped past her head, however, and she realized that might not be the best thing to do. "Azure!" There was some movement, at least, the blue pony pulling herself back into cover, even as she smeared a red streak across the floor.

"They're still moving up!" yelled Short as he fired a quick burst before ducking down again. "No manure, really?" replied Gunn as he let out a longer stream of rounds, unafraid of the bullets zinging past. In front of the sergeant, one of the wolves fell to the floor, howling in pain as he clutched his chest with a paw. Nearby, one of the lupines suddenly jerked back and fell motionless as a lucky shot from Short caught it the operator in the forehead.

"Twilight!" yelled Gunn as he primed a grenade. "How about some magic out here!"

"WHAT?" the student yelped, unable to keep the shock from her voice and wincing as a bullet sparked against the bulkhead right next to her. "Are you nuts, Sergeant? If I try a powerful spell at this point, I could wind up blowing the sub to pieces!"

"It's not much worse than our current situation!" Gunn replied as he chucked the explosive. It bounced twice, the large canister rolling for a second before detonating in the face of the wolf who leaned down to pick it up. Nearby, a wolf threw a grenade of his own, only for it to be kicked aside by the blue stallion into another passageway, detonating harmlessly. "DO IT!" the sergeant bellowed, sawing out another burst of automatic fire.

Panicking, Twilight glanced around, looking over the surfaces of the sub's interior. She couldn't risk it, a failed spell at this point with cause all the rivets in the vessel's frame to shoot out, or for it to compact together and crush them all, or for it to simply disappear and leave them in the water with heavy gear on, or...or...or any number of things could go wrong! Magic was proven to be as powerful as one's own concentration, but if you forced the spell it could have disastrous results! Her own studies proved this beyond doubt!

"Twilight..."

She heard his voice through the din, calm and collected. She risked a chance, peering around her cover, flinching as a bullet narrowly cut past. There, just a few hooves away, was Short, crouched behind an instrument panel. He was watching her, his own eyes calm and still, a small smile on his face. Nothing in his demeanor suggested he was scared, or even intimidated. Nearby, Gunn popped out once more, firing a long burst that suppressed a few wolves, cutting down one or two who had tried to advance on their position.

"Short..." she half-whispered, half-sobbed, unable to keep the fear from her own voice. "Short, I can't control it! What happens if I blast us all to oblivion, or teleport the sub to a volcano, or-"

"Twilight. We've got our backs to the wall here. Literally. It's all or nothing at this point." The explosions became muffled as Short abruptly crossed the hallway, a bullet snapping past his head and another slamming into his side, throwing him into the ground. As he crawled over, Twilight thought she'd see blood spewing everywhere, but his vest had taken the blow, and the bullet had not gone through. Now next to her, Short smiled down at the unicorn.

"I'm not afraid."

Those three words (as corny as it sounded, a part of her still-functioning intellect pointed out) triggered something in Twilight, something that made take a deep breath, waiting until she stopped shaking before she nodded, saying "I am. But that's no reason not to."

And then stepping out into the passageway.

By all rights, she should have died on the spot. Bullets were whizzing back and forth, grenades rolling underhoof. They were outnumbered still, about fifteen black ops wolves still alive. The numbers didn't add up as to why Twilight survived, and even from the squad's testimony no unicorn at the universities or military analysis center in High Command could figure out how or why Twilight had survived for the seconds she needed to cast her spell. But she did, and that's all that mattered. Her eyes glowed a soft lavender, making several wolves pause and others look away, yelping and crying out about a witch. The air around her crackled, static causing her hair to stand up on end as she rose from the deck, hanging in midair.

Everyone around (except for Gunn, who was still shooting even when the return fire stopped) stared in awe at the spectacle...

Just as Twilight's magic peaked and her spell finished. A jet of purple and black flames, conjured out of nowhere, zoomed down the corridor, somehow not singing even a single patch of Sergeant Gunn, though it passed right over him. The wolves had only second to scream, howl in panic, shoot at the fire or turn to run, but in the end it made no difference. The fire caught up with them, and while many were expecting to be burned alive, the fire did not harm a single piece of their bodies. Instead, each of them felt a deep, sharp pain as the Soulfire spell burned their chests from the inside out, spreading to their brains and extinguishing their lives swiftly, without the drawn out agony that real fire would have caused. None of the operators escaped, the very inner beings destroyed as the powerful spell caught them, did its work and moved on. By the time Twilight fell to the deck again, not a single operator was standing, all of them laying dead in a heap, expressions of shock and surprise etched on their face, a few in pain but not suffering. Most had died before they even realized they were dead, so quickly had the process taken place. Such a spell was forbidden, unused since the War of the Moon (by both sides in that horrific conflict). But Twilight had done no studying on it, hadn't even known the right incantation for it. She'd simply cast the spell that seemed right for the job.

But she didn't know this. None of them did. Instead, Short and Gunn rushed to the student's side, and when it was ascertained that she was physically alright, Gunn moved to Azure.

"Private Cobalt, are you sleeping on the job?"

Azure chuckled, a little blood leaking between her teeth. "Sorry, Sarge. Getting shot tends to make you a bit tired."

Gunn nodded, not risking more damage by pulling her hoof away to look at the wound. "How is it?"

"Just a flesh wound, Sarge. I'll be up and at 'em in no time."

"That blood says differently."

Azure sighed, a smile on her face as she looked back up at the Sergeant, nodding and saying "Yeah. Yeah, it does." She coughed, spraying a little

more blood over the deck as she settled back, hissing in pain as blood continued to leak from behind her hoof, down her neck and settling in her vest or on the floor. The crimson conflicted brightly with her blue coat, even in the gloom, and Gunn knew that unless he acted now she wouldn't make it, she was losing blood too fast. The bullet appeared to have passed straight through, but the hole it had left must have hit something. If it was an artery, then it was already over.

He reached back, rummaging in his saddlebags before pulling out a piece of gauze in his jaws. But Azure held up a hoof. "No, Sarge. Don't. Don't waste your time. I already know my chances. And there's no way for you to get me out of here. I'm a dead mare already-"

"Shut up."

The quiet, flat answer was enough to shock Azure into silence. Sergeant Lock Gunn never spoke softly, or even as harsh as she'd heard just now. Gunn didn't even look down at her as he tugged her hoof away, slapping the gauze into place to stem the blood before beginning to wrap bandages around her neck to hold it in place. "I've been in the Army for ten years now, Private. I've seen comrades come and go. Most were transferred. Some retired. But a few others died. Right in front of me. I've kept track of how many of my squad mates died, all through the years. Never forgot the number or their names. Last week, the count was at seventeen. Now, it's at twenty-three." He looked at her now, just as he finished tightening the bandage in place, already staining red with blood seeping through. So long as she wasn't hit in an artery, she would be okay. "I'm not letting it go to twenty-four. No pony else is going to die. You hear me, Azure?"

Slowly, the blue draft mare nodded, wincing at the pain in her neck. She resisted the urge to reach up and hold the wound, knowing that would just irritate it more. Her limbs felt leaden anyways, her head buzzing and her eyelids heavy. But she couldn't fall asleep, for she knew there was a chance she might not wake up again.

Gunn stood, looking down at her with the expression a father might have for a sick daughter. Concerned, suffering, but knowing there was little else he could do. "You need to live, Azure. That's an order."

The mare chuckled, nodding and swallowing to clear her throat of the cottony feel that had somehow been placed in her mouth. "Yeah...you got

it...Sarge." She saluted him, weakly, already feeling her strength leaking out with her blood as her hoof fell to her side, but she nodded, making sure he knew she was still conscious.

Gunn turned to Short and Twilight, his face dark as he looked upon the two. It broke his heart a little to realize he had misinterpreted Twilight's kindness as something more, and he did feel a little pang of jealousy at his young recruit's good fortune...but also a little bit of satisfaction. The two were almost made for each other, even if they were continually beating around the bush. Maybe, some time down the road, they'd finally come to their senses. But here and now, Gunn pushed those fatherly thoughts from his mind, returning to the task at hoof.

"Let's finish this," he said, cocking his rifle. "The sooner we clear the sub and find a way to sink that destroyer, the sooner Azure gets to a medic."

Twilight still wasn't sure how they were supposed to sink a warship with a transport submersible. According to Colonel Coldheart, the vessel was unarmed save for the autocannon deck gun up top, and that hadn't even been able to get the best of their dinky little patrol boat. There was no way it could penetrate the thick steel armor of the ship in the harbor. But Eagle Eye had remained convinced that the Seawolf carried more than she appeared, and there was only one place to find out if that was true; the command center.

The hatch, as it turned out, was unlocked, so Short and Gunn slammed into it with their shoulders, forcing the thick steel door open and leaping inside, rifles up and at the ready. The room was dark, like the rest of the ship, and lights blared from every single direction. Panels, status lights, switches, levers, gauges. It all blared out at them, like a Technicolor dream or one of Vinyl Scratch's more radically minded music videos. But they weren't challenged, and nothing shot at them.

You can't be shot at by dead crew.

At first, Twilight thought her spell had killed everyone in here. Was it strong enough to reach beings through steel bulkheads? Was she really that powerful? But a quick inspection of a nearby body revealed that these dogs had been shot, not killed by magic fire. Each one had a bullet in his head,

and the all lay in various death poses. Judging from the angle, they'd been shot from...

"What kind of idiot shoots his own crew?" Short muttered, stepping over a dead Labrador.

"Someone who wasn't satisfied with the results," replied Gunn, kicking the commander's chair lightly. It swiveled, revealing a dead Corgi with a high peaked cap, blood streaming from the bullet hole between his eyes and his paw clutching a pistol.

"The black ops commander?"

"Makes sense. Every dog here was killed by a single shot to the head. Tell me, would -you- have that kind of accuracy?"

Short shrugged, turning over another dog nearby. "I dunno. Probably not. At this close range I'd just hold down the trigger and keep going until my magazine ran dry."

Gunn nodded, moving to a nearby panel. "Exactly. Which means this wasn't done by Fleet marines. Look at this." Gunn pointed to two marines, laying side by side next to the wall. Their thick hard-shell armor and helmets hadn't saved them, for the bullet holes were right in their facemasks. "Someone made sure to knock these guys off first. They're still at their posts. If this -was- a coup, I'd wager they'd have shot the captain to start."

"But he had enough time to draw a weapon," Twilight muttered, frowning as she squinted in the darkness, trying to read what each of the switches controlled.

Short, meanwhile, had made a discovery. "Sarge! Check this out, it's the periscope!" A thick metal tube was deployed in the center of the room, handles out. The ensign at their hooves must have been looking out when the assassins came, and Short reared up, pulling it down a little to gaze into.

"Short, we've got other things to worry about, so why don't you pitch in for a second and stop screwing around with the sightseeing? Look, I found the

control panel for a torpedo tube, but I have no idea what the dogs use to aim with this thing..."

"How about a range meter, Sarge?" Short asked, turning around slightly to face the same direction as the prow of the submersible. "This thing's labeled in range and coordinate markers..." He fell silent for a second, gazing out at whatever was beyond the vessel. "Hey, Sarge. You say you've got the trigger?"

Gunn frowned, glancing at the fire control panel. The green light over the label TUBE 1 glowed brightly, and an arming switch lay beneath that, coupled with a button that he assumed was the launching mechanism. After a moment of studying, he nodded and replied "Yeah, in a manner of speaking."

Short peered around the periscope, grinning like a loon. "We're pointed right at that destroyer! For the moment, anyway. I think the sub's still turning...the point is, we've got the direction, we've got the torpedo-"

"We've got a way to sink the ship!" all three of them exclaimed at the same time, jaws falling open and ecstatic smiles everywhere.

Gunn didn't waste any time, stepping over the panel swiftly and lifting the lid over the arming switch, flicking it and waiting for the light to turn red before he brought his hoof down firmly on the firing button.

The Canid Mk. 16 torpedo was a finely tuned system of explosives and propellant. Unlike Equestrian torpedoes, it was not meant to explode directly on the hull, and unlike Hippogryph dive sabots it had no steel spike to shoot through the side of a ship. Instead, the Suplex exploder mechanism had a magnetic detonator inside it, meant to detonate just under a ship, catastrophically ruining the keel. Such an explosive had already sent many a ship to their water grave and liquefied the inside of many sea monsters. It was slightly front heavy, but that assisted in its role of being a concussive explosive.

As the projectile left the tube, the motor turned on, the metal fin pushing the single, lone weapon through the water at high speeds. The destroyer wasn't very far away, and most of the other boats in the harbor (their

wrecks, anyway) were made of wood, simple fishing and sailing boats that had brought in fish from the ocean for years. The torpedo nosed past several of these wrecks, disinterested in the boring wooden hulls. It had no time to be detonating against debris. It ignored the corpses in the water as well, hundreds of griffons and ponies from the ill-fated attack on the destroyer who, thanks to their gear, were already beginning to sink into the harbor. There was nothing large enough to attract the torpedoes attention. Instead, it honed in directly on the Howloween Night, the biggest, most metallic target in its sight. In the panic to repel the airborne attack, none of the dogs had been watching their instruments, and the captain had just called all hands back to stations when Victor squad had made their discovery. As such, the sonar system on board picked up the torpedo too late, and by the time the ensign assigned to it had turned to yell, the torpedo detonated.

The Howloween Night's keel bent backwards like a wet bamboo shoot, thrusting up into the hull and ripping apart the connection from countless bulkheads, crushing various compartments and pulping crew like oranges. But the worst of it came when the shaking reached the arsenal, causing a pair of shells that had been paused in mid-load to fall from the loading racks. One bounced away harmlessly, rolling to the side. The other, however, fell directly on the blasting cap. Unlike battleship shells, Fleet destroyers used ordnance that came packaged together like a conventional bullet, more like a tank shell. As such, when the second round fell, the blasting cap went off, the powder ignited and the round fired, sending the shell straight up into the ceiling, where it detonated.

An Assassin Class destroyer carried a lot of ordnance. Not only shells for their big guns, but also flak rounds for the anti-air turrets, thousands of machine gun and autocannon rounds for the deck guns and stores of grenades and other explosives for the marines. But the biggest problem was the depth charges. Large barrels of explosives meant to rupture submersible hulls and liquefy the internal organs of sea monsters, the depth charges were, naturally, stored away from the shell arsenal. But, when an explosion rips through the ship, it's hard to avoid.

The Howloween Night's arsenals and storage bays detonated, blowing out practically every compartment. The bridge disappeared in a storm of fire, metal shards and a hail of broken glass, incinerating and eviscerating every crewman in the room before they could even respond to the torpedo strike.

The deck ruptured as the turrets were ripped up like mushrooms from the ground, railing spinning off from the sides. Plates of armor were tossed carelessly into the water, and when the explosions finally reached the kerosene engines, the result was catastrophic, practically half of the ship disappearing in a fiery death that could be witnessed in great detail even from aboard the Artemis mobile airbase. Colonel Coldheart and General Spitfire stared, dumbfounded at the mighty ship that had repulsed them, shocked beyond all belief at the spectacle before them.

The Howloween Night died a horrible, fiery death just as the sun finally slipped over the mountains, spilling sunlight down onto the city. Smoke from the Industrial Sector kept the majority of the illumination from pouring through, but out on the harbor the golden rays highlighted and framed the destroyer's conflagration on the water, captured the fate of its crew as what remained of the ship rapidly began to sink into the water, its keel gone and its hull almost nonexistent. Few Fleet sailors would survive. Those who did immediately jumped ship, swam for the harbor docks and immediately surrendered to 1st Company as the Army soldiers swarmed the port to see the spectacle for themselves.

Unfortunately, fate would deal out a not too kind card to Victor squad.

"Direct hit! Direc-oh, holy BUCKIN' hay!"

Short threw his forelegs into the air, letting out a cheer as he forgot all about his speaking lessons and proper manner, whooping like the southerner he was as he spun around and drawled "She's goin' down to th' bottom of th' harbor! Lit up brighter 'n a firecracker, ah kin tell ya that!" The grey stallion laughed crazily, but he was joined by an equally ecstatic Twilight, who practically body-slammed into him, the two of them hugging madly like they might fly up into the air at any second and holding on was the only way either of them would stay rooted to the floor. Nearby, Gunn chuckled, grinning widely before he started laughing too, a raucous bellow that hadn't been heard in far too long.

However, in the midst of this cheering, the three didn't hear the quiet rasp of metal on metal.

Not until the gunshot, anyway.

Short and Twilight spun around, detaching themselves from each other as they stared, wide-eyed. Nothing is actually considered 'bullet-proof.' Merely 'bullet-resistant.' The right bullet will pierce through almost any material, even it's rated against rounds. In this case, an Army Mark IV combat vest was rated against most small arms of repeater caliber and below, as well as moderate success against middle-weight rifle rounds.

But from six feet away, even a bullet-proof vest can't absorb a magnum slug.

Sergeant Lock Gunn was pale, eyes wide as he coughed, trying to draw breath. It was hard to move, hard to inhale, hard to even think. He felt as though a great, hot lance had been speared through his side, and he could taste blood in his mouth. He turned his head around, using practically all his strength to do so, to find himself looking down the barrel of a Canid J2F pistol.

Gunn's knees gave out from under him as he collapsed to the deck.

"No...NO!" screamed Short as the sergeant fell, and he would have sprinted forward if it weren't for the fact that the gun was swiveled around, and another shot rang out, slamming into the young soldier and sending him reeling back, gasping in pain. Twilight shrieked, eyes wide as she watched both stallions fall, her reactions set back to something primal, animalistic prey instinct kicking in as she skittered backwards, half-hiding behind the commander's chair.

Major Ulrich Boxer stood in the hatch, gun smoking as he gazed coolly down at the unicorn. How disappointing. To learn that all his wolves and most of this sub's marine detachment had been killed by four troopers, to learn that the torpedo had already been launched, to learn that the last salvageable part of the plan had been ruined. The entire plan had been ruined since the griffons had shown up, and this was just icing on top of the cake.

At least he'd already killed that idiot Garret after they'd been immobilized. Him and his entire incompetent bridge crew. Including Ensign Jowls. Boxer could barely keep his rage tapped, and knew that all who had known of his involvement needed to be silenced.

He stepped inside, watching her coolly, listening to the second soldier groaning on the ground. There was no point in finishing them off, he was done here. It was time to extract back to the Recalcitrant somehow and find a way back home.

Still, he felt that there was something he had to do. It wasn't like he could just leave them there.

So, he turned around, holstering his pistol and reaching up to his vest, plucking a frag grenade. With an almost careless gesture, he pulled the pin, tossing it over his shoulder and striding away. After all, four second fuses only lasted three seconds. Every soldier knew that.

As the dog turned around, Twilight crawled forward, finally bringing herself level with Short, who was still groaning in pain, at least. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah...vest took most of it, I think. But it might have gone through anyway." Short groaned, reaching out to her-

Just as, with the clink of metal on metal, Boxer's grenade dropped nearby.

A soldier's first duty is to protect his country and his people. A soldier's first reaction when an explosive drops, however, is to save those around him. So when the hand grenade fell, he immediately hauled himself up, the pain in his chest gone, and threw himself on top of Twilight, yelling "GRENADE, GET DOWN!"

It was the longest three seconds of Twilight's life. Her eyes were wide, her body covered by Short as he once more put himself in harm's way for her. This time, however, might be too much. She had enough time to be shocked, her jaw dropping as she realized the full extent of the situation, not nearly enough time to push Short off of her and get him to safety.

The grenade detonated. With a muffled thump.

And Sergeant Gunn, who had managed to throw himself on top of the grenade at the last second, fell back down to the deck.

Epilogue

Sugarcube Corner, Ponyville

1 month later

"-and we're very glad to be joined by today's guest, the 'Hero of Stalliongrad,' newly promoted Field Marshal Eagle Eye! You listeners don't wanna know what I had to do to get him on the program! Marshal, we're glad to have you here at the studio."

"Thank you for having me, Miss Scratch. It means a lot to me and all the soldiers around Equestria."

"Now, Marshal. We're all wondering which direction the Royal Army is moving in ever since you stopped that nasty invasion in Stalliongrad. Care to give us any details?"

"Well, first of all Miss Scratch-"

"Please, call me Vinyl!"

"Alright, Miss Vinyl. First of all, there has been no proof to suggest that the commander of those ships was acting on official orders from the Hegemony or if he was a rogue operative. Regardless, I'm afraid I'll have to dismiss any claims made about the political situation between Equestria and Canida."

"Awesome, secretive nature! Getting into some black ops, are we Marshal?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, Vinyl. Anyway, you can start referring to the military as the Equestrian Royal Armed Forces once again. I'm proud to announce that following last week's edict by Princess Celestia and a few amendments from Princess Luna, all branches have been restored."

"Oooh, how radical!"

"Indeed. Thanks to several recent factors and events, the Air Force and Magic Corps have been reinstated, and we already have several hundred applicants to go through, as well as several thousand new enlistees for the Army."

"Now, I've heard plans for a Navy to be constructed in case of threats from across the ocean. Any word on that?"

"I'm afraid I can't say much, Vinyl. What I –can- tell you is that you can expect to see a few more sailor ponies in and around the ports in the coming months."

"Rad, rad, radical! Marshal you're just awesome at suspense! Now, a few listeners have submitted questions over the phone, and I've chosen one for our Fans' Minute. It reads 'is being the commander of the Recon Commandos an exciting job?'"

"Vinyl, you and all your listeners should know by now that any information regarding RAIC troopers and their activities is strictly classified, as it has been since they were announced one month ago. But yes, commanding the Army is an eventful job, one I can't actually talk about either. I will instead say that in the aftermath of the Battle at Stalliongrad the Armed Forces are receiving more funding in the next year than in the last five centuries combined."

"And everypony will be happy to make the donations necessary to ensure that our country is kept safe, I just know it! This has been Vinyl Scratch, AKA DJ-PON3 with Field Marshal Eagle Eye, Equestria's newest hero! He'll be going on tour to all garrisons around Equestria with Princess Luna starting next week, so if you want to submit your application to enlist with the big shots themselves, look up your tour day, TO-day! Marshal, thank you once again for coming onto the show!"

"My pleasure, Vinyl."

Twilight reached up, smiling lightly as she turned off the radio set. It was good to hear that Eagle Eye had gotten the position. She'd recommended it for him herself to Princess Luna, who had been eager to find a real commander to take the vacant position of Field Marshal.

"So, that was the infamous Colonel-I mean...Field Marshal Eagle Eye. Came quite a long way in a mere month, wouldn't you say?"

Twilight glanced over her shoulder at Rarity, currently munching on a sugar-free brownie levitating in front of her, held up by a magical aura. The vain fashion mare had been on a bit of a dietary binge after weighing herself and finding that she'd gained two pounds since her last time on the scales three months ago. After that, she'd panicked and immediately switched her eating habits. But Twilight knew she'd eventually calm down, realize that her outfits were still perfectly sized to her and start eating normally again, albeit with a little more caution.

Currently the fashionista was watching Twilight carefully, blue eyes taking note of the mage's expression. Said unicorn grimaced, knowing what Rarity's scrupulous gaze would find; bags under her eyes, ruffled coat, messy mane. Maybe a nervous twitch every now and then, just to mix it up a little. In truth, Twilight knew how haggard she looked, and hadn't planned to go out today. Still, she knew that she had to leave the library at some point. Fortunately, she didn't have to face everypony as soon as she'd stepped out the door. Pinkie Pie was in the back room right now making a new batch of cupcakes, Fluttershy was out with Big Macintosh (the two of them made such a cute couple) and Applejack was busy working the fields with Caramel. But the biggest issue was with Rainbow Dash. Or rather, between her and Applejack. The blue Pegasus wasn't around anymore, having left a few weeks back. Not that she'd moved away, exactly, but things would never be the same...

"Darling, you simply look a dreadful mess. Why haven't you been out and about, it's been months since you got back!"

"-A- month, Rare." Twilight shrugged, taking her seat again, feeling her back slump a little. Quickly, she corrected that, sitting up straight. "I dunno. It's just been hard, readjusting."

"Twilight, you speak as if you were at war for years. You were only in Stalliongrad for two days. I know you had a hard time, but I can tell there's something else bothering you."

"Rarity. Please. Not now."

The white unicorn watched her dear friend, quite concerned, before she nodded and smiled sadly, brownie forgotten on her plate. "Of course, dear. I don't mean to push; I'm just trying to help."

Twilight sighed, setting her head on the table. "I know, Rarity. But please...right now, I don't want anypony's help."

Hoovsin Bay, Southeast Equestria

Naval Storage Harbor (Deactivated)

Housing the Hoovsin Bay Reserve Fleet

These ships were centuries old. It was a wonder, Luna considered, that their wooden hulls hadn't rotted out yet, but Hoovsin Bay was near Savanneigh, and the 7th Battalion had at least a few unicorns who kept the ships maintained, at least holding back the stresses of time until these ships could be properly scuttled and disassembled into Equestria's resources, the pieces probably ending up in an industrial yard in Seaddle or even in Fillydelphia. Stalliongrad certainly wouldn't be processing anything for a long time, meaning that Equestria had lost a lot of industry.

Luna huffed. She had her work cut out for her.

Still, she trotted forward down the pier, examining the ships she passed by. They were old steam galleons, relics of a time long past. Compared to the naval forces of today, they weren't even seaworthy, much less able to go to war. No armor, primitive cannons, engines of nowhere near the same efficiency as today-scratch that, she thought as she saw that most of the ships were missing their engines. Probably pulled for factory duty somewhere up north.

Yes, Luna knew these ships would never sail to war again. And yet there were so many pieces of history here, kept locked up in this barely maintained base, little more than an Army Harbor Watch outpost now. But, with the Royal Navy reactivated, they needed warships from somewhere.

"Your Majesty," said her personal bodyguard, a Pegasus stallion named Stormchaser, dressed in his golden armor with a captain's blue star on the

breastplate. "Why are we here? I thought today's task was in reconstructing the Navy." Stormchaser was a grizzled veteran, a stallion who'd worked his way up the ranks. Though highly trained for most of their lives, most Royal Guards were reviewing battlefield procedures once more and updating their tactics based on the Army's experiences around Stalliongrad. They were the veterans now, the ones to call on when battlefield veterancy was needed, but Stormchaser had a small problem with humility. As such, he was bold and blunt, two traits Luna liked in a bodyguard. She needed someone to question her constantly and tell her she was wrong, or she was liable to not realize it herself.

"And we are, Storm. It's all here. The Oatlahoma, Neighvada, Ponyvania. Even the Marizona, once considered queen of the high seas." Of course, as Luna gazed up at the fearsome dreadnought, she knew that one torpedo to her copper-plated keel and the floating pile of matchsticks was done for. She was little better than target practice now.

"And so?" pressed Stormchaser, frowning under his plumed helmet.

"And so, Storm. We will finally scuttle these ships and make way for the new Hoovsin Bay Naval Yard. I hear there's actually a small job shortage in Savanneigh and the surrounding countryside?"

"We were planning to introduce some new greenhouses to make up for the deficit."

"Well, forget that. We need dockworkers, ponies who know how to work with their hooves. They may not yet know steel, but they'll learn. And we've got plenty of experienced labor from Stalliongrad up north. You see, Storm, this is our beginning. I've been doing endless reading on the naval ships of today, and I do believe I can resurrect Her Majesty's Royal Navy to once more become the most powerful in the world."

She glanced over at Stormchaser, who was, understandably, looking quite dubious and dumbfounded. Poor stallion, was probably wondering if he should call for a therapist for the moon princess. "Uh...beg pardon, ma'am. But how are you going to do that with these wrecks? And against the Canid Fleet?"

"It's simple!" And with that, Luna's horn glowed, a purple bolt leaping out to strike against the side of the Marizona. Where her magic touched, the

wood seemed to shiver, slightly, before it began crumbling away, faster and faster, the countless years of sitting in the warm ocean air finally taking their toll as the unicorn magic was reversed, the cautious repairs made by the Harbor Watch being undone. In mere minutes, the ship listed to port, but then began to sink, slowly, as the hull began to shrink away, enormous holes creeping across the wood. Before the top mast could touch the water, it too was consumed by the spell as the Marizona simply faded from existence.

"Well, that was easy. I'm surprised Tia didn't come down here and do that herself," Luna commented casually, flicking a forelock as Stormchaser stared on in alarm. "Anyway, as I was saying, once we scuttle this decrepit old group of sticks, we can resurrect it! Update and rebuild every ship! You see, despite all the centuries since the Navy has gone to sea, combat on the water has changed very little. Oh, there's new things to consider like anti-air, torpedoes, finding submarines with depth charges, but in essence tactics are the same. Therefore, once we rebuild we simply sail with the same methods we used generations ago. No need to study and rewrite. Of course, our new hulls will be steel instead of wood, but I do believe that once the yard is established, we'll have what we need to begin work on our first few capital ships." Luna turned to Stormchaser once more, an eyebrow raised. "And our first project; the dreadnought Marizona in her new form." Of course, finding the plans for a completely modern battleship shouldn't be too hard thanks to the assistance of a small nation of spies known as Viperia...

Cloudsdale, somewhere over Equestria

Campbit Air Force Base (reactivated)

7th Wing, Royal Equestrian Air Force (reactivated)

Basic Training, Day 24

Princesses, it hurt like hay.

Dash was definitely a physically adept pony, as she would be the first to brag. Long days spent training for her shot at the Wonderbolts had left her toned and muscular, nimble and fast. She'd prepared her entire childhood

and adult life to achieve her dream and eventually wear the blue uniform bedecked in lightning bolts and fly alongside General Spitfire, Colonel Surprise and Major Soarin...

Of course, that was much more feasible now, after the demotions.

Thanks to General Spitfire's laxity and carelessness in ordering an attack that caused unnecessary casualties, she'd been slapped with voluntary manslaughter and criminal negligence. Her punishment? Demotion from general all the way back to Flight Lieutenant in the new Air Force, after sixty days in military prison. Soarin and Surprise got a lighter sentence, only being charged with criminal negligence and demoted to Flight Lieutenant as well. Every other Wonderbolt had received the same fate, whether they had been in Stalliongrad or not, and they all had to bow before the new Air Marshal; Gale Rush.

Her mother.

In Pegasi culture, names were a confusing issue. For example, there were no 'last' names, and families simply named their foals whatever they could think of. Oh, sure. There were exceptions as earth pony culture overlapped with them. That Wing Commander Leeroy Wingkins, for example, in command of the 9th Bomber Wing. But Dash's family was a proper Pegasus one, of course, and that meant that they mixed and matched their names so often that nopony knew -what- to call them.

"Hey! Are you lollygagging, *maggot*?"

Dash knew what was coming, and felt the blow to her back as she staggered, forcing herself back up again as she strained. Her wings were strapped to her sides, much like Applejack had done in the Running of the Leaves, and over her back had been draped a set of saddlebags with two enormous bricks of lead. Except here, fortunately, they weren't expected to run mile after mile in a marathon (thank Celestia for that...). Instead, this little jaunt was all about endurance in the hot sun, unblocked by clouds over Cambit AFB. So far, the other Pegasi recruits alongside her had been going at this for over an hour, and already they all looked ready to faint.

The Training Instructors (or TIs are they were called) were especially ruthless in this part of what had become Dash's new life. In the morning, before dawn, they were roused from their cloud bunks and ordered into

assembly in a set time. If they failed, they had to go without breakfast that day, and everypony went hungry (they'd gotten over that little problem fast, and were now practically in assembly in their sleep). Then came morning exercises...which was where they were today.

A whistle suddenly blew, and the TIs all stopped skulking around like a pack of wolves (that comparison was actually rather ironic at this point) and the Senior Training Instructor (no, not referred to as STI, they made a point of making that different) Flight Sergeant Lightning Squall let the whistle drop from her lips.

"Alright!" the orange Pegasus called out, looking over the gasping group of recruits. "Take five, lose the lead, get some water. But if I see -anypony- drop their bag through a cloud, they'll have to gallop around the fort -twice- while we watch."

Squall was a harsh mare, a sergeant in the Royal Army before the Battle of Stalliongrad. As one of the 89th who had survived, she'd actually enjoyed watching the Wonderbolts get deposed and turned into common soldiers again thanks to Spitfire's mistake, and her high performance scores and good record had gotten her fast-tracked to the Basic Flier Training Program. In the Army's words, it was boot camp for Pegasi.

Dash gasped as she felt the saddlebags being lifted from her back by two TIs, grateful at last for the chance to walk without effort and finally spread her wings again...but Squall never gave the order for the bindings to come off, so they didn't, leaving every recruit standing around on the cloud, waiting while another TI started down the line with levitating canteens, courtesy of the Magic Corps. Dash gratefully reached out, sipping at her own despite the fact that her throat roared with thirst. She wouldn't make the same mistake many other fresh recruits had made, in which they gulped and gulped and in the end just wound up swallowing a lot of their water without banishing the thirst.

After five minutes, Squall finally recalled the canteens with a single piping note from her command whistle, and all the magical vessels drifted away towards their collection bins. Fortunately, most of the recruits were now watered up and prepared for the next challenge.

"Alright," said Flight Sergeant Squall, standing before the recruits with her eyes set, squinting under her blue duty cap at the uniformed recruits

(uniform, sure. Training duds meant a one piece jumpsuit that covered everything from flank to neck. Dash was looking forward to when they would finally don their skintight flight suits). "Now, so far we've gone through three weeks of physical training, history classes and familiarity with regulations. Tell me, platoon, who was the second in command of the 7th Wing at the Battle of Crazy Horse Ridge?"

"Captain Thunderhead, Instructor!" the recruits all chorused back.

"Good! Let's go with some modern news, shall we? What is Canida's take on the Battle of Stalliongrad?"

This one was an individual question, and it was up to the fliers to take a step forward and announce the answer. Fortunately, Dash knew this one, and she moved faster than anypony else to answer it. "Ma'am, Canida announced in an official statement that, thanks to communication errors, they were not informed that the Howloween Night and the Seawolf had gone rogue and deserted to attack Stalliongrad. As such, they thank Equestria for bringing these pirates to justice!"

"Thank you, Recruit. Step back."

Dash did so, retaking her place in the line and resisting the urge to smile smugly.

"All you need to know, fliers, is that war is on the horizon. I know it, the Princesses know it, hay even the whole bucking -world- knows it. But I need to make sure that -you- know it. So today, we'll be hitting the target ranges and familiarizing you with your new service weapons! Let's go, hooves up! One two, one two! Hustle, fliers, you can't land without strong legs!"

Yes, Dash thought, basic training was killing her. But it was her new dream now, to replace her old, shattered one.

Stalliongrad, Northern Equestria

Ruins of the 71st Royal Army Battalion's Garrison (former)

One Week Later

The turnout had been incredible.

As well as the survivors from the battalion, several thousand civilians (most of whom were workers who had returned to show their thanks) and dozens of griffons had appeared for the service. That was expected of course, so many ponies were grateful for the time the 71st had bought with their annihilation.

But, most surprising of all, were the enormous amounts of other soldiers there. Most were from the Army, of course, but there were also several from the newly restored Air Force and Magic Corps, as well as a line of sailors and marines from the Royal Navy (who, lacking ships, had taken over the Harbor Watch's responsibilities for the time being).

Everypony who wore a uniform wore it crisp and clean, proud and respectful. Air Force flyers were bedecked in deep blue while mages from the newly reopened university of the Magic Corps had bright green jackets and the tall, stoic marines bore the royal red alongside their tight-lipped, white-clad Navy brethren. But even though this colorful rainbow of uniforms made a solid block of the crowd, they were literally swallowed up by the sheer mass of Army tan dress outfits, black caps and belts marking row after row, white sashes draped across shoulders and over chests. The entire 102nd had shown up, for they were the most accessible (made simple by the fact that they had taken over the duties of guarding the remains of Stalliongrad) and several other groups were represented as well.

But instead of socializing, the mass of spectators stood in silence, in the mud. No pony offered a single complain about the wet ground, or their wrecked surroundings or even to the frigid air that still could not be tamed by Weather Control (practically slaved to work in order to clear up the smoke and airborne debris from the battle). They were all rigid, facing forward with solemn expressions.

It was an obelisk, what stood before them. A great, tall obelisk that stood before the garrison's gates, in the center of what had once been an ugly killing ground. Now, for the sake of decency, the trenches had been filled in, the bunkers cleared away and the barbed wire taken down. But the obelisk stood as an obvious testament to what had happened at the crumbling walls behind it. Made of rich, strong obsidian, it was protected by a powerful alicorn spell, which would preserve the stone and the words written upon it through the rigors of time and ward off weathering. Carved upon its flat, black surface were the names of every single trooper who had died in the Battle of Stalliongrad, as the engagement was being called. Almost fifteen hundred ponies had been confirmed as killed in action, with the last remnants crawling out near the end, once the diamond dogs had been routed and left the city.

But there was only one name that newly promoted Sergeant Short Stop was interested in, and he kept his eyes fixed on its location, near the middle of the list. Sure, he would never forget all those who had given their lives to defend their homes, but he was here to honor the stallion who had been by his side nearly his entire service.

Hanging from his uniform, the starburst and oak clusters of the Merit of Valor glistened. This was only the second time he wore it, the first being when it was pinned on him. Every other pony in the 71st wore it as well, for bravery displayed in the face of overwhelming odds and the courage to stand in front of sure death. But Short didn't want the medal. He only wanted his sergeant back.

Before the assembled crowd, Princess Celestia stood in front of the statue at a microphone stand, her customary happy smile and wise airs gone. In their place, a grim and resolved expression was left, making her seem far more intimidating than any other time Short had seen her on the television. She wasn't here to spread happiness or to bless a town with the rising of the sun. Her flowing mane and tail, which had flowed with light in all her other appearances, were softly waving, devoid of any glow whatsoever. To see the Princess down here, in the mud and the sludge of the garrison ruins was a shock to everypony, Short especially.

The Princess began her speech with a deep sigh and a shake of her head. Her horn glowed, and from the stand's top a sheaf of paper flew off it, cast to the winds. "I can't do this," she said aloud. A murmur began in the crowd

as the various ponies began muttering to each other, shocked beyond belief. Was the monarch refusing to do the speech?

Fortunately, Celestia continued. "That speech that my advisor wrote, it isn't me. I can't go on pretending this was some hour of glory and there were angels descending from On High with trumpets behind our bold soldiers as they fearlessly held the line. I may not have been here, but I know that's not what happened, and I can't say that." She shook her head again, slowly, stepping out from behind the pedestal and projecting her voice quite naturally as she paced across the platform. "So I'm going to speak quite frankly. I've heard that soldiers tend to prefer that. This unprovoked attack wasn't a diamond dog uprising like Canida is calling it. It was a deliberate action that has dragged us into conflict. It's already cost us three thousand soldiers, seven thousand police officers and twenty-four thousand civilians, all dead. This city is in ruins and the majority of the civilian population have been evacuated while reconstruction and insurgent sweeps occur. And all for what?"

The princess paused here, gazing out on the stony faces of the silent crowd with something akin to pleading, as if begging them to tell her that the victory had been worth the lives that had been paid for them. But Short had no answers, and neither did Corporal Azure Cobalt next to him, as the two glanced at each other before looking back. Azure, like him, had recovered from her wounds thanks to unicorn magic and a lot of bedrest, but she'd also received the Purple Heart for sustaining wounds in a combat action. Before today, she hadn't even taken it out of the box. They both hated their medals.

"These ponies gave their lives to buy the time needed for reinforcements to arrive. Any other unit would have fled, but because they were disciplined and dedicated to their duty, they held the line despite the savage losses that were inflicted upon them. They were outnumbered ten to one with nowhere to go, but they did not retreat. All to save the city and keep the rest of the civilians safe. Now, instead of the entire city destroyed, only a single district has sustained large ruination. We will rebuild. But this attack served as a wake up call to us."

There we go, thought Short, smiling a little as Celestia's head rose, her expression going from depressed and pleading to hard and authoritative.

"Ask yourselves for a second, everypony. If we had kept a fully active military and continued our long history of dominance instead of disbanding the armed forces, would it have happened like this? Would it have happened at all? I got lax, and the ponies of this city paid for it. It will -not- happen again. Don't forget those who sacrificed themselves to give Equestria a chance here," and Short could have sworn Princess Celestia had looked over straight at -him- but he may have just been imagining it "And above all do -not- forget the living."

The cafe's name was the Brass Saddle, he saw now. Interesting how Stalliongrad's metalworking industry was so deeply integrated that it stretched across the entire city, even here in the Residential Sector.

Short glanced down at his salt lick, sighing as he leaned down and gave it another taste. Despite the sharp, stinging bite of the salt rocks on his tongue and the sour taste melting in his mouth, it didn't make him feel any better.

"Good speech," said Azure from next to him, nursing her own salt lick. "Nice and short, but she was sincere about every word." After the ceremony, the soldiers had all gone their own ways, heading to socialize and have one final lick before they were forced to go back to their bases. With the military in full swing to wake up again, it was all hooves on deck to try and catch up.

But Short and Azure would be waiting for quite a while. They were one of the few heading out towards Canterlot, as it turned out, and Colonel Di'ac had arranged for a train to come pick them up in a few hours. The 71st didn't exist anymore, of course. There were too few survivors to try and reform it, and the soldiers left had been further split apart by the dismantling of the various branches to reform their own services. The Sky Corps fliers became Air Force, the Section Five battlemages went to the Magic Corps and those few surviving Harbor Watch troopers were inducted into the new Navy. Of course, the Army stayed the Army, no changing that. But some ponies had been selected to become Marines, and so their pool had shrunk even more, until it was just a few dozen left. Too few to build an entire battalion out of.

And so, they were drawn into the 105th, based in Canterlot. Their own colonel had retired just before war had come to Stalliongrad, so they were in need of a new commander, and with new war preparations they needed more recruits as well to swell up to the necessary regimental size of seven thousand, even after they'd activated their reserves. But word was, there were so many troopers signing up, even more regiments may need to be formed, and Canterlot already had five of them in the city. Rumor had it that the 105th was being reassigned to a border posting.

But Short didn't care. After the battle, everything had fallen apart for him. His mentor was gone, his battalion was practically nonexistent and Twilight had even gone home without ever sending him another letter. He had gone home for a week, of course, but Savanneigh didn't feel like home anymore. He took another lick, a hard one.

Didn't help.

"Watch it, Short," said Azure, her neck displaying the large bullet scar she'd received. She'd become his ASL (assistant squad leader) for Victor squad, and as such remained his voice of reason and restraint, keeping him rooted to reality even in his time of grieving and self doubt. She never called him 'Sarge' either, and while it may seem that they were getting too familiar, they couldn't stomach being formal with each other. So, she called him Short and he called her Azure and nopony complained.

He nodded, pushing the lick away. Already a third of it was gone, and he sighed as he felt the burn of dehydration already beginning to set in. "I'll get some water," he muttered, but he didn't rise. He didn't feel motivated to, didn't feel the drive like he used to when Gunn was still around.

When Twilight was, too...

"Excuse me? I'm looking for Private Stop," said a voice nearby, and Azure glanced over, a look of surprise on the blue draft mare's face. Oddly, she didn't correct whoever it was, and Short groaned, turning his head and snapping "That's -Sergeant- Stop, for your informa-...oh."

There stood Twilight Sparkle, an amused look on her face as she looked Short up and down. He was still in his uniform, of course (sans cap, laying on the counter) but she was dressed in a tasteful purple dress, a short affair that wouldn't look out of place in a formal affair but fortunately kept its

elegance in check with no excessive decoration. A simple silver chain hung from her neck, dangling a moon charm, and her eyebrow was raised.

"I think I see Sergeant Sunbeam over there," Azure said quickly, leaving her own salt behind as she quickly moved into the crowd of uniforms, disappearing in the colors.

Twilight stepped over, glancing at the salt lick. Short suddenly felt embarrassed and ran a hoof over the back of his neck, chuckling. "A little, uh...celebratory lick."

"You don't need to explain," said Twilight, not bothering to order a lick herself. She smiled at him again before glancing around the cafe. "Hard to believe this is still Stalliongrad, isn't it?"

"Hard to believe this is still the same year," Short replied, sighing softly. "It feels like ages since that day."

"I know what you mean..." Twilight murmured. Short heard her, as he suspected. "And I need to apologize, Short."

He frowned, looking back at her. "For what? You didn't do anything wrong."

"I never replied to your letters."

Short winced. He'd sent her three letters, using the address she'd given him. The public library, Ponyville, out in western Equestria. He'd always sent two copies, just in case (Twilight had warned him that Ditzzy, the local mailmare, had a habit of accidentally mixing up the letters, thanks to her tweaked eyesight. She was a good carrier, it seemed, but had a case of dyslexia). But there had been no reply.

"Hey, it's alright."

"No, it's not."

"You were probably busy. Celestia can't count on just Luna to help her out, and her Grand Adviser is a sentimental romantic idiot." Blueblood, of course, had no idea just what the problems of the lower class were, and the rumor was that Celestia had only granted him the position simply to keep him out of trouble. Luna, of course, now held the dual role of both ruling the

kingdom alongside Celestia and being Grand Marshal of the Armed Forces. Thanks to her, Equestria was reacting to the attack quickly, its military gearing up and the industry knuckling down to make up for the loss of Stalliongrad's factories.

"I wasn't," Twilight replied, smiling sadly. "I was...I guess you could say I was lost within myself. Ponyville didn't feel the same anymore, and my friends have tried to support me, but they don't understand. And everything's falling apart."

Short nodded, taking a gamble and placing a hoof on her shoulder, which she didn't react to, either positively or negatively. "Hey...if you need somepony to talk to, you know you can come to me."

She nodded again, absently staring into the crowd. It had swelled with civilians as the soldiers left to go back to their postings, and now there were fewer uniforms than there had been even five minutes ago. What few remained were mostly Army soldiers from the 102nd and their supporting fliers in the 9th Bomber Wing and the Navy Harbor Watch (most of whom were getting retrained in combat procedures). But the 102nd didn't have any battlemage support, as they had been a mechanized infantry battalion before the battle. Unicorns had only just begun to stream into the Canterlot Academy of Magic Combat (CAMC in military shorthand), and there was a short supply of unicorns who weren't retaking the basic training.

"How's it going with the 105th?"

Short nodded slowly, looking out at the crowd as well. "Alright, I guess. The colonel hasn't actually given me my own squad yet, but I suppose we need to wait for the first platoons to get out of basic training before we actually get some new recruits."

They fell silent after that, not dancing when music came on, not licking salt even when the disgruntled cafe owner came by and took the two unfinished ones. They didn't move from where they were, but they did look at each other. Little peeks and glances that quickly ended with blushes and both parties staring at nothing in particular extremely hard. The party went on into the night before the cafe finally closed, forcing the two of them into the streets again. Nowhere was truly safe in Stalliongrad anymore, even though the 102nd had annihilated the diamond dogs. Small packs still

roamed the city at night, hiding from the Army and police as they tried to eke out an existence in the abandoned streets. But neither really cared.

Twilight glanced up at the sky, squinting at the full moon.

"Looks like Luna formed it early," she remarked. Short looked as well, frowning. The moon wasn't supposed to be full for another week, but the Princess of the Night must have completed it for tonight to guide the spirits of the fallen soldiers in the city home. Or so the legends went, anyway.

"Yeah..." he replied, then sighed. "Twilight, when are we going to stop this?"

She halted, a frown on her face. "Stop what?" she asked, in a tone that told Short she knew exactly what he was speaking of.

"We're dancing on eggshells around each other. Look, I know what happened has changed us, but it's not something we can't overcome. After everything we went through, everything we shared about ourselves, we can't go on pretending like it didn't happen."

Twilight glanced away. "Short, I can't. I'm too muddled up, too confused. I..."

"You're having nightmares, right?"

She nodded, still not looking at him.

"I did too, after my first fight. Cave skirmish, had to drive out some sirens who were sinking cargo ships and eating the crews. I couldn't sleep for weeks, was afraid to go anywhere without a little bit of light."

Twilight finally looked back at him now, illuminated in the snowy street, tan uniform stretched tight over his frame, black cap perched between his ears and a dead serious look on his face. "Really? You?"

"Of course. True bravery isn't a lack of fear. It's the ability to act in spite of it. If you don't fear things, you make stupid mistakes. I was absolutely horrified by what I saw down there, afraid something was going to jump me everytime I turned out the lights. I still am, to some extent. It won't go away completely, but there is a way to make it better."

Here, the purple mage finally turned to face the grey soldier, an inquisitive and hopeful look in her eyes. "There is? What is it?"

"Having somepony there to help you through it." Here, Short reached up, lightly trailing his hoof along her jaw. "Gunn saw that I was having problems and sat me down one day. We talked for hours, well into the night. When we finally stopped, I suddenly realized how dark it was and how tired I was. But I wasn't afraid at that point. I went to sleep and I stayed there for hour until reveille." He smiled, his hoof ceasing its motion. "I'm not asking for much, Twilight. I can't really. We're an hour's flight apart and I'll be going who knows where soon-"

"I know where," she said softly, fortunately still smiling, eyes glittering in the moonlight. Short raised an eyebrow, pulling his hoof back and studying her closely before the pieces came together, and he risked his guess.

"Ponyville."

She blushed a little, glancing away for a second. "The Everfree Forest is a bit dangerous, and so is Froggy Bottom Bog. The mayor requested a military presence in the region for security, since we're also a bit close to the border and...well..."

"No. You didn't!"

"I did," she said, grinning sheepishly and letting a little giggle escape her. "She OKed it almost instantly. You're shipping out as soon as you get your new recruits!"

Short's jaw was hanging open in disbelief, and he glanced at the cobblestones with wide eyes. "Dang...but what about fortifications?"

"Already built. You'll be stationed in Glass Grass Fields, just a few miles outside of town. No pony uses the place, and the wide expanses are perfect, so I called in a little favor from Lieutenant Conway-"

"Conway's a -Lieutenant?-" Short blurted out, staring at the student with wide eyes. She burst out laughing at this point, holding her sides as she chortled, so amused by his astonishment.

"Yes, he is! Anyway, I asked him to spare me a few of his experienced unicorns, and the palisade is already set up. All we need now is-"

Whatever the regiment needed, however, was a topic left for another time. But it would be a long while before Twilight and Short got over the shock of the kiss that he had abruptly pressed to her lips. It had been a reaction, completely unintentional, but as soon as he'd done it he knew it felt just right. And Twilight, once she'd realized what had happened, went along with it, pressing back against him.

The two kissed under the moonlight, both of them feeling more alive in the last few minutes than they had for an entire month.

Ottapaw, Canada

Parliament, Prime Minister Mation's Office

"Mister Prime Minister, I have no excuse or explanation. The operation's fault lay with the issues in the chain of command, not personal grievances."

"That's what you keep telling me, Captain! And yet, the Howloween Night is in pieces at the bottom of the harbor in Stalliongrad, the diamond dogs have been utterly annihilated by the Royal Army, and the Seawolf is now in enemy paws...hooves...hands! Do you realize what a catastrophe this is?" Prime Minister Dale Mation, already exhausted from the lack of sleep over the last few weeks, fell back into his chair, drained beyond belief.

"Ulrich...I know you tried your best, and things got complicated. But the point of the matter is, I -cannot- give you back your rank. Someone had to pay for what happened, and you were the only one to return. I'm sorry for all the negative attention that's come your way, but it's out of my paws."

Captain Ulrich Boxer, feeling the stinging burn of shame coursing through him, simply nodded, not trusting himself to speak. The entire mission had gone pear shaped, and the Admiralty had pinned him with six or seven different charges, each one that could potentially see him executed. But, he'd simply been demoted to Captain and put on official reprimand and report. At this point, anymore screwups would definitely see him getting a bullet.

A little harsh for a single mission gone wrong, but everyone in the higher echelons of the Hegemonic military was freaking out, trying to keep everything together even as the prospect of war loomed on the horizon. Fighting Equestria by itself in a conventional battle would have been easy enough, even with their witches and warlocks. But the fact that two demi-goddesses were rulers of the Kingdom was enough of a terrifying prospect that even Chewchill was beginning to balk at the thought of war. Add to that the fact that every other nation not in the Hegemony was announcing their loyalty and allegiance to either Equestria or Hippogryph, and it seemed like the entire world was out to spill some canine blood.

Yes, Boxer knew why he'd been demoted. But he also knew that he could still redeem himself.

"Well then, Mr. Prime Minister. What happens now?"

Mation nodded, slowly, leaning forward and pressing the button on his desk intercom. "Luise, send him in."

Boxer raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment.

The Prime Minister turned to the captain, his face set in stone. "The President has issued me a challenge, Ulrich. He knows the risks that fighting a multi-front war could impose, not just the chance of defeat but also victory with a ruined economy. He -was- a Fleet officer, after all, he knows something of tactics. He wants to ensure that when war -does- break out there will not be an allied front in the south."

Boxer raised his other eyebrow. Cause a split between Steelclaw and the Princesses? That was a tall order.

"To assist you, I've called in another operator. I'm aware that you're acquainted."

Before the disgraced commander could ask for clarification, there was a rapping at the door, light enough to not be intrusive, but loud enough to make its presence known. Mation called out "Enter."

The door swung open to reveal a wide, inquisitive face, dressed in a plain uniform like Boxer himself, alert and aware eyes dancing back and forth

between the captain and the Prime Minister, and as the Catahoula Cur shut the door behind him, Boxer felt his hackles raise and let out a sharp snarl.

"You!" he snapped, his teeth now bared. Dirk Frost simply nodded stiffly before he turned, saluting crisply to Mation.

"Major Dirk Frost, reporting as ordered, sir."

"MAJOR? You promoted this idiot?" Boxer snapped, astonished, shocked and betrayed at the same time. He was usually able to hold onto his emotions relatively well, but this was just crossing the damn line!

"Captain! You will settle down! Major Frost's team accomplished their mission perfectly with few slip-ups and light casualties. The residents of Hoofington are even now being relocated to Ottapaw as we speak. You, on the other paw, lost two ships, thousands of crewmen, hundreds of Marines, your entire team and tipped off Equestria as to our plans-yes, I KNOW it's not your fault!"

Boxer snarled again, his ears pinned back. There was nothing he could say, it seemed. The Prime Minister's mind was already made up.

"Now, gentlemen. If you'll kindly take your seats, we can get started."

Dirk Frost glanced at Boxer coolly, reminding the disgraced dog of when they'd both served in the Marines. The bastard was always the perfectionist, the goody-two shoes, the factoid book. In other words, a REMF's dream. No wonder he'd been promoted.

"So, Berzerker. I guess we'll be working together again."

Frost extended his paw, and Boxer stared at it for a second, feeling the urge to bite it off.

In the end, he simply clasped his own paw around it, staring Frost in the eye.

"Indeed, Ice Dagger. Just like old times."

Canterlot, Royal Palace

Royal Labyrinth, Statue Collection

Hmm?

What was this?

Was it finally time? It WAS, it was finally time! The spell around his prison was finally shattering, about to let him go free! And it was now time to go and spread so much chaos and disorder through the world-

What? Oh no, this wouldn't do at all. Looks like Celestia went and screwed up, and badly too.

The world's already in Discord.

The stone cracked before him.

But it could always use a little more.

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The End Of  
Guardians

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Ceasefire

Prologue

Canterlot burned before Twilight's eyes, flames reaching up, high into the black sky beyond, licking hungrily at the very life of Equestria as Princess Celestia tried (and failed) to escape the destruction of the city, managing to flutter many hundreds of feet into the air before the alicorn's burning wings could no longer hold her up, and Celestia fell with a scream into the inferno. The violet unicorn stood there, jaw open at the tragedy before her, trying to come to terms with what she was seeing. Shadowy figures moved inside the streets and burning buildings, and the snap and crackle of gunfire accompanied by the boom of cannons reached her ears. She stumbled forward, finding herself on a downhill slope towards the city that took her from a stagger to a proper walk to trotting until she was finally galloping towards the city, screaming her lungs out as she tried to reach the buildings. Her parents were in there! No pony was getting out, so that meant they were still in the city, along with thousands of other innocent ponies!

Suddenly, an obstacle rose up in her way, a camp of some sort, and she almost screamed in frustration before she spotted the silver shield emblem of the Equestrian Royal Army on the side of a battlewagon. Canterlot was saved! It would only be a matter of time now before the Kingdom's troops rolled in and took it back! But as she trotted through the camp, she realized that her hopes were being dashed in front of her. Wounded trooper ponies were being pulled away from the frontlines, placed onto steamwagons to take them away from here, while artillery fired from fortified positions and Pegasi flew overhead, away from the city. The Army was retreating!

Up ahead, she saw a tall stallion in the green coloring of the Royal Army's summer camouflage battledress. His body armor was scorched, his grey coat caked with ash and soot, but as he turned around, Twilight recognized him instantly and stopped dead, a chill running down her spine.

"Short!" she screamed, eyes wide as she stared at the colt. "What are you doing here?"

"We've got nowhere to go, Twilight," he replied, his expression deadpan as another pony nearby fell to the ground, blood splattering everywhere. "Nowhere to fall back to."

"You can't leave!" she screamed, tears in her eyes, almost in his face now, though she didn't remember moving. "Equestria needs you! I need you, Princess-bucking-dangit! My parents are in there, and so are other ponies' families!"

"Nowhere..." he whispered, as if he hadn't heard anything she'd said.

She pushed past him, actually able to move her legs again, leaping over a sandbag wall and continuing down the hill. Abruptly, a shell screamed overhead, and the position she'd just left disappeared in a fountain of dirt and blood and metal, and she opened her mouth again to scream-

Only to find herself snapping upright in her bed, eyes wide and gasping like she'd dashed all the way to Sweet Apple Acres and back. A hurried glance around showed that she was safe, in her room above the library, no burning cities, no fleeing monarchs, no wounded soldiers or dying ponies. It was only a nightmare.

Another nightmare.

Twilight flopped back down, still breathing hard and feeling the adrenaline pounding through her veins. It had been like this almost every night for the past four months, ever since she thought she'd gotten over the aftereffects of the battle. But, as it turned out, when the nervousness and mood swings went away, the nightmares began. Horrible, vivid things where she saw various parts of Equestria burning to the ground and close friends and family being blown to pieces before her. Several times, she'd come to Ponyville in her dreams only to find ash where buildings once stood and skeletons where her friends had been. A few times, such as tonight, Canterlot. But more and more often, she'd been going back to Stalliongrad in her mind, reliving the horror that had started it all.

Twilight groaned, rising from her bed and trotting downstairs to the kitchen, determined to find some way to rest. The clock's hands told her it was four

in the morning. Perfect, she thought as she levitated some cow's milk out and poured herself a glass. Now she would also be sleep deprived, as well as avoided by most of the town.

Being a war survivor was not good for one's health.

Seaddle Naval Port

Royal Navy Shipyard (Reactivated)

6 Months after the Battle of Stalliongrad

Captain Jayce Cobalt groaned, hanging his head over the technical section before him. The things he did for his kingdom and monarchs, he thought. Like trying to memorize everything in the new Royal Navy Manual of Nautical Warfare, which happened to be the thickest tome he'd ever seen and seemed to be filled with more words than he'd ever even heard of.

Deciding to take a break and clear his head, Jayce shut the book with the flick of a hoof, turning and striding to the window to look down on his new child and think for just a moment. Some might consider him crazy for calling the multi-ton ship below him his foal, but he had done the same for his own Harbor Watch boat, even though that had been a veritable plank on the water with a single small engine and no armaments whatsoever (to be honest, it at least had a hull, and could reach a respectable speed, but it was nothing compared to the PT boats coming back out of retirement). But here, below him, was the true wonder of his life.

The Equestrian Royal Navy didn't have the numbers required to maintain a fleet quite yet. Why Princess Luna had decided to start with a capital ship, a dreadnought of all things, was quite beyond Jayce, but he didn't argue with the Commander in Chief. The story of what had happened to the Wonderbolts thanks to General (now Flight Lieutenant) Spitfire's screw-up was still fresh in everypony's mind, the Air Force especially, and the new Pegasi recruits were being pushed through the wringer to make sure that an incident like that didn't happen again. In fact, all officers the rank of captain and above in the Army had been forced to go back to High

Command for a refresher course in tactics and regulations, and were only now just returning to their units after their 'reeducation.'

Jayce cast such dark thoughts from his mind and gazed down at his new beauty with fondness in his eyes, tracing over her massive skeleton and the plates of her hull that were being riveted in place. The Hippocampus Type Escort was a new kind of ship in more ways than just date of completion (only a month away, thanks to capable unicorn mage workers next to earth pony muscles). Since the Army Harbor Watch had been the least staffed sub-branch of the Royal Army, the Royal Navy had suffered from a severe lack of personnel, even with the surge in recruitment following the Battle of Stalliongrad. As a result, there was a large projected hole in the Equestrian ship lines no matter what plans were set down by the new High Sea Lord Nash Lake, head of the entire Royal Navy.

Lake had been a general of the Harbor Watch during his career, and to date was one of the few soldiers in that branch to actually see combat thanks to a small incident with overeager griffon fliers several years ago. As such, when Luna had begun hunting for new commanders, Lake had proven himself several times over, and the Princess had promoted him to take on the responsibilities of the new Royal Navy.

Unfortunately, even the salty, temperamental stallion's tactical brilliance couldn't help to avoid the obvious truth; with Equestrian naval tactics focused around supporting air combat, there would never be enough destroyers and frigates to protect the capital ships, carriers and transports on the water. So, Lake had done the next best thing.

While the Royal Navy were to still possess cruisers in their current form and battleships (not many, of course), the escorts and transports would take on a new shape. Hippocampus Escorts were both frigate and destroyer, small and fast yet bristling with flak batteries and depth charges to destroy aircraft and kill submarines. Hippocrene Assault Carriers hauled both Air Force fliers and Royal Marines in range of the shore for beach and inland assaults. It was the hope that, with these new hybrid ships, the few available ponies could be distributed more effectively and the Royal Navy could still maintain its minimum numbers of ships needed to go to war.

Or so the theory went, Jayce thought, grimacing. In the drydock "graves" next to his ship (the HMS Valiant) were three other Hippocampus Escorts

(including the HMS Hippocampus, first of her kind) joined by two Champlain Type Cruisers (the main muscle of the Royal Navy, only outclassed by the Marizona Type Battleship) and a full four Hippocrene Type Assault Carriers. Seaddle's shipbuilding yards had been deactivated centuries ago, and were renovated into the new industrial port.

Unfortunately, with the need for warships once more, the factories were now forced to use the commercial port while the nine ships under construction practically swamped the now-crowded shipyard. If it weren't for the efficiency and tireless work of unicorn magic, the entire project might have taken years to accomplish, but six months later and this port was close to producing her first brace of ships.

Jayce gazed down lovingly once more at Valiant, shimmering in the morning sun. The earth ponies and unicorn workers crawling over her hull had only just begun today's work, but already they had actually managed to bring the hull up to halfway done from its previous status of one-third completion. Remarkable. Whereas most shipyards elsewhere in the world possessed enormous cranes that inefficiently hauled steel and other supplies into position, Equestrian ports used mages skilled in telekinesis, able to shift heavy loads three times as quickly as any crane. And let's not forget the dragons, where they could be found. Few though they were in populated areas, dragon workers were powerfully strong, and even provided their own welding equipment for the large plates of armor on the hull (though less than a thousand had actually stepped into the entire Equestrian military when the call had gone out).

It was thanks to this efficiency and speed that the Royal Navy even had a chance against the dreaded Hegemonic Fleet, which possessed almost two hundred vessels at present. Jayce shuddered at that thought, realizing just how up against the wall they were. Projections for Royal Navy ships completed by the end of next year would only be up to about fifty, nowhere near enough to go head-to-head with the dogs.

In other words, Jayce thought, the tense peace had better hold for at least another few years, or else the waters of the Arcana Ocean stretching away to the north would belong to Canida when the war began.

Kodiak, Western Faunterra

Geisterbjorn Underground Headquarters, Einherjar Range

General Krastos was tired.

He reached up, touching a paw gently to his empty eye socket as he grunted, feeling the ache once more. Phantom pains, his healers had called it. Something that would go away in time. The problem was, it had been years already and the pain had not yet faded.

The grizzly left it alone, replacing the eye patch as he stood, jaw stretching as he yawned. It was time once more to go forth and rally the troops, try to stir up the resistance. Not exactly something he looked forward to, as he was a horrible speechmaker. The Geisterbjorn resistance seemed to follow him simply because of his tactical prowess and veterancy in the Dominion Ground Forces.

The problem, he supposed, was that bears weren't very social. Even when the Matriarchy had come knocking in retaliation for the blockade Kodiak had erected, the bears of the Dominion had been bickering amongst each other. Even as their enormous super-heavy tanks were burned by fast-moving griffon Airborne and their cities bombarded by Mobile Airbases, the bears had refused to get along. Clans, Caves, families, even friends on a personal issue always had something to argue about in the Dominion. And, thanks to their infighting and separations, they'd lost the war within a week.

No, bears didn't get anywhere when they talked about their problems. In a way, they preferred to slug it out, go claw to claw and maul their opponents to prove themselves right. A bit savage, sure, but at least that would get things done. Even among families, the occasional bite was made to ensure cubs were kept in line, and it never hurt for long. Powerful though they were, bears were tough enough to recover quickly and aware enough not to seriously injure each other.

Krastos sighed again, shaking himself out of his ruminations and what-ifs as he shifted his weight around, pushing the curtain "door" in front of him to the side. What greeted him, oddly, was not his personal attendant Rylar, but a tall, thin creature, stretching higher even than Krastos himself, almost to the ceiling cavern. The bear raised an eyebrow as his gaze traced over

the various parts of his new visitor, observing that each limb was that of a different creature. This thing was a chimera of some kind, a disorganized mix of so many things that it shouldn't even be possible for it to be standing, much less smirking at the general.

"Who are you, creature?" he snarled, one hand going for the large axe at his belt, a tool more than a weapon, but highly effective for splitting griffon skulls. The birdbrains constantly sent assassins after him, but rarely actual troops. Apparently, he wasn't much of a priority.

The beast smiled wider, bowing at what Krastos assumed to be its waist. "Fear not, General! I know you are suspicious of me, but I come in peace, I can assure you! The name's Discord, and I have a proposition for you of truly...chaotic proportions!"

Krastos halted his paw on the haft of his axe, watching this Discord carefully. He didn't seem to be armed, but he knew nothing of this beast. Who knew what natural weapons it possessed?

"Where is Rylar?"

"Your lackey?" Discord snorted, straightening and examining the claws on one hand haughtily. "Don't worry about him. He'll stop burping up bubbles in about an hour or so."

"What did you do?" Now, Krastos did draw his axe, brandishing it at the abomination with no quaver in his arm. Bears were the largest nationalized creatures in the world, and his axe's head was easily the size of an earth pony. He'd have no problem at all chopping the insolent being to pieces.

Discord shrugged. "Does it really matter? He'll be fine, he's not injured. Let's get past the barbarian-like growling and weapon swinging, shall we? There are bigger things to address at this point than simply swinging our arms around and displaying like two bulls competing for a cow. Important things like why I'm here for example."

Krastos paused again, his axe still held up. Reluctantly, the general admitted that Discord had a point. If it had wanted him dead by now, surely it would have killed him, wouldn't it? And Rylar was still alive and (hopefully) unharmed, and he was a large bear, a former infantry soldier before the Dominion fell.

"What do you want?" he growled, still not letting the axe fall. Discord laughed, pacing around the cavern, his serpentine body seeming to bend at unnatural angles as he turned and writhed.

"It's simple, General. Geisterbjorn wishes an end to Matriarchy rule of Kodiak. Correct?"

"Yes. But that's fairly obvious."

"So it's definitely not my point. But you are not suited for this task. You have many fighters, sure. Strong, tough, dependable, well-armed and-"

"Get to the point, Creature!" Krastos snarled, ready to drop the yammering beast. Discord paused, putting his hands up to placate the bear, a smirk still on his face.

"Of course. You need new tactics. You got your asses handed to you in your brief spat with the feather-heads because you depended too much on static defenses and heavy armor. So, to fight against the griffons and their airpower, I propose this instead; outside, I have several P-21 Anti-flier guns waiting with my...associates, as well as many more Mk. 4 Gunframes. Quite mobile, especially for your bears. Everything you need to fight a war on the Legion."

Krastos finally let the axe and his growling hackles fall, frowning more than snarling now. A stranger appeared out of the blue with so many weapons in hand, ready to help a rebel movement that the world had practically forgotten? The whole situation stunk of wrong, but Discord was right. Geisterbjorn needed better weapons, or they would just be throwing away their lives.

"Canid and Equestrian equipment. High end stuff. But what about ammunition?"

Discord chuckled, scratching his chin again with a sly look on his muzzle. "Don't worry, General. I've got plenty of rounds, and more where they came from. I'll keep you supplied for years."

Krastos snarled once more, his one eye squinted in frustration. "But that means we'll only be relying on –you- to deliver us the supplies! Who –are-you?"

"As I said, I am Discord-"

"No! That is simply your name! Who do you represent? The Kingdom? The Hegemony? Why do you want to help us?"

Discord smirked again, finding amusement at this stubborn old fool's paranoia. He was sharp, at least. Not willing to give an inch in negotiations and more than willing to use intimidation to get information. He placed a hand on the General's shoulder, leaning in to smile and say, quietly "General, I am my own benefactor. My men and I have a purpose, and Kodiak plays a large part in it. These weapons were...given to us to pass on to you, and I am simply the middle man, the grease between the wheels of the transaction machine. You should really be thanking Equestria and Canida for the generous gift. Me? I'm the delivery boy, but I'm not getting paid. I want a free Kodiak, and so does the rest of the world." He reached out his other hand, grinning wickedly. "So what do you say, General? You've got the world on your side and someone who can get you their assistance without risking griffon interception. It's just not something to turn down lightly...is it? Whaddya say?"

Central Canida, Muttreal Territory, North of Quebark City

Hegemonic Army 101st Armored Regiment, 5th Company **"Ironsides"**

Training exercise against the 251st Mechanized Infantry **Brigade**

Snow. Snow stretched away before him, rolling hills and banks like some kind of unbelievable ocean, its waves and spray replaced by sprays of...snow. He'd grown up with it, but now that he looked out and saw just how –much- was out there, he knew that his view of the world was barking small.

He stood in the cupola of his Silverback main battle tank, field glasses in hand as he gazed out at the hills beyond. The forests around them were the only interruptions to the snow, a constant reminder of the places where infantry could hide and snipe at him. Unlike Equestria, perpetually wrapped

in a shroud of magic, Canida had no interaction with the changes in their environment, and nature moved all on its own, not caring a whit for the nations that lived on it.

"Hey, Sarge! Get your ass in here, the drill's about to start!"

Sergeant Henry Fangson glanced over at the hatch next to his own, the helmeted head sticking out of it turned in his direction. The poodle's eyes were hidden behind her visor, but he could tell she was staring right at him crossly, waiting to give the order to move out already.

"Right, sorry. I'll be right down, button up."

With a clang, his gunner sealed the hatch, scraping the handle to turn the lock. In case of a gas attack, a Silverback MBT was environmentally sealed to keep out all poisonous fumes. Though there was an international ban on chemical weapons, Canida still had entire warehouses filled with them, and it was known that Hippogryph and Prance did as well. All three powers manufactured the stuff, ready to use it against their enemies. Still, just the threat of retaliation was bad enough to warrant a little discretion. Gas was nasty shit.

Fangson let the field glasses hang around his neck, pulling his own tinted visor down into position. The sheet of plastic over his eyes did more than just keep the sunlight out, however, it also protected his upper face from flying debris. It fit over his snout, and he felt the edge through his fur. The Jack Russell Terrier gave the landscape one last glance before he too descended inside the metal monstrosity, slamming and locking his own hatch over his head before he seated himself in the commander's chair.

The T22A1 Silverback main battle tank used a crew of four dogs to pilot it. A commander, a gunner, the loader and the driver. If one member fell, the others were cross-trained in how to quickly take their station, meaning that unless the tank was on fire or had thrown a tread they would keep going no matter what was thrown at them. Which, thanks to the thick armor swaddling the tank, didn't seem very likely. Canida's last war, the invasion of Zebrabwe, had involved entire battalions of these tanks storming over the plains and hills. The Silverback was truly the high end of armored warfare.

"This is Hammer Actual to all Hammer units. We are mission launch for Objective Cardhouse. All callsigns advance to Line Delta and report."

"This is Hammer 4-4. Solid copy, Hammer Actual," Fangson replied through his headset, quickly setting to work fiddling with the various settings of his tank's video sights. Thanks to a basic if reliable parabolic periscope mounted in its frame on the front of the turret, the crew could take in the scope of the world outside without risking their own heads to enemy fire. The gunner and commander both had the same view, but the driver had to rely on another set of sights from a periscope on the front of the tank's chassis. This was to ensure that the entire tank could still remain operational and each crew member worked as independently as possible.

Outside, the other elements of his tank platoon burst from the trees. Three more Silverbacks, thundering across the snowy wastes, powder flying up from their treads and their hulls almost indistinguishable from the white snow thanks to the painted winter camouflage. Well, save for the red symbols on the sides, emblems of the Hegemonic Army and Canida itself, necessary identifying logos. Smoke launchers, coaxial machineguns, extra equipment and tools all jutted out from the curved turret and boxy chassis, emphasizing how Silverbacks could stay out in the thick of it for weeks at a time.

They joined the rest of their company, and Fangson grimaced at the sight of their accompanying platoons. A group of T13A6 Heavy Tank, AKA the Grizzly, were hauling ass up the middle, escorted by a second group of Silverbacks. The Grizzly was slow as frozen molasses, and was a relic from another time, an era when steamrolling tactics consisted of driving over trenches instead of facing other tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. Though only slightly larger than the Silverback, the Grizzly carried far more armor and a larger main gun, resulting in a tonnage half again as heavy as the tank Fangson preferred. Grizzlies were a dying breed, and even now were being considered for decommission. The Army could only afford to field their best tanks, and unneeded designs were being scrapped left and right from all branches to make room for new ones.

The tank company spread out again, the Grizzlies (struggling to keep up at the company's casual pace) at the center with the Silverbacks arranged on either side, main guns forward towards the horizon. Fangson knew that there would be a dozen other squadrons like this plowing across the snow

towards their destination; the 251st Mechanized Infantry Brigade's defensive lines, where they'd set up base for a 'capture the flag' match. It was up to the 101st to breach their lines and reach the flag, all the while hoping they didn't take too many casualties. There was another way to win, however. If one side could kill off half of the other, that unit was considered broken and the match would be won. However, while that meant that the tanks had to take out almost a thousand infantry and dozens of supporting light armor, the dug in troopers would only have to dust one hundred tanks.

"Enemy APCs sighted in the trees ahead," reported the poodle, Corporal Nicole DuGrowle. She was quite an able gunner, a marksman with the Silverback's cannon and sharp eyes to pick out targets. Unfortunately, she also had an attitude problem, one Fangson never bothered to correct. Unchecked aggression was exactly what was needed in his crew, especially with the world in its current sorry state, and there was no way he was going to quash that now.

DuGrowle was part of a minority known as Prench Canids, a way of speaking and acting that mirrored the cultural influences of the neighboring Prench left over from when Neighpoleon had kept the entire continent under an iron hoof. The stallion had been a military genius, but when it came to ruling an empire, he fell disastrously short. As it happened, however, the ancient occupation had brought their lifestyle to the dogs, uncivilized and living in various clans, and Prench customs had attracted a few clans to their ways. DuGrowle was a descendent of one of those clans.

"Loader, paint up," Fangson ordered, and the loader hauled out one of the specialized training rounds, sliding it into the breech before snapping it closed with the clank of moving machinery, the Scotty dodging to the side and crying "Paint up!" Private Terry Aberdeen was a good soldier as well, a bit nervous at times but he had plenty of reason to be, for when that gun fired the breechblock snapped past only a few inches away, able to pulp an unwary dog in a single strike.

"Choose your targets Corporal, but don't fire until we get the order."

She growled lightly in irritation but otherwise gave no sign of dissent, her muscles tensing and ready to stamp on the trigger pedal. Meanwhile, their dachshund driver Thomas Lebay held the tank on course, his speed matching the rest of the formation and his paws constantly making minute

corrections to stay in their tank's lane. Lebay never talked much, but Fangson never considered that a bad thing. Thanks to their time together he knew that if the private at the controls suddenly started up, there was something bad right in front of them, and would either order evasive maneuvers or even a retreat.

The major came over the line again from his command tank, Hammer Actual, meant to move tank platoons around quickly. Tank commanders led from the front, directing more by eyesight than what radios and maps told them. While this did mean that armored commanders were more up to date on threats in the field, sometimes entire companies fell out of contact with each other, and a battalion could suddenly become a patchwork of tanks simply advancing to survive. Fortunately, radio strength was strong in the Canid wilderness, and there would be no errors now. Plus, this was just training.

"All callsigns, enemy vehicles and fortifications spotted. Remember, this is a training exercise. No cannons on the infantry, no retributions or rollovers. Proceed with attack, you are cleared for firing on all targets."

As Fangson gave the order and felt the Silverback shudder beneath him, watched as the paint shell splattered a bright red on the side of the Hydra APC ahead, listened to the coaxial medium machinegun hammer out dozens of rubber bullets at the dug in infantry, he contemplated how the rest of the world even remotely considered that they had a chance against such an amazing machine of war.

Over the Horsandie Coastline, Southern Prance

Equestrian Royal Air Force (RAF)

4th Air Division, 16th Fighter Wing, 7th Squadron, Dispatched from Royal Cargo Ship *Endeavor*

Routine Patrol of Coastline

They weren't allies. Not really.

Prance had long ago separated from Equestria, back when the War of the Moon had raged all over the southern continent and the kingdom looked to fall under the domain of Nightmare Moon. Fearing for their lives and safety, hundreds of ponies had journeyed north, to the relatively unexplored wilds, and founded the Prench Republique, a new government run on the consent of the ponies to be governed rather than presided over by a hereditary and all-powerful leader (aside from Neighpoleon, who'd seized power in a military coup centuries back). A crazy form of government, the Pegasus decided as she peeled into another turn, gazing down at the landscape whipping past beneath her. While most of Equestria had moved their seasons from summer to fall, Prance was still on the northern hemisphere's natural cycle of late winter, Spring just on the horizon. There would be no Winter Wrap-Up here, however. While Prance hadn't forgotten the importance of magic, they refused to use it on nature around them, in keeping with their paranoia about unicorns.

Flight Lieutenant Rainbow Dash tilted her wings a little more, keeping in formation with the rest of the wing. Her blue flight suit kept her warm in these cold climes and the ballistic armor encasing her torso, legs and the helmet on her head kept her safe, her helmet's eyeshields locked in position to keep her eyes from watering up. The Royal Air Force was still mostly using the same equipment as they had when they were the Royal Army Sky Corps, but they were branching away as fast as a sonic rainboom. For example, the Air Force had more officers in it than any other branch, owing to the fact that only officers could actually fly on sorties, while the enlisted were either ground crew or couldn't fly (crippled Pegasi usually filled these ranks, but the Air Force interestingly had a few earth ponies and unicorns. An odd thing, to be sure).

But Rainbow Dash –could- fly, and as soon as she'd left Fort Campbit's Basic Training, she'd gone into Officer Candidate School at Cloudsdale Flight Academy for two entire months, where she was pushed to her limits in order to discern if she did have what it took to challenge Hegemonic airplanes. Flying machines, while a relatively new development that gave the dogs a dominating edge in warfare against living fliers, were still susceptible to weapons fire, and a fast enough Pegasus could still outmaneuver them. Unfortunately, the selection process was brutal and vicious, with very tight margins of ability and an instant drop from High Speed Maneuvers Training if a single sequence was failed more than four times. While Dash had been able to meet and even surpass those

expectations, the rest of her class hadn't been so lucky, and dozens of Pegasi would never be in the Bomber or Fighter programs, forced to either take a job in ground crew or (more often) simply shifted to Attack Support (strapped with a recoilless pack and told to help out ground units), where they would essentially be soft, vulnerable targets for Canid fighters. And while she'd passed through training easily enough with little to no hiccups, it would have been nice if her mother had at least warned her what was in the lineup for the recruits...

"Alright, Team," said Dash's Squadron Leader, an orange stallion named Green Gem. *"Prench fliers up ahead. You know procedure, descend and give them the right of way. Remember, we're here to help."*

Boy was that off the mark, thought Dash as she fell to a lower altitude with the rest of her squadron. After all, the Prench Republique had a much larger, more technologically advanced military than Equestria, even though they had a third of the Kingdom's population. If anything, Equestria needed the help of their separatist cousins. Hence why they were here, and why the RAF was flying patrol sorties next to the Armée de l' Air de Prance while negotiations were underway in Prairie, Prance's capital city.

But they weren't allies. Prance had stayed separate for so long, they'd become practically another species of pony, with different behavior, culture, even a different language rather than the world-accepted Common. They were as alien as the dogs, practically, thanks to their own militaristic tendencies. More than one Prench officer Dash had met was convinced that the Republique would hang Equestria out to dry and look to their own needs. After all, they'd fought Canida to a standstill half a century ago and survived, and their technology had only progressed thereafter. While it was obvious there was no love lost between Prance and the dogs, it was quite obvious the northern ponies would rather not get dragged into another war. Especially alongside the southern royals.

Overhead, the black uniforms of the Prench flier patrol soared overhead, streaks across the cloudy sky that paid no attention to their blue-clad counterparts below. Dash could feel their haughtiness from down here, and it irked her enough to almost make her break formation and chase after them, simply to demand what their problem was. But, at the last minute, her training took over, and she maintained the formation with a sigh, her wings

still twitching to fold into full pursuit mode. But they weren't here to start a war with Prance, and they weren't here to fight Canida...yet.

But Dash still felt that burning in her gut, the yearning to engage in battle. She'd been trained to wage war against the enemy, and there was no enemy to fight yet. The anticipation was killing her, and she'd already been out here for six weeks. If she didn't get some action soon, she was going to go stir-crazy.

Might just shoot up one of those Prench patrols for sheer snottery, she thought sarcastically.

Frontier Desert, Southwestern Equestria

Royal Army Weapons Testing Facility "Fillhalla"

Conducting Field Tests for "Crusader" Prototype

"FIRE!"

The gun on the machine boomed, sending a shell soaring out and smashing into its target, barely a millisecond before the high-explosive charge detonated, blasting the thick wooden stand to splinters. For several seconds, only a dust cloud remained, obscuring vision and keeping the test from proceeding. The silence reigned, interrupted only by the rumble of smokeless coal engines and the light pattering of debris still dropping occasionally. Everypony nearby waited with bated breath, hoping that, maybe, their test results would be conclusive.

Finally, the dust cleared, and the results were there for all to see. The target, in the shape of a large bull's-eye, was half destroyed, the top sheared away to pieces...but the bottom was still intact.

"Clear the range!" called an Army major from his observation post of sandbags, chewing a wheat sprig as he watched the soldiers scramble to their positions, disarming the guns and turning off the engines, checking for damage and anything out of place. As had happened previously, the main gun had almost ripped itself from the moorings on one of the four machines, and that meant that particular vehicle would need to be taken

back in for repairs while the others were reinforced to ensure it did not happen again...for the fourth time.

A bunker sat away from the range, and inside it two Magic Corps unicorn engineers scribbled furiously at their notes with levitating pencils, double checking their calculations and adding to the complex equation on the blackboard behind them. The prototype was supposed to be fully-functional and ready for mass production in the rebuilt Stalliongrad factories by now. The volume wouldn't be high, of course (less than half of the Industrial District had been rebuilt), but at least these vehicles could get out there! Of course, the real reason they were scrambling to accomplish their goals was due to the large alicorn behind them, her coat the color of a moonlit night sky and her equally blue mane and tail waving though there was no breeze to be found. Rumors still persisted of what she did to those who displeased or disappointed her.

In truth, however, Princess Luna was feeling more frustrated than angry. She had every reason to be, after all. This particular machine, dubbed the "Crusader" was her own design, built from the ground up based on data collected on armored warfare committed by both Canida and Hippogryph (and there was an astonishingly large amount of data to be found, as well as captured Silverbacks in the possession of Zebrabwé from the ill-fated invasion) and correlated to build a superb fighting machine. Indeed, just by looking at the data it was superior to the older Knight battlewagons in everything save for speed. But, for some reason, the new Crusader Main Battle Tank simply refused to cooperate. Though the prototype had been built a month ago, there had been issues with the suspension, the smokeless coal engine and the steering. While those problems had all been tempered out in a few days' time, this issue with the ordnance (shells built specifically for its new, larger battle cannon) had already halted final checks for an entire week. While the gun fired just fine, the high-explosive shells themselves were defective, misfiring or not detonating. Armor-piercing sabot rounds were working brilliantly, and had pierced through the hull of a Knight quite easily, even if it had some difficulty on the captured Silverbacks.

She sighed, teeth grit as she muttered "I have to figure this out, and soon. If Tia's right, things are not going well in the diplomatic circle..." Poor Celestia was working herself ragged trying to hold off the coming war, but talks with Canida and Hippogryph weren't getting very far, and there was

now even word that the Matriarchy might even consider war with Equestria. If that happened, they were doomed, and it would be up to the Princesses to take to the frontlines and potentially stop the invasions. But not before many losses.

Equestria's first tank, the Crusader, was supposed to be their answer to the fabled Silverbacks of the Hegemonic Army. With a larger fuel tank, thicker armor, a bigger gun and treads, the Crusader was a completely different beast of machine than the Knight. But it had come with problems, too, problems that were holding them up. Luna looked down upon her tanks, watching as each one backed up to the machine shop for checkups and routine maintenance. One another of the shells had backfired in the cannon, almost destroying the gun itself, and now they were reinforcing the turret mounts on all of them, just to be sure.

More delays. More holdups. More time wasted. And time was one thing Equestria did not have in abundance.

Canterlot, Royal Capital of the Kingdom of Equestria

105th Royal Army Regiment

Victor Squad, 4th Company

Short had visited Canterlot a few times in his life, mostly during his short-lived baseball career with the Savanneigh Sharks, and one word came to mind every time he arrived; gaudy. Even after being here for the last six months, retraining and waiting to be reinforced, he still got a sense that the city might be a little –too- overdecorated. Now, standing in front of a café and waiting for his lieutenant to hurry up and get on with whatever she was doing inside, he glanced around at the packed, shining boulevards. Compared with the pearlescent buildings and cobblestone streets (the golden street signs were a nice little bonus as well) the four-wheeled steamwagon behind the sergeant seemed crude, boxy, its smokeless coal engine hissing under extreme pressure.

"Foals are easily amused, aren't they?"

Short glanced to the side, frowning at the little grouping of foals nearby, about four fillies with two colts they'd dragged along. The diminutive huddle was currently a few dozen meters down the street, talking mutedly amongst themselves and staring at the steamwagon. Short smiled a little, turning to his assistant squad leader and saying "They are indeed, Azure. Don't you remember being that way?"

"No, actually," the corporal replied, an eyebrow up and a blank look on her face. "Whatever do you mean?" She immediately took on an air of innocence, glancing around as if interested in the hustle and bustle of Mane Street.

Short snorted, turning away and shaking his head as he turned back, banging on the side of the wagon with a hoof. "Hey, Handlebar!" After a pause, the hatch opened and the driver, a Sergeant T.E. Handlebar, stuck his head out, eyes furious behind his busy moustache. "What?" he said, eyes narrowed at the infantry stallion.

"Hey, we've got some curious foals down the street. Was wondering if you might introduce them to Bernie." Handlebar grinned (partially hidden, of course) and ducked back inside. A split second later, the wagon's air horn sounded, and the foals down the street yelped in astonishment, literally scrambling over each other to escape the metal monster and its vicious, high-pitched howling. "Thanks Bernie," Short said, grinning as he stroked the machine's name, painted on her flank in red lettering with a heart in place of the l's dot.

"Next time, just call me on the dang radio," Handlebar grumbled in his headset, and Short paused as he realized that he was indeed wearing the radio. It consisted of an earmuff attached to a band stretching over his head, covering one ear and allowing him to still hear the outside world, fitting comfortably under his helmet. Though he'd retrained with it in several squad, platoon and company based exercises, the griffon-built radio set always seemed to slip his mind, and he paused before responding "Uh, right. Sorry," into the microphone extending from the earmuff to in front of his mouth. A Hippogryph radio company named Airwings Radio Communications (ARC for short) had gladly offered their services to Equestria after the Battle of Stalliongrad, and thanks to their discount the Kingdom had been flooded with these brand new radio sets. Gone were the clunky radio packs and inefficient hoofsets that never seemed to get the job

done right. In their place, these ARC headsets were distributed to every Army soldier, boosting communications and expanding squad mobility.

Sergeant Short Stop turned his head towards the café once more, wondering what the hay was keeping the lieutenant. She was a good officer, for sure, but her tendency to socialize with other ponies meant she often forgot about the ponies she'd been traveling with. In this case, the squad was supposed to be heading back to the High Command Barracks, having just been tested with new tactics of mechanized warfare. The lieutenant had, on the way back, wanted to stop by the café to 'check on something for a minute'. That had been an hour ago, and Short was becoming more and more irritated. Typical officers, he thought. The Royal Army had too long played host to socialite political figures in their command ranks, and Lieutenant Roseluck was only reinforcing the stereotype.

Short sighed, grunting as he leaned against the side of the wagon. The squad was technically still on-duty, but their weapons weren't needed here, especially in the middle of a crowd. Despite the publicity the military had received, the traffic still gave them a wide berth, and Short was sickened by the amount of wary looks they were receiving, more now thanks to the horn. He should have thought that through, he decided, but that didn't change the fact that they were getting a hay of a lot of negative attention.

"Doesn't help that we're going to be protecting their flanks when war breaks out..." he muttered, pawing at the ground irritated. The green sleeve of his summer camouflaged battledress hugged his forelegs, accompanied by the olive green armor and helmet. His ballistic goggles were strung over his helmet's brim, but other than that his war gear was kept to a minimum, weapons and equipment still stashed inside the wagon.

"Don't they realize some of us are suffering alongside them?" came Azure's bitter tone, and he glanced up at the large mare, taller and stronger than him. Ever since she'd received news that Hoofington's population had gone missing on the night of the Battle of Stalliongrad, her temper had taken a nosedive, and anything under Celestia's Sun could easily get her mad enough to see red. After all, her cousin Beatrix had gone missing, and neither she nor her brother Jayce could find her. Which meant quite a few things, seeing as apparently 'Trixie' always made herself known wherever she went.

"Easy Corporal," Short muttered, glancing at their collection of new recruits, standing around the wagon to get some air like him. "Let's not scare the newbies, alright?"

Even as Azure took in a deep breath and nodded, Short could tell she was still harboring her aggression. He could only pray that Colonel Di'ac got back to the regiment on time from training next week. The sooner they got out of this retraining and into serious garrison work, the better.

The map was stretched over the wall, covered in lines and symbols. Checkmarks dotted the paper here and there in green and blue checkmarks, but the most common were the bold red Xs over most of it. Equestria was covered in them, from the western griffon border to the eastern coastline, from the swamps of Savanneigh down south to the factories of Stalliongrad in the north.

He wasn't there, or there, or even –there!- Her Royal Guard and Luna's RAIC soldiers were searching every secretive, hidden place possible! True, he was a magic spirit, but there was no way he could have simply vanished without leaving a trail of –some- kind! She'd studied her prey for ten years, after all, all that time ago, and he had always left some kind of obvious hint!

But now, -NOTHING!-

WHERE WAS HE?

Chapter 1

Dream On

One Week Later

Heard on radio station 133.7 "PON3 N01S3"

"-and that was the Cutie Mark Crusaders with 'Find Yourself.' Ahh...girls, please don't send me another record. I've got the other six copies already. Oh well! You three'll find what you're all good at eventually! And now, this report from our good friends at the War Effort! Ahem...'Negotiations with the French government between Prime Minister Hoovieu and Councilor Affero of the Equestrian Diplomatic Corps broke down once more as the French leader was quoted as stating Equestria's true purpose in its military buildup was simply the Kingdom panicking and overreacting to an understandable threat of diamond dog infestation, and not a cause for international alarm. Hoovieu went on to say that the Canid Hegemony was no real threat to Prance and their enormous military would keep them safe in the unlikely event of invasion. "Frankly, I would be surprised if they got past the Alpine Light Brigade, not to mention the Maginhoof Line," the Prime Minister went on record to say. "Should Canida even attempt it, they will sincerely regret even thinking of the attempt quite quickly." Councilor Affero was not available for comment after the end of the diplomatic session.' Well, if that doesn't take the cake, folks. Here we are, with Canida knocking on our door, and Prance doesn't want to help. Well, you can't say we didn't warn them! Now, let's hear some music!"

South Arcana Ocean

One-hundred and fifty miles northeast of Stalliongrad shoreline

Royal Equestrian Navy, Arcana Fleet, Submersible Corps

Kelpie Type Submersible, coded, S-40 AKA 'HMS Barreleye'

He was quite aware that they were all an oddity. This ship included, barely a week out of Hoovsin Bay and was sailing for the place where the war had begun, ironically the most ill-suited of the coastal cities to have them. The HMS Barreleye was not a rare breed, as she'd been released in record time with five other Kelpie Type submersibles (almost carbon copies of Canid Orca-class subs, modeled after the captured Seawolf), but what made her unique was the pony commanding it.

He yearned to stretch out his wings, felt them twitching with anticipation at his sides, but resisted the urge. He knew that, here in the command center, he could very well injure somepony. Many had asked him why he had signed up for the Harbor Watch of all things, for a Pegasi was most comfortable in the sky, and thanks to his experience with boats he'd been a shoe-in for command. Those were all very good things, but there was still that one outstanding detail in his record; injury, unable to fly.

Lieutenant Commander Hal "Skipjack" Hunley sighed, blinking in the gloom of the Barreleye's command center, his eyes sweeping over the nearby sailor ponies at their stations. Most of them were Harbor Watch, just like him, but they were supplemented by a dozen or so new recruits, fresh from Recruit Training in Seaddle (the new unofficial home of the Royal Navy's headquarters). They'd been picked up yesterday, when the Barreleye had stopped in for a refuel of smokeless coal, just enough to take them to Stalliongrad. What the recruits lacked in experience, they more than made up for in energy, which actually didn't mean much since no Harbor Watch soldier had any experience in submersibles either. Hunley himself had just finished his own training into the systems a month ago before he found himself appointed as commander of a brand-new vessel, one of the first the Royal Navy had made since their rebirth (efforts were still being made to finish the Marizona and her escorts, unfortunately). The Navy was so desperate for anypony, anypony at all, with any kind of boating experience at all, and suddenly Major Hunley of the Royal Army Harbor Watch (they were still using Army ranks at the time) was now a Lieutenant Commander

in the Royal Navy Submersible Corps...essentially almost the same thing when you held the two ranks side-by-side.

Hunley cleared his throat, calling out "Sonar, keep a sharp lookout for siren songs. They're pretty heavy around these parts."

"Aye, Commander. Nothing on scopes yet."

Hunley knew his crew was a crack team, and they repeatedly demonstrated it in their performance, slipping smoothly through the waters as they rapidly approached their target, watching out for threats that may not even be there. Academic excellence could only go so far, however, and the sooner they became experienced seastallions, the better. They were almost all stallions, of course. Nearly all the mares in the Harbor Watch had been transferred to the surface fleets and logistics yards, leaving mostly only males to staff the Barreleye. While this did make arranging living quarters much easier, they were still left understaffed by at least a third, and the sooner they reached Stalliongrad the better. The waters of the Arcana Ocean were filled with any number of creatures, from water dragons to hydras to kraken to-

He heard it before the sonar did. A light, soft, high melody drifting down through his ears, ringing through the metal shell of the sub. At first, it was so soft, so subtle that he didn't even realize its existence was there. Henley simply found himself relaxing into his seat, wondering what could have ever been wrong in the world. He smiled, sighing quietly as he rubbed a hoof idly across the command chair's arm, suddenly feeling as though his commander's cap weighed a little too much. He set his head back, closing his eyes, about to order a new course when-

"Song detected! Off the port bow, sixteen degrees down! They're calling to us!"

That was why Henley had asked for female sonar operators, he recalled. Mares and generally females of all species were unaffected by siren songs, meant to lure males to their deaths under the water. He shook himself, straightening up once more as he ordered "Do as the lady says! Take us out hard to starboard and submerge!"

"You heard the Commander!" shouted the dive officer, just now shaking himself out of his own stupor. "We're going under the waves, you lugs! Prepare for dive!"

Looks like they'd be taking the long route to Stalliongrad, Henley grimaced as his crew sprung once more into action, fighting the lure from the sweet voices of the monsters waiting to devour them.

Sweet Apple Acres, Ponyville, Western Equestria

Her mind chose inconvenient moments to slip back to that day. It was frustrating more than angering, but as often happened, Applejack slipped through a medley of emotions. Fury, hurt, loss and depression were the most common chain to plague her, as they had whenever her mind was idle in the months since Rainbow Dash had left. And her mind was idle quite often at this particular hour, when the sun was slipping over the autumn horizon. The golden leaves always reminded her of that day when she and Dash had participated in the running of the leaves, all to see who was the most athletic. Of course, in typical fashion, they'd both let their own pride get ahead of themselves, taking the competition to such lengths as to accuse the other of cheating.

It was only after that, however, that things began to change. She and Dash began hanging out on a regular basis, doing practically anything and everything under Celestia's sun. Applejack had even managed to convince the unmotivated weather mare to help her buck apples alongside her, Big Mac and Caramel, the hired hand. Though she griped and she moaned all day everyday about working, Applejack had to admit she was a good help to keep around, and she had done excellent work.

But it wasn't until after the Gala that it started to get a little strange. Private lunches, a quick visit to listen to a new Vinyl Scratch record on Granny Smith's phonograph. Meaningless little ventures out to who-knew-where on a dare from the other. Perhaps she was oversimplifying it, but Applejack never liked to think in complexities. They just gave her a headache, and right now her mind was already scrambled and all over the place.

Suffice it to say, finally, that she and Rainbow Dash were in love. Point blank, that was how it was. No flowery words or romanticizing it. It was

simply the easiest way to describe their relationship. Neither she nor Rainbow Dash had been very good with words, after all, and it wasn't like one was going to read a poem to the other. Especially not now. Not with her deployed on the other side of the world.

Applejack sighed, leaning forward and finally pulling out the apple pie she'd been staring at for the last ten minutes in the oven, trying to pull herself back together. This wasn't like her, getting distraught because her fillyfriend was far away. She was tough, she could handle it.

Are you saying that about her or you?

"Ah'm tired of arguin' with ma'self!" she snapped abruptly, the apple pie falling from the oven pad she'd been clenching between her teeth. Fortunately, she'd been standing next to the table at this point, and it clattered over the surface before rolling to a halt, perfectly intact and right-side up. Applejack sighed again, this time in frustration. It wasn't fair how much her friends had changed! Rainbow Dash was deployed to Prance (leaving them all here in the process), Big Mac was still at Army Reserve training (knowing he would have to stay and work the land) and Twilight was so distant it almost hurt to watch her on the few occasions she actually came out of the library. Pinkie Pie was...Pinkie Pie was alright. Regardless of what most thought, she at least knew when to simmer down and be serious. You just had to catch her at the right time, mostly when there wasn't actually a reason to party...which was very difficult to convince the pink earth pony of.

Fluttershy was, unexpectedly, the worst choice to talk to about her problems. Not because of any personality issues she had, no. It was the mood swings that made her flip out. Being three months in was already causing the normally gentle Pegasus to become a snarling, rapid monster one moment, a sobbing, quivering lump the next. Expecting a foal was excruciating just to watch and Applejack would personally never experience that sort of mess if she could avoid it. Which she would. Like the plague.

So that just left...Rarity? Could she actually do it? The fashionista definitely had quite a few experiences hidden away under that shiny mane of hers...

Abruptly, the door flew open, and in stampeded the infamous trio known as the 'Cutie Mark Crusaders.' Applebloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo. All of them were yammering to each other, tossing something back and forth

and exclaiming loudly, apparently trying to get Applejack's attention, if she heard them right. Honestly, they didn't know when to be quiet and say one thing sometimes.

"Sis, sis, sis! You gotta hear this!"

"Omigosh, it's the best Applejack!"

"We totally rocked!"

"Applejack, c'mon, listen to it!"

"It's really good!"

"The most AWESOMIST song you ever heard!"

"Applejack-"

"ONE AT A TIME!" the farmer mare suddenly cried out, which fortunately quieted the three fillies down.

For a few seconds.

Applebloom tugged at her older sister's mane, looking up with pleading eyes. "We jus' want you to listen to our song!"

Applejack perked a straw-colored eyebrow, blinking down at her sister before glancing at the record currently on Sweetie Belle's horn. It was a nondescript thing, a piece of black vinyl meant to be played on a phonograph.

Phonograph...

She shook herself, slightly trying to get the music out of her head. "Song? You three made a song?"

"And we made fifty records and gave them to a whole –lotta- ponies! Sent about half of them to Vinyl Scratch!" Scootaloo crowed, making Applejack's jaw drop at the proclamation.

"-FIFTY- records? Where on Faunterra did you get the bits fer that? We coulda –bought- these stinkin' pies instead a' me makin' 'em!"

Sweetie Belle grinned. "I learned a new spell! We bought one from the recording booth at the music store, and I doubled them!"

Oh, sweet Celestia...

"Sweetie Belle, who taught you that spell?"

The young filly blinked in confusion for a second before she beamed and replied "I read about it in the library!"

A blond eyebrow perked up over a green eye. "And Twilight was fine with you learning obscure, -forbidden- magic?"

"Uh..." Sweetie Belle suddenly didn't seem so sure of herself, glancing left and right shiftily, as if looking for an escape. "Yes?"

The blond eyebrow went down, joining the other in a flat frown. "An' what did you blow up while learnin' it?"

"Uh...nothingimportant, justafewappletreesoutside!"

As Applejack hung her head, wondering what she was going to do with these three, her problems with Rainbow Dash seemed as far away as Prance itself, as the real issue came to her; by the time she was done cleaning up the CMC's latest mess, she wouldn't be able to get to the welcoming ceremony at all.

Why was it that when the manure hit the fan nobody was there to help you scoop it off?

105th Equestrian Royal Army Regiment

4th Company, Victor Squad

Near Ponyville

Current Assignment: Relocation

Private Tenpin Strike hated the Army.

He'd joined after hearing the tales of glory and the heroic story of how the 71st had held back an enemy that outnumbered them ten to one, carried modern equipment and even had the backing of a foreign power. But, of course, nopony ever mentioned in those grand tales that the battalion was almost wiped out to its last, save for a single company that equaled one tenth of its original number. For some reason, that little detail was always kept as far away from the current conversation as possible, especially when it was being told by a recruiter. Army, Navy, Marines, Magic Corps, Air Force. The grand battles of the 71st were always regaled by everypony who wore a uniform. But when it came time to recall the soldiers lost, there was an immediate change in subject.

It wasn't like Tenpin didn't want to serve in the face of the current crisis, he did. Hay, he'd almost signed up for the Royal Navy Marines because one of his friends was doing it. But he'd chosen the Army simply because there was the chance of staying home that much longer. Already, the Navy, Marines and Air Force were being deployed to foreign theatres such as Prance and Zebrabwe, securing friendly territory and assisting in local matters. Well, they were in Zebrabwe, anyway. The zebras and ponies had formed an accord decades ago, a pact to allow Equestria to come to their smaller sibling's assistance with supplies and other goods. However, that had only recently turned into troop deployments to root out the diamond dogs, jackals and hyenas trying to disrupt zebra supply lines in the far west, on the other side of Hippogryph.

From what he could hear, the Royal Marines were getting stuck in, hard. Fighting was harsh across the savannas and deserts and through the jungles villages of Zebrabwe, where the fighting had been already going for two months now. From all accounts, the marines sure seemed to be kicking flank. And, of course, dying at the paws, claws and fangs of the vicious carnivore insurgents.

Tenpin shook his head, grunting as his hoof hit a stone. His legs were still sore from the stallionhandling he'd received to have his new, Army issue shoes nailed in (honestly, did that dragon –have- to clamp his leg down and bucking –slam- the nails in with that hammer?). Then again, there were other reasons his legs were sore. He kicked at the stone, snorting as it flew away and smacked into another trooper's helmet nearby. The other pony only reacted lethargically, glancing around before reaffixing his gaze straight forward.

The green Canterlot colt stared back over his shoulder at the massive column stretching out behind him, the main cause for his sense of antagonism. Don't get him wrong, he loved the occasional prank (even on himself) but when he got irritated, such as now, he tended to get hostile. The problem was, of course, he'd been walking for full on almost ten hours now, changed shoes once and eaten out the back of a bucking steamwagon! That sort of thing would be bound to get anypony frustrated, and exhaustion, sore limbs and the entire day walking in the hot sun were digging into his patience, rendering him in an extremely foul mood.

The reason why most of the regiment was forced to hoof it to their new garrison detail was simply a matter of machinery. Steamwagons had never been in plentiful supply even before the current rise in hostilities, and now that the Kingdom was gearing up for full-scale war they were even harder to find. Currently, priority went to not only the Royal Marines deployed actively, but also the thousands of Army ponies deployed to the northern shore to enforce what some were already calling the 'Eye Line.' Marshal Eagle Eye was convinced that, when the Canid invasion came, it would be from the north once more, and had spent considerable amounts of resources to dig in almost three-quarters of the Royal Army along the coastline. Of course, that meant less equipment to go to the rearmost garrisons, which was where the 105th had been trekking for the last twelve hours.

Twelve.

Hours.

With a single hour for lunch break. And about two hours total from four half-hour rest stops.

Total travel time; fifteen hours from stop to finish, from early morning to now. Of course, the drill wasn't so bad. The regiment had been divided up into three shifts, and each shift would ride on the steamwagons one after the other for a third of the trip each. As Victor squad had been in the second segment, they'd gotten a little reprieve midway through.

Over the horizon, the sun was dipping out of sight, casting streaks of orange across the sky, the few clouds overhead blackened with shadow. Above, in the sky, Tenpin could already see the moon, its glow just barely visible as the two celestial bodies competed in the sky. But that didn't make

sense, he thought. The sun should have dropped about two hours ago, and night should have rolled in already. Was Princess Celestia keeping the sun up longer to help the soldiers guide their way?

"Private Strike!"

Tenpin grimaced, glancing over his shoulder at the intimidating figure that came trotting out of the column towards him, gun-yoke bouncing as he did so. How the pony still had the energy to do so after such a long trek was beyond the green colt, but he stared at the gray sergeant approaching him with a mild sense of apprehension.

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"You're not with the rest of the squad. How come?"

Tenpin snorted, shaking his head lightly. Sergeant Stop tried far too hard to fill in the mold of every other sergeant in the Army. The typical, hard-flanked and iron-eating fear mongers who not only kept their soldiers in line, they also demanded their respect. Although, sometimes, they'd get hatred instead. Tenpin couldn't ever take Short Stop seriously, especially when the sergeant was only a few years older than the recruit. Besides, it always seemed like the gray stallion had something to prove...the squad all listened to him, however, partly because of their training and partly because of Corporal Cobalt. You don't become regimental boxing champion without cracking a few skulls.

Tenpin sighed, shaking his head as he replied "All due respect, Sarge. I'm not in a social mood."

"Good. Because I'm not asking you to join a club, Private, I'm ordering you back into formation. So do it."

Yes, thought Tenpin as he sidled back over to Victor Squad where the other worn out recruits were walking. Sergeant Stop usually tried too hard to be a sergeant. But there were times that he fit the bill perfectly.

Ponyville Public Library

Spike had done his best over the months to keep the library clean and tidy, even though the doors had remained barred and any visitors at all turned away, all on the excuse that "extensive inventory and restocking" had to be done, all to keep Twilight's privacy intact. Secretly, however, the little dragon had been making delivery runs to ponies requesting specific books, all thanks in part to Ditzzy who was the carrier. It was a way to keep suspicious eyes away from the tree, but it couldn't last forever. The few times Twilight had gone out, she'd looked a mess, and she'd brought more questioning ponies to the doorstep. Hardest of all was turning away the other Elements, especially Rarity. For the baby dragon to tell the fashion mare no to anything was heartbreaking to him, even to help Twilight.

But tonight that would change, thought Spike as he finished another inventory check, ensuring the books were all organized on their shelves as Twilight wanted. For tonight, the regiment was finally arriving, and Twilight would pick herself back up and get to business.

"Twilight!" Spike called as he clambered up the stairs towards the mage's room. "I just finished the inventory! Everything's sorted out and in its place!"

While the baby dragon usually got some sort of affirmative response from the unicorn, even when she was in the pits of depression or reading a book, tonight there was no reply, which was worrying again. He knew she hadn't gone back to sleep, she'd been getting ready all afternoon, panicking about what to do. Partially, it was about organizing the celebration and banquet to welcome the regiment to Ponyville before they moved on to their new outpost, but Spike knew that, contrary to her insinuations, she was also concerned with how Short Stop would see her.

But now, she wasn't saying anything, and the baby dragon frowned, rolling up the inventory list and tucking it under his arm as he mounted the stairs. Twilight had eaten today, he'd seen to that. He'd been buying her groceries for the last half of a year and accepting gifts from Applebloom and Pinkie Pie when they were offered, but sometimes Twilight didn't eat. For lunch, however, he'd made sure she bit down a daisy sandwich, and he'd spotted her snacking on some alfalfa earlier, so he knew that much at least.

"Twilight?" he asked, knocking on her door. Receiving no response, he cautiously pushed it open. Her room was lit by a single candle, and Spike

could at least let out a sigh of relief to find that the prodigy had cleaned up her room at last like she said she would. This move was going to be a real big thing for her, especially with Short so close by. After doing some snooping and negotiating with Mayor Mare, Spike not only knew now which of the new houses (built in and around town specifically for the military personnel) the stallion would be staying in, he'd also kept Twilight up to date on the war preparations out and about, so the two had something to talk about.

Honestly, playing matchmaker wasn't so bad, but he really felt out of his element here.

Twilight stood next to the candle, peering down at the table before her, back to the door. She didn't move as Spike stepped into the room, just continued to stare down at whatever it was on her desk. The little purple dragon groaned. And here they were making such progress! Now, however, she was suddenly off in another world once again, probably moping about something or another.

Still, somehow Spike kept his patience, pushing into the dim room and asking, calmly, "Twilight? Are you ready to go?"

The mare suddenly stiffened turning to face Spike with a confused look on her face. And what a face, Spike thought as he gawked. Twilight hadn't done anything that could be considered 'special' for tonight, but the fact that her coat was brushed, her mane groomed and entire being finally washed in general was a big turnaround, one Spike had expected but didn't know could look so good. She looked just as she had the day before the Battle of Stalliongrad, back to her old self.

Twilight smiled, replying "I'll be down in a minute Spike. Just head to the party without me for now."

As Spike nodded dumbly, Twilight turned back to Short's letters, smiling sadly down at them even through the web of apprehension she felt. Though short wasn't exactly her coltfriend (her own actions had set back their relationship a bit) she was still eager to try, and knew he at least returned some of the attraction she felt towards him. As such, she'd actually responded to his fourth letter, giving him the rundown of everything going on here in Ponyville. He hadn't sent a reply of his own, but that was understandable. He'd get here before it anyway.

She was finally ready to get her life back on track, she decided.

As she moved to put out the candle, however, her hoof brushed something on the desk, and Short's first letter was pushed aside to reveal...something odd. She frowned, leaning down and exposing the old book to the light. It was a thick, leatherbound tome, with steel bindings and even a lock set into the side to keep it shut. But it possessed no title.

Simply a pentagon of some sort on the front in silver.

"Now where did you come from?" she muttered, studying the tome.
"Owlowicious? Did you put this here?"

No reply.

Oh well, she decided, shrugging again as she set the book to one side, putting out the candle and moving to the door, ready to get herself back on track.

There was a rise near Ponyville, stretching out from the Everfree Forest to overlook the entire plain. From here, one could make out Sweet Apple Acres, the library, Sugarcube Corner, the Carousel Boutique, the Glass Fields Garrison and much more. From here, anypony could see the long column winding in from the east, across the river and into town proper. Lines of soldiers, seven thousand in all, as well as a few hundred steamwagons, their forward lights illuminating the way as they wheeled through the town.

The sun was slipping over the horizon. Good. He'd rather not risk the chance, however slight, of being caught. Instead, he watched the activity below, miles away yet still clear to him, as if he were there. Finally, Twilight was emerging once more, her emotions mostly upbeat thanks to that useless idiot Stop. Oh well. He wouldn't matter anymore soon, and then he could get down to business. But not tonight.

"Yes, Twilight Sparkle. Celebrate, while you still can. Because soon, your worst nightmares will come to light...and I will be there to guide you through them."

Chapter 2

Meet the Neighbors

South Arcana Ocean

Five-hundred miles North of Matriarchy Airborne Legion outpost "Starhawk"

9th Hegemonic AOT (Advanced Operations Taskforce)

Aboard Packmaster Class aircraft carrier CNV-1301 *Stalwart*

T-Minus Thirty for mission go: Operation Root Canal

Stealth Measures Active

The RKH-61 assault rifle was a gas operated, lightweight, modular, fully automatic and ambidextrous bullpup rifle, the carbine version of the previous generation's RKH-55 rifle (which had been retired from active use in all branches of the Hegemonic Armed Forces), and a considerable step up from the rifle used in the Second Trench War against Prance, the RKH-32. The 61 fired a lightweight, accurate, hard-hitting 6.8mm Grendel smash-head round designed to expand on impact to cause maximum internal tissue damage. It had a rate of fire of nine-hundred rounds per minute and a muzzle velocity of eight-hundred and sixty meters per second. It used a top-mounted Skorag accessory rail to attach iron sights and (more commonly) many different kinds of scopes. The foregrip could be slid off to make room for a PGL-14 single-shot, break-open, double-action grenade launcher, giving an individual soldier much more effectiveness in the field. The barrel had the fittings on its muzzle for a flash suppressor that would allow the user to stay hidden in their position without giving away their position to enemy eyes, and could be further enhanced by a long, slender sound suppressor to mask the sound of the gunshot.

This rifle was the most advanced in the world, made from carefully machine-tooled parts in a factory and combining a dozen generations of assault weapons together in one lethal package.

And it was laying in pieces before him.

Captain Ulrich Boxer sat cross-legged on the floor of his quarters, studying his weapons very carefully. To know one's weapon as if you knew yourself was to make an extension of your body into the weapon, a natural feel that would allow the handler to react as if the weapon was part of him. This technique was, ironically, first learned from the French, who brought the ancient art of sword fighting with them to the battlefield. Granted, they had held their swords quite differently, but the effect had not been lost on dogs, who immediately applied it to their new firearms after their liberation.

Before him, the RKH was disassembled, scattered over the cloth in front of him. Beside it were the pieces of his J2F magnum pistol, also disassembled. Next to that were three CM100 fragmentation grenades, still whole but ignored for now. All the equipment he would be using on this mission, the job where he redeemed himself and finally regained his honor.

Boxer took in a deep breath, closing his eyes as his ears twitched, his body straining with power restrained and reserved. And then, in a flash, his paws were flying over the rifle parts, his eyes snapping open to glare unblinkingly down at the machined components as they slid together with muted clicks, the well oiled parts making nary a scrape. In seconds, the rifle was reassembled, and he slid the grenade launcher, rifle scope and suppressor into their positions with gentle and conservative gestures, almost as if he were caressing a loved one. His paw snapped back, pulling the action twice, listening to the way the metal slid over itself, the clack of the catch coming down on an empty chamber.

As quickly as it was picked up, the rifle was set aside, and the pistol was suddenly together again as well, its mechanisms quiet in the small room.

As if that were a signal, there came a rapping at the door, and Boxer paused before he set his pistol down on the cloth, standing and stepping over to the hatch and twisting the wheel before pulling it open to reveal none other than Major Dirk Frost.

"Ice Dagger."

"Berzerker."

Frost glanced inside the small room, eyes lighting on the weapons in the center with a neutral expression. It took a lot to get a rise out of the major, the calmer of the two. They'd served on the same Black Ops team for three years, where they'd both earned the callsigns they continued to use to this day. Frost had always kept himself cool and calm, even when a mission was falling apart. Boxer, on the other hand, was the fury behind the group, taking their enemies apart one by one. He let his emotions guide him, not exactly admirable in a soldier, but his skills were so enhanced that it didn't matter.

"I see you're getting prepared."

"Yes. I was just doing a last minute check on my equipment."

Frost nodded, not taking his eyes from Boxer's. The two never trusted each other before, and they wouldn't start now either. However, whereas Frost was always watching his back to be aware of the vindictiveness of Boxer, the berserker was going to be settling back on his laurels, letting the new major's paranoia get to him. He would regain his rank once more, and Frost would be crushed.

Later, of course. The patient hunter always gets a bite to eat.

"Excellent. I'm here to remind you that we're almost ready to launch. Thirty minutes and counting."

"The wolves?"

"Already on deck, loading the gyrodynes."

"So you came to me last?"

"Best for last, Berserker. You're my second down there."

"...right," Boxer sighed, smiling coldly as he gave a quick salute. "Sir. Ponyville, here we come."

Ponyville, Town Square

Fluttershy honestly didn't know what to think of soldiers. She was, after all, extremely divided on the issue. While she abhorred violence in any way, shape or form (even just the natural predator-prey relationship of the world) she did admire these ponies for at least fighting what the world was already slating up as a hopeless battle. Being alone and oftentimes confined to her home, she'd learned how to use and tune the radio with every degree of skill a master technician would have, even learning in her spare time how the device worked and borrowing a few books from Spike to do some reading on it. This, then, was how she filled her time, listening to news reports and music and learning about electricity and radio.

And, of course, her husband was going through training right now. Big Macintosh had left two months ago, promising to return as soon as he could, and Fluttershy had kept track of the days since. Mac's letter had once stated that basic training was much shorter for Royal Army recruits than the other branches, and according to Fluttershy's calendar and Mac's estimations, he'd be back within the next two weeks.

Fluttershy herself didn't know much about the particulars of training, and her husband wasn't allowed to talk about it in his letters, but the cream-colored Pegasus knew her big red draft stallion wouldn't have changed a bit save for the extra job security he would now have. And fortunately, since Ponyville was so far to the west, there was no chance of him being called off to war either. So, aside from the two month ordeal, she had no reason to be mad...

"I'm going to kill him when he comes back," she muttered, teeth grinding as she felt her anger rise, wings rustling irately. The nerve of Big Macintosh Apple! To leave his expecting wife at home, practically alone, while he went off to learn how to become a trained killer! Who could do such a-

"You're gonna kiss who, Fluttershy? Ooh, I hope it's Big Macintosh!"

Abruptly, the Pegasus' rage died out, and she turned to see Pinkie Pie standing next to her, head tilted expectantly and a goofy smile on her face. The pink mare was playing dumb, Fluttershy knew, something to try and lift the Pegasus' spirits, to which she greatly appreciated. She knew that her behavioral patterns were making her friends a little cautious around her, but

Pinkie's unabashed and unrestrained sense of humor (good and corny) helped Fluttershy stay on the bright side.

Most of the time.

Fluttershy smiled, happy to see Pinkie once more. "Oh, hey Pinkie Pie. Just forget what I was saying. I'm afraid I had another outburst."

"Okey dokey lokey Mrs. Apple!" the party mare beamed, grinning as she bounced a little in place. Really, it seemed like there was very little that could dampen Pinkie's mood, and Fluttershy couldn't help but smile and blush a little at her new surname. Mac had told her she didn't need to adopt it if she didn't want, but she had insisted upon it, wanting to be his wife in every way, shape and form.

"So Fluttershy! How's the party going?"

Glancing between her excited friend and the 'party', Fluttershy wasn't sure at first how to answer. The welcoming ceremony had been Twilight's idea in the first place, a way to make the arriving soldiers feel welcome and ease the transition. At least, that's what Spike had said, delivering the purple unicorn's orders and plans by way of scroll through Ditzy "Derpy" Doo. There weren't supposed to be balloons or cakes here, though. At least, not from what Fluttershy understood of the plan. But Pinkie had, of course, tracked down the scent of the party straight to Mayor Mare's office and took it upon herself to... 'offer' some 'suggestions.' Now, over on the stage in the corner, the band was finishing with their warm-up, preparing to strike up a jaunty tune as soon as the soldiers were within the square. How exactly Pinkie Pie had gotten the group was a complete mystery to Fluttershy, but famous entertainers like the String sisters Octavia and Violina were present, along with Blues, the resident saxophone expert, and his cousin Noteworthy, currently finishing with a run over his drums. Lyra Heartstrings, Ponyville's own resident starving artist, was also there, albeit over on the side with her lyre. Most odd of all, Mr. Breezy was finishing with his bagpipes. Bagpipes, of all things. It had to be the strangest band Fluttershy had ever seen.

Meanwhile, the picnic tables set out for the soldiers were full to bursting with cuisine, from dinner items like piles of apples and stacks of sweetened hay to desserts like cakes and various pies, all prepared in Sugarcube Corner and generously donated by the Cakes. The square itself was full to

bursting with most of Ponyville's residents, supporters of the military and eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Army. What few ponies openly disapproved of the armed forces were, at least, not here, sequestered away in their homes. Above the entire assemblage was a collection of balloons in various colors (where did Pinkie get camouflage patterns?) as well as an enormous banner proclaiming **WELCOME TO PONYVILLE 105TH ARMY REGIMENT**. This, it seemed, was one of the few things left unmodified from Twilight's original plans.

"Pinkie," Fluttershy began, raising an eyebrow at the crowd. "It hasn't even started yet."

"And already it's AWESOME!" Pinkie crowed, leaping onto a nearby bench and dancing around. "Look at it! Everypony's having a great time, and the guests of honor haven't even shown up yet!"

While a few heads turned to stare at the ecstatic pink earth pony, everypony else simply ignored Pinkie's familiar antics. There wasn't a single one of them that hadn't seen the effects of one of the infamous parties or been hilariously pranked by her and Rainbow Dash. The dancing was simply business as usual.

Just as Fluttershy was about to comment once more, Daisy came galloping back into the square, out of breath and a plume of dust spewing up behind her. Elected as the lookout, it was her job to watch for the Royal Army column and let the town know when it was time to get ready for the greeting. While not exactly the fastest, she'd been one of the only ones to volunteer, and had been standing out watching for almost three hours now.

"THEY'RE COMING!" she yelled, racing through the square.

"Places, everypony!" Pinkie called out, but her voice was lost amid the tumult of the crowd stampeding back and forth, creating a lane towards the tables and stage, down which the soldiers could march. Mayor Mare took to the stage as the band prepared to strike up their first number. A tapping at the microphone (and a brief adjustment of the speakers by Blues after the hash of feedback) and the town's leader was ready to give her welcoming speech.

"Oh my," Fluttershy started, realizing there were several very important ponies missing. "Where's Applejack? And Rarity? And Twilight?" She

flapped her wings, hovering above the crowd for a moment as she gazed upon the rush of colors and forms, looking for her three friends. The party couldn't start without them, right? Especially since Twilight had designed it, Applejack had cooked for it, and Rarity had helped decorate it.

So where were they?

The soldiers spotted the lights of the party from miles away, and suddenly found the energy to rush towards it like a pony who had been hitting the salt hard spotting a glass of water. Those on hoof quickly latched themselves onto the sides of nearby steamwagons (completely against regulations, but they were too excited to care at this point), hanging off the rails and racks like the equipment stuffed onto the vehicles. Those left were still forced to walk, but did so at a faster pace and with hope for a feast and relaxation finally in sight. Even Colonel Di'ac, rising up front in her command vehicle, smiled at the prospect of celebration, something so desperately needed in these grim times, peering back to watch the troopers proceed to cover the distance in record time, even after the weariness of so much marching.

The second the first group of soldiers and Colonel Di'ac's steamwagon crossed into the square, thunderous applause rang out as the residents of Ponyville cheered, those closest reaching out and shaking hooves or bro-hoofing those troopers within reach, and the weary Army soldiers gladly returned the gestures. The column continued to roll through, steamwagons parking on the unoccupied sides of the square and disgorging their passengers to stream out and join the swelling crowd of green-camouflaged fatigues and armor. For a few minutes, worry crossed several brows, for the 105th not only outnumbered the Ponyville residents, the town only having a population of roughly around the same number (no official count had ever been taken in years, and the weather team continued to come and go...or would have, if almost half of them hadn't enlisted with Rainbow Dash) but the square was too small to hold the flood of soldiers, and the streets of the town were packed with bodies, the unwashed stench of thousands of sweaty, smelly soldiers filing in and a few hundred steam-powered wagons parking wherever there was space. The scent was manageable, at least, as it was fighting with the smells of fresh food and

steam engine exhaust, as well as the multitudes of flowers placed around the square.

Finally, just when it seemed like the town itself would burst, the last few soldiers staggered in, and the racket rose to an unfathomable din as soldiers and civilians mingled, exchanging jokes and conversation (or trying to, for it was almost impossible to hear over the wave of noise). Most troopers by this point had shed their helmets, weapons and vest webbings, dropping everything by the steamwagons or in random piles scattered through town.

Though the ones in the streets couldn't see the square, they were at least within hearing distance when the mayor tapped the microphone and called out "Fillies and gentlecolts! Soldiers of the 105th Royal Army Regiment! I am Mayor Mare, and I heartily wish to extend our town's warmest greetings to you as the first military unit to set hoof in Ponyville!" A round of cheering rang through the massive crowd (which on second glance only occupied half of the town), mostly from the soldiers but also from the residents. The mayor continued "We give you a feast to fill your empty bellies and beds to house your weary bodies before you go on to the outpost, and hope that this will signify many happy times and much cooperation in the future! So, without further ado, let the party begin!"

The band behind her struck up a fast tune, all kinds of sounds meshing together in a surprisingly welcome chorus, rolling out over the darkened town and kicking off what was, quite possibly, the largest party Pinkie Pie had ever put together. And, unsurprisingly, the pinky pony was at the very center of it all, living up the cheer and fun she'd orchestrated.

The celebration was in full swing by the time Twilight and Spike emerged from the library, the unicorn wanting to finish up a few last preparations (which were a bit useless, Spike had pointed out, for Short wasn't even coming over) before she was finally ready. Surprisingly, Rarity was waiting for them right outside, dressed in a tasteful but stylish black (camouflage? Really?) dress with a modest amount of makeup on her face. Compared to her, Twilight seemed especially bare, but the fashionista mare still squealed with glee as the mage stepped outside.

"Oh, look at you, Twilight! I had almost forgotten what you looked like, and now you're all freshened up!"

"Thanks, Rarity," Twilight replied flatly, not sure if that was a compliment or an insinuation.

"Oh, my dear! You must pardon my excitement, I meant that with only the best intentions. I'd gotten so worried about you that I was ready to burst in myself and save you! But I'm quite pleased to see you out and back to your old self again!"

"Thanks, Rare. You're not looking so bad yourself."

"I should think not!" the white mare huffed, pulling her nose into the air.

"This is a Rarity original, made specifically for this event! I did an - *enormous*- amount of research into military patterns with my contract, and I can honestly say that the pattern was simplicity itself!"

Rarity had, in conjunction with her reputation for style and speed, been commissioned a month ago by Armed Forces High Command to make uniforms, both field and dress, and thanks to her skill in stitching she'd burned through every weekly order. So far, she'd mostly pumped out fatigues for the Royal Marines, but she'd just gotten her newest order to begin on Army uniforms this week.

"Well, you've got my vote for dress of the year!" Spike remarked, making a thumbs up at his crush, a stupid grin on his face. Twilight rolled her eyes at her assistant's barely disguised flattery. He'd compliment Rarity's work even if she'd tossed it in the trash.

"Dress of the year? Oh, Spike, I'm afraid this wouldn't even come close. Even with the rise in military popularity, a lot of those judges are still completely anal about patterns. I appreciate the compliment, though."

"Have you seen the others?"

"I saw Fluttershy heading towards the town square a few hours ago. Poor dear really shouldn't be straining herself like that in her condition..." Rarity paused for a moment, frowning before she smiled again. "I know Pinkie will be right in the thick of it, as always. But I haven't seen Applejack yet. Caramel came in pulling her cart, so maybe she's just running late."

Twilight shrugged, relief coursing through her that she could see almost all of her friends again (and that they'd mostly shown up, of course). "Well, you know Applejack. She'd probably just busy. Least she got the food here. She'll show if she'd got the time."

The three began to make their way towards the crowd, Spike and Rarity chattering aimlessly about dresses and competitions and how Carousel Boutique's dresses were sure to win every time (well, Spike was the one saying that, at least). Twilight had long ago detached herself from the conversation, her mind and eyes straying to the tumult before them, swallowing in anticipation. She knew the numbers, sure, but she hadn't realized that the crowd would still be -this- big. A veritable sea of green vests and fatigues was spread out before her, occupying more than half of Ponyville and obscuring the inner group from sight. The rumble of good partying and thousands of conversations spilled back over her, competing with the music over the speakers as to which was the louder.

"Where are you, Short?" she muttered, realizing that, with all these soldiers here, she might not find him in the mass. What would he think then, that she was too cowardly to show up and face him again?

"Relax, Twilight. It's a big crowd, but you'll find him."

Blinking, the student glanced at Rarity, who wore a knowing smile on her colored lips. The white mare nodded, gesturing to the crowd and saying "Go find your soldier, darling."

The task was far more daunting than even her wildest imagination could have portrayed. It didn't help that the crowd was pressed together as much as possible, and the entire mass was one enormous entity of swaying bodies dancing to the beat. Even keeping herself coordinated by the groups of soldiers centered around piles of helmets and rifles didn't assist her much, for the troopers were holding their own small groups of parties in amongst themselves. Several had fished out salt licks, and these were being passed around by the dozen to the group, obviously contraband but not confiscated by any of the officers Twilight spotted.

After an hour of pushing (and watching Pinkie ride past on the backs and hooves of the crowd at least six times) Twilight was completely lost and

about ready to give up and find her way back out. She'd see Short tomorrow, hopefully, and she could try to explain what had happened. Abruptly, however, she found her forward movement arrested by the front of another pony, and she fell to the ground, dazed and trying to discern what happened.

"My. I'm sorry, I appear to have bumped into you."

Impossibly, she could hear his voice above the crowd, as clearly as if there was nopony else around, and his tone was that of one speaking levelly, not shouting to be heard. Twilight glanced up, curious now. Above her, a grey unicorn loomed, his mane a beautiful shade of silver, sparkling in the multitude of lights. He wore a small smile on his face as he gazed down at her, extending a hoof to assist her.

"Uh...thanks," she replied, accepting the help and brushing herself off. "Sorry. I'm usually more alert."

"Oh, it's no trouble. I'm just fine." The unicorn turned, beginning to walk off before stopping and saying "Oh, and you might want to check near the fountain to find Sergeant Stop. He's currently relaxing with his squad."

"Thanks," Twilight replied, about to move off into the crowd when she suddenly realized two things; one, she was speaking normally as well, having a regular conversation. The noise seemed to be outside of a bubble almost, muffled and shut out to block out almost all noise (a spell of his?). And two, he'd told her where to find Short. Without even being aware of who she was looking for.

Twilight snapped back around, intending to confront him, but the unicorn was gone, vanished into thin air. Or the crowd, she winced as the noise came slamming back down on her, causing the mage to lose her sense of balance and direction for a second. When she finally regained her senses, she gazed again at the spot the silver-maned unicorn had been. Today was just getting strange.

Sure enough, Short was right where the unicorn had stated. Twilight spotted him through the crowd as she pushed closer, batting away a string of blue and pink camouflaged balloons before she finally broke out and into

the little clearing created by yet another pile of equipment, rifle yokes stacked up carefully in the center and helmets arranged in a ring around them. Short was discernible enough, still recognizable with his grey coat and crew-cut black mane (short than what she remembered. Must have gotten it cut recently). But the real tipper was the large blue mare next to him, her white mane equally short. Azure Cobalt, the only other survivor of Victor Squad.

Twilight took a second to watch the two carefully, a streak of paranoia flashing up in her as the two talked, indiscernible in the noise. Finally, however, Short raised his head and, upon noticing Twilight, ceased his end of the talk, even in the middle of a sentence. Flashing a short grin at the purple mage, he said one last thing to Azure before he crossed quickly over to a now beaming Twilight, catching her with his forelegs in a tight hug, one she gladly returned.

Upon breaking the embrace, he leaned in, yelling "Come on! Let's find somewhere we can actually talk!"

Fortunately, Twilight knew just the place.

Espionage Mission; Ponyville

Codename: Muttahari

Assignment: Recon 'Elements of Harmony' and Ascertain Threat Level

Report begins.

During my time in Ponyville, I have kept track of several aspects of the town, including its proximity to the Matriarchy. But I can honestly say that these 'Elements of Harmony' may represent the greatest threat to the operation aside from the Princesses. United together, the Six are quite a powerful magical force.

We must strike soon. One of the Elements is not present (Element of Loyalty, please see attached dossier) and the others are divided, unsure of each other. So long as this continues, their power is non-existent, and the

various jewelry hereby codenamed as 'Talismans' (see attached dossier) are of no use.

There is the possibility of using these Elements to our advantage. Must gather more information, but I'm currently being stonewalled by the large level of activity in town. With the Army garrison here, I will need more support.

Report ends.

Chapter 3

The Fateful Reunion

Kodiak Protectorate

Matriarchy Controlled Territory

Disputed by the Geisterbjorn Rebel Movement

The guns arrayed before her were a curious mismatch of rifles, handguns, shotguns, various automatic weapons and even a large grenade launcher. Of course, they were all made to be gripped by bears, and as such they were far too large for a simply griffon like herself to pick up, let alone fire. One could try, of course, but the recoil almost always sent you spinning thanks in part to the unbalanced nature of the gun when held as only a griffon could. Heavy caliber rounds would be hammered out to cause devastating and horrendous damage on whatever sat in front of it.

Still, it was the weapons –not- designed for bears that drew Warden Tempestia Bravencrest's attention. She glanced up, over at the rebel steam truck, mounted with two of the infamous Gun Frames. Behind that was the even more sophisticated P-21 anti-flier gun, a self-propelled weapon on treads, designed to spray the air with its 50mm autocannons. The front part of the cab had been removed to make room for the bear crew, and even now she could see several other crude improvements that had been made.

The griffon glanced down at the large pile of dead bears before her, a dozen or more taken from this one raid alone. All of them determined, all of them heavily armed.

The Matriarchy had long thought Kodiak to be on the verge of being pacified. With the Geisterbjorn cells squabbling amongst each other and using outdated equipment and tactics, it was almost too easy for the Legion to roll over them. Now, however, the table was turning as the rebel front reacted with more coordination, fielding better equipment and using tactics comparable to any high-level military in the world.

Something had changed, and the Legion wasn't prepared for that. Even now, only after a few days, they were already staggering under the loss of four cities to the rebel movement, and unrest was growing everywhere else.

"Report," she called out, and her squad instantly perked up, scattered about as they were inspecting the site of the battle. While they hadn't been the ones to attack the bears, those who had weren't around to speak of what had happened. Twenty or thirty griffon corpses were scattered around nearby, in various stages of slaughter. What had happened wasn't clear, but Bravencrest wanted as clear a picture as possible of the events that transpired here. As such, she'd ordered all weapons and material nearby to be collected and assembled.

It wasn't much. What firearms were left behind simply seemed to have been missed, and all ammunition had been stripped from every single body in a hurry. The bears had been piled up when they'd arrived, and the vehicles emptied of fuel, both smokeless coal and kerosene.

One of her recruits flapped over, landing before the Warden and saying "Looks like an ambush, Ward. One gone badly for us, it seems."

"Got that much. What do you have on these weapons?"

"They're still bearing the seals of the Equestrian Royal Army and Canid Hegemonic Armed Forces. Shell casings match their manufacturing profiles."

Tempestia cursed under her breath, rearing up onto two legs, removing her helmet as she trudged through the mud.

"Dammit. This doesn't look good. Where the hell are they getting these weapons? What's got them so riled up and fighting like an actual army?"

And, the most important question of all, could the neglected forces in Kodiak actually stop the newly motivated (and equipped) Geisterbjorn?

Ponyville Public Library

As the door shut behind him, Short at first thought the library was dark. But no, compared to the bright lights outside from the celebrations, the place was only dim, candles alight in the gloom, and it took his eyes several seconds to recover from the contrast. By comparison, the tree was silent as the grave as well, and he could still hear the roar of the crowd, the buzz of music and the rumble of steam engines coming from outside.

But, personally, he'd much rather be here.

"I'll be right back," Twilight said hurriedly as she trotted past, heading up the stairs to the upper floor, pausing long enough to say "There's food and drink in the fridge if you want any. I'll only need a few minutes." With that, she disappeared in a purple flash through the darkened doorway to what Short assumed was her room.

He reached up, pulling his helmet off and depositing it on a nearby chair, careful not to let any dirt get on the hundreds of books around him. It was a very impressive collection, no doubt, and even though he couldn't discern the titles on their spines, he knew they had to contain dozens of subjects within. Slowly, careful not to slam into anything in the gloom with his still adjusting eyes, he navigated his way into what he assumed was the kitchen, lit slightly brighter thanks to the candelabra on the table, holding a brace of five wax candles. Shrugging his rifle yoke off once more, he set it down with the barrel facing up, following firearm safety procedure out of habit more than any real concern. The ammunition chain was disconnected from the yoke, and all the rounds were still in the weapon's magazine, rattling lightly as the rifle's barrel came to rest against the edge of the table.

Cracking open the simple refrigerator, Short noted that it was mostly bare. Various apple products and several baked goods dominated most of the small space, interrupted by the occasional cluster of flowers, hay or bread. He inspected these foods closely, wondering if this could mean a predetermination of diet. Still, the fact that there was little food meant she was still eating, and judging from what he'd seen and heard of her, she seemed to be keeping herself in good health and manner. Perhaps his fears were no longer valid, and she'd finally gotten over her stress...or maybe she was just good at hiding it.

He shrugged, pulling out the materials needed to make a hay and daisy sandwich...as well as six apples, a slice of carrot cake and a pint of orange juice. An odd meal, to be sure, but one he made in minutes and ate in minutes, practically gulping it down. He'd burned a lot walking all that way, and he was tired, sore and hungry. Fortunately, with one of those conditions solved, he could take care of the other two before tomorrow, when the regiment would continue on to the garrison proper, out in Glass Grass Fields. The walk was only about ten miles or so, easy pickings with a steamwagon, but a full two-hour trip on hoof.

Rubbing his sated belly, Short hopped out of the chair and deposited his dishes in the sink, deciding to explore a little while he waited for Twilight. It had been almost a half-hour since they arrived, and she had still not reappeared. Normally, he would be worried, but this was her home, and he knew she could take care of herself. Instead, he began browsing the shelves, squinting in the dim light to make out their titles. And the titles were amazing! History, geology, folk tales and ever more topics, they seemed to go on forever! On a whim, he decided to pull out one or two tomes on Equestrian sports, and suddenly found himself at a table, studying one with four others stacked up nearby. It was remarkable how much he knew about baseball, and yet these books were making him learn as if he had never even heard of the sport before.

Finally, however, he checked the clock again, realizing that an entire hour had passed since his arrival. Frowning, he closed The Classic Age of Ponies in Baseball and turned, frowning as he glanced up the stairs. He found himself hesitating to try and approach the doors, as if some invisible force held him by the ankles. After all, this was Twilight's room, a place he shouldn't be going into until...she invited him. Right? Still, was it intrusive if he was going up to check on her, make sure she was alright? Come on Short, he thought to himself, you've faced down a dragon before and thousands of dogs! You can go into one filly's bedroom!

Slowly, hesitantly, he mounted the steps, pausing occasionally to make sure the violet mare wouldn't emerge to find him on the stairs just below him. What an embarrassment that would be. Probably get thrown out on his flank...no, Twilight was better than that. She would understand, he was just concerned and curious...a bit more curious now he thought about it.

He pushed the door open, peeking in slowly. Like the rest of the library, the room was rather dark, boasting more books along shelves that seemed to be part of Twilight's private collection. Up a ladder, a bed sat below a wide window, with a grand vista panoramic of the night sky, the moon prevalent in it. For a few seconds, Short stood in awe of such a beautiful sight, smiling at the span of stars stretching out before him. Some creatures in the world didn't believe in spirituality and gods or goddesses, but when faced with such evidence as this, Short was constantly reminded on their presence. Maybe he'd start going to temple after all...

A bit of movement caught his eye, and he turned, eyebrow raised to find Twilight standing at a desk, a quill scribbling furiously at the scroll before her and at least a dozen books floating around her, each flipping their pages back and forth. The prodigy continually looked down at her notes, then back up at the tomes, memorizing what she needed in a flash and jotting down some comment about it before moving on to another page or even another book, and all throughout the quill only stopped to dip back in the inkwell for more.

He watched her for a moment, impressed and just plain dumbfounded by her level of skill and coordination. He'd never seen her use such extensive magic or manipulate so many objects at the same time, not even in Stalliongrad (though the memories of the spell she'd cast in the sub still haunted him sometimes). But finally, he snapped out of his admiration and asked "Twilight? Everything okay?"

Abruptly, her concentration broke, and she spun around, the books around her all freezing in midair, a look of panic and guilt on the mage's face.

"Oh...manure!" she cursed, squeezing her eyes shut as all the books suddenly snapped shut, settling down on the desk in two stacks quickly (coincidentally obscuring his view of her notes at the same time). "Short, I'm so sorry. I just got so caught up with this thing, and I had to look it up and-"

"Hey," he interrupted her, moving close and touching a forehoof to her shoulder. "Easy now. It's okay. You got a bit sidetracked, that's alright."

She smiled at him in relief, and he smiled back, at least relieved she was ignoring the fact that he was in her room. He patted her on the shoulder, about to turn and leave to go wait for her to clean up and join him back

downstairs, when she suddenly leaned forward, and he found his lips captured by hers, held there by some invisible force. Though surprised (and pleased) his eyes closed automatically, and he pressed into it a little more. Though he had no means to measure how long it lasted, the kiss seemed far too short, and Twilight pulled away, a light blush to her cheeks but still looking directly at him with a small measure of shyness. No awkwardness or embarrassment, at least.

"I owed you one," she said, chuckling at Short's stupid grin, before she nudged him in the side. "Now c'mon, back downstairs so I can properly show you around."

Canterlot Palace

Princess Celestia's Chambers

The room was ashambles. The walls themselves were perfectly fine, built to withstand the high intensity heat of the sun when Celestia had her little "flare-ups" as Luna called them. They were made of reinforced steel, put in place over the years as technology and the secrets of metallurgy advanced. The wallpaper, however, and the paintings hanging from the walls as well as the curtains and windows and doors...they were all burned to some degree.

The bed had been the first to go. Late night musings and frustrations had resulted in several flare-ups, tearing away the sheets and four-poster bed in firestorms of anger, causing the castle staff to panic endlessly and stock sheets continually. They could only replace the sheets and rebuild the bed during the day, however, for it was unsafe to enter when Princess Celestia was having an "episode." But though the beds were restored and the sheets replaced (even wards placed to try and protect the poor furniture) they were continually reduced to ash to be cleaned out in the mornings.

Finally, after a month of this, Celestia requested that no more beds be brought in. She would sleep on a thick steel plate. Though the castle staff protested, they understood.

The wallpapers and paintings were next as the global situation got worse, scorching away the trappings and the rest of the furniture in the large room

until all that was left was steel and stone, their surfaces black and scorched and the wooden attachments piles of charcoal. Fortunately, all the really important items had already been relocated to Luna's chambers, where they would be kept safe.

Now, standing in what had once been a large and glamorous room draped in glittering shawls and bedecked by various shades of pink and white, Luna would have at first said it would be a dungeon, albeit one with an extravagant view out the grand vista (also burned). She shook her head, watching the stars beyond and the moon she had raised scant hours ago.

"Luna...Sister, you do not have to guard over me every night. I'll be fine."

With a quick jerk of her head, the doors on the other side of the room slid shut with no protest, their inside surfaces as scorched as the rest of the room. The cleaning staff hadn't visited for weeks either, for their work was burned away every night, and the Princess of the Sun finally told them to stop as well. The Princess of the Night looked down at the steel plate that was Princess Celestia's bed, frowning in concern. The once bright and exuberant alicorn was disheveled, her mane drooping as if weighed down by several gallons of water, her hooves dirty with soot and her coat sticking up in patches. Celestia was still agitated over the disaster in Prench negotiations today, where Councilor Affero was forced to leave the room by Prench military commanders saying that the Kingdom wasn't worth saving...in not quite so few words. Luna anticipated many flare-ups tonight, and was preparing to leave after checking on Celestia.

In response, Luna drew herself up straight, her face first hardening into iron before softening as she looked down on the Sun princess. "Sister...Tia. I do this because I must. I worry for you, and I just want to make sure you stay safe."

Celestia smiled tiredly, her head settling back down on the steel block.

"Luna...I appreciate the gesture, but I am strong. I've grown soft over the last millenia, I see that now. Time was once where I wouldn't flinch at the thought of war and punish insolent diplomats. Now...I'm falling apart." She closed her eyes, pushing a forelock out of her eyes once more. "You're got to stay strong, Sister...for both...of us..."

"Goodnite Tia" Luna whispered, backing away silently, knowing her sister would sleep for at least a few more hours before something else burned.

She closed the door, not bothering to lock it. Those who worked in the castle knew not to enter, and the Royal Guards outside the door were still as statues, ready to defend Celestia with their dying breaths. She really had nothing to worry about.

But she did. As Luna turned and began down the hallway once more, a pair of RAIC troopers detached themselves from the shadows, moving noiselessly to her flanks to take up position, their Type 15 medium machineguns scanning the hallways on their support yokes, two barrels each ready to spray the hallways if an assailant should show themselves. Another pair appeared ahead, completing the square around her in silence, despite their heavy ballistic armor, specially made for RAIC troopers and based on Air Force flying armor.

Luna sighed, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. With Tia in her distraught and worried state, Luna was the emotional crutch needed to keep the Sun Princess going, and her military reforms were finally starting to pay off...now, anyway. But with that, her reputation had...taken an infamous turn.

The door to her chambers opened, and the RAIC troopers took their posts outside, two on each side, ready to blast apart anypony who dared trifle with their Princess.

And yet...

The military spread rumors of her "brutality" and unwavering harshness. Even her Marshals were intimidated by her more than they respected her. It was all because of what happened with the Wonderbolts, she knew. She shouldn't have so badly disgraced such celebrities, but she had been forced to take -some- action. Still it wasn't doing her many favors, especially with Nightmare Night approaching...

She frowned, glancing over at her calendar, next to her smiling bat plushie. Nightmare Night was only a week away, everypony's house decorated and costumes being finished for candy-plundering. An event that remembered how she had terrified Equestria and Faunterra and reinforced her new negative image, even among civilians who had no idea what was happening in the upper echelons of the military.

Luna smiled slowly, an idea coming to her mind. One that could, possibly, help reverse the downhill slope her public image was taking. She just needed to give her RAIC troopers a little bit of a makeover with a few transmorphing spells.

And she'd carry out her plan exactly where she'd started...

Ponyville would have a Nightmare Night like no other.

Chapter 4

The World Turns Round

Encrypted Message from Canterlot High Command sent via Radio

Received and Decrypted by Royal Cargo Ship *Endeavor*

Intercepted by Hegemonic Military Intelligence Directorate (MID). Failed to Decrypt Message

Message begins:

Immediate withdrawal of all assets based off of Endeavor to begin post-haste. Will be replaced by HMS Hippocrene and the 1st Support Flotilla to maintain operations in and around Prance. No Royal Army presence to be sent to region.

10th Armored Battalion to be redirected to Stalliongrad. 115th Royal Army Regiment to report to Canterlot for rearmament and further assignment. Endeavor to be disarmed at Seaddle. 15th Royal Marine Brigade to be reassigned there.

16th Fighter Wing to report to Cloudsdale to rejoin 4th Air Division. As entire division is exchanging roles with the 7th, the 16th Fighter Wing will report to Fort Coltson outside of Ponyville to defend western border.

Message ends.

Next Day

105th Royal Army Regiment, Fort Coltson, Glass Grass Fields

Ten Miles Northeast of Ponyville

Fort Coltson wasn't very large or glamorous. With just enough room to hold half of the regiment at any one time (while its motor pool was just big enough for all the steamwagons) the wooden walls seemed cramped constantly, the barracks full to overcrowding. Fortunately, the palisade-esque keep would not be playing host to the entire regiment, thanks to the residential houses built in Ponyville. At any one time, half of the regiment was at the base and the other half in the village itself, but neither half was truly relieved of work. The fort received little attention from its occupants as it was only six months old, leaving it near perfect at this stage and with very little to fix, save for what Colonel Di'ac called 'real defenses.' Trenchworks were dug around the fort on all sides, log bunkers erected and heavy weapons installed in both of these, further adding to the fort's ring of defenses until it was bristling with strongpoints by the end of the day.

In the morning, however, Colonel Zo Di'ac looked over her new stronghold from the ramparts, not completely impressed with what she saw but not entirely disappointed either. While it most definitely would not hold up to a concentrated assault from armor or aircraft, the wooden walls conveyed a sense of rustic ease to them, and carefully concealed the concrete fortifications and steel beams keeping the fort held together. While it may have –looked- like a structure made of wood ready to fall over at any moment, the thick wood and concealed metal were both more than enough to absorb an immense amount of damage.

"Colonel!" came a yell, and the zebra turned to spy Sergeant Olive Drab coming down the walkway towards her, headset firmly clasped over his ears. Having no radio pack to operate, Drab had instead found himself shifted to more mundane tasks, such as maintaining the communications set in Di'ac's command wagon and taking charge of all long-range radio transmissions in the regiment. Even as her adjutant, the wire-stallion still founds ways to make himself useful outside of his set task.

"Sergeant Drab, I did not call for you yet. Is something coming through on the radio set?"

The newly promoted NCO nodded, reaching back and extracting a slip of paper, presenting it to Di'ac by laying it on the flat wall next to them and pinning it down. "This just came in for you, ma'am. One way transmission, so I wrote it down. We're getting a few reinforcements, and not all of them are ground pounders."

Di'ac frowned, acknowledging the transfer orders personally. The 34th Armored Battalion was expected to report to Fort Coltson within the week, bringing much needed armored support in the form of numerous battlegroups and several heavy artillery guns. Coltson, already stocked to capacity, would need serious renovations done to accommodate the armored wagons and big guns. However, it was the next piece of information that really made the zebra raise her eyebrows.

"An Air Force Wing? Surely they cannot do this thing!"

Drab shook his head slowly, a grimace on his features as he did so. "Sorry, ma'am. These orders came straight from Canterlot High Command. 4th Air Division is being tasked with garrisoning the entire border, and we fall into their line of defense."

"But we have no landing pads, no airfield! And where will we store their munitions yield?" The black-and-white colonel gnashed her teeth angrily, not expecting an answer (and not getting one either) as she snorted, letting the notice fall to the floor as she looked away, gazing off into the distance. Glass Grass Fields, she'd learned had been named as such because (so the story went) the long-stemmed grass, when bent in the wind, shone in the sunlight as if a sheet of glass had been laid down and shattered, the surface it was on shifting and flowing to reflect the light as the glass might. But her troopers were in for a long haul of work to expand the motor pool and build new accommodations for the Pegasi coming in, rendering quite a bit of that grass into flat dirt and structures. With no presence from the Magic Corps in the region, it was down to good old fashioned blood, sweat and tears. Just how she liked it.

"Sergeant, round up the troops. I have some new construction ideas to send round the loop..."

"Uh...yes, ma'am."

Ponyville

Short had left in the night, taking his pack, rifle and helmet with him as he had departed. Twilight had been sad to say goodnight to him, but knew it was getting late, and he needed to go to his sleeping quarters. The entire regiment had been forced to cram into the houses, taking up the small abodes in threes and fours where one or two were supposed to live, but it had fortunately only been for the night.

Now, however, she helped clean up the aftermath from last night's party, passing a very much unconscious Pinkie Pie, asleep on the stage with her mouth stained by chocolate and a Royal Army helmet perched on her head. The mage chuckled, shaking her head as she gathered up several deflated balloons, depositing them with her aura into a plastic bag to be disposed of later. The pink earth pony wasn't the only one to have passed out from too much partying. Scattered around the town square, dozens of soldiers and civilians alike were just awakening to the morning, parched from salt dehydration or worn from too much dancing. Some had headaches from the loud music but the number one ailment that plagued those awakening was disappointment at a good time brought to an end and the prospect of the day's work. Soldier and civilian.

Already, Twilight spotted several Army soldiers, already up and in uniform, assembling outside of the new Mess Hall over at what some ponies were already calling "Ponyville HQ." The new houses had all been built on the western edge, where a large and unused field had previously been, clustered around each other in small clumps with expanding layers in curves reaching out until many hundreds of homes sat there. In the middle of them all were several buildings of great importance to the soldiers staying in town. Six Mess Halls stretched along the rows, easily accessible from all sides and impossible to miss from here, each one with varying crowds filtering through their entrances to get their morning rations. Another large structure was an armory, constructed by Magic Corps unicorn engineers several weeks ago out of concrete and steel, a block of ugly architecture that stood out against the rest of the Ponyville inspired buildings, almost an eyesore, really.

Ponyville's first police department also rose up from among the cluster of buildings. Two stories tall, with a bell steeple and two pointed watch towers, the dark blue building was emblazoned with a brass star over its door, proclaiming for all to see its purpose and intent. For now, it served as the 105th's "townside" command center, where Army personnel were managed from. Police ponies would come, of course, to replace the Royal Army MPs already taking up patrols through the town, the white armbands standing out against their green uniforms. But, unfortunately, it received little priority compared to actually protecting the town itself.

Which brought them to the real problem, Twilight thought as she grimaced, setting the trash bag down next to a large pile of others. The Royal Army was here to protect the town, which meant they needed to prepare the citizens. Which, so far as Short knew, meant drills, emergency plans, checkpoints, Army patrols and even a specialized riot suppression unit on call to sort out any disturbances in the town that was too much for the MPs, but didn't warrant direct military intervention (a rather pointless statement, Twilight had pointed out, for these specialists were still Army soldiers). In other words, as friendly as the greeting had been, many ponies (even those in the crowd last night) still saw the garrisoning of Ponyville as a military occupation, a lockdown on everything they held dear.

"You better be right about this Short," Twilight muttered under her breath, watching the soldiers in the distance and remembering what the gray stallion had told her last night. Encouraging words, she remembered, ones that promised a minimal amount of change. But though they had both talked on into the night, Twilight knew that was one of the things that Short had absolutely no control over.

Another one seemed to be her own library now, with mysterious books popping up out of nowhere on subjects she hadn't dared to think of...

"So, ya found him last night?"

Applejack stood where once a heap of trash had only minutes before, a smile on her face and an ease to her stance that suggested a good night's rest, obvious evidence of a lack of her involvement in the party. The mage was still quite delighted to see the workhorse, and chuckled as she said "There you are! I was so sorry you missed the celebration last night."

"From what ah'm seein' Sugarcube," Applejack remarked, glancing back at the ruined town square "It's prob'ly best ah did."

Twilight laughed again, shaking her head as she turned back to her work, lifting another pile of trash into a fresh bag.

"So? Didja find him?"

"Who? Oh, right. Yes, I found Short." The unicorn was practically beaming at that remark, carelessly missing the bag with half of the trash in her aura. "We talked all the way into the night about anything and everything! He may consider himself rather low on the intelligence chain, but he's not giving himself enough credit!"

"Are ya sure –all- ya did was talk?" Applejack commented, a smug smile coming to her features.

A red tinge rose to Twilight's cheeks, and her next attempt to lift a bundle of trash fizzled out with a *pop* as she glanced over at her friend. "Applejack! W-we've only just...you can't mean-"

"Easy, sister!" Applejack laughed, elbowing the purple pony in the ribs. "Ah was just teasin'! Trust me, if ah suspected in any way, shape or form that you two were movin' that fast, ah'd be on your case...and kickin' –his-flank!"

Canterlot

Equestrian Armed Forces High Command

"By my stars, as I live and breath! Eagle himself!"

Field Marshal Eagle Eye hadn't been in his new role a year, yet already had more than enough stress from his job. Forms to sign here, battle plans to consider there, subordinates to control every left, right and center...the list went on and on to include political meetings, press conferences, supply issues, personnel transfers, fund requests, the whole nine yards.

And he was sick of it.

So when a familiar voice called out to him in the concrete halls of the oppressive structure known as High Command, he didn't waste time turning on the spot to find none other than Fancy Pants himself, one of Equestria's most successful business stallions, pacing down the corridor towards him a grin on his monacled face. Eye immediately broke into a smile of his own, ignoring the Army lieutenant who had been filling him in on some meaningless issue of new dress uniform patterns to consider, backtracking down the hall and catching Fancy in a hard embrace, both of them laughing from the impact.

"Fancy Pants! I was wondering what the hay happened to that balloon head of yours!" the Marshal exclaimed as they broke apart. "You still chasing mares up and down the streets?"

"As if you expected anything else!" Pants chuckled, straightening his vest. "And you're probably still ignoring your instructors and superiors. Although, you don't really have many left, do you Field Marshal?"

"Just two, but they're not really the type who liked being ignored!" Eye laughed, patting his old high school friend on the shoulder. "What happened, Fancy? Graduation hit and bam, you fall off the map for six years. Then I suddenly hear about you conquering the media industry single-hoofedly."

"Well, my 'disappearance' was helped quite a bit by you dashing off to join the Army the second that diploma was in your hoof. As for my wealth, I've found that if you give ponies what they ask for, they tend to pay quite a large sum of money to get it!"

With reminiscing between the two stallions, it wasn't long before the pair found themselves stepping into Eye's office, or breaking out expensive salt licks from the warm shores of Zebrabwe, tasty tangy things that sent shivers of flavor up Eye's tongue with every lick as he laughed with Fancy Pants, remembering days gone by in school when the both of them got into all kinds of mischief, rich and poor both. While Fancy had come from a family of quite considerable standing, Eye was a dirt poor colt from a small mining town with big dreams of soldiering to the rescue of his kingdom. Little did they both know of what the world had prepared for them, and it sounded as if Fancy had just as much trouble as him in finding his success in the world.

"I tell you Eagle," Fancy finally said, a somber look on his face as he studied his salt lick intensely, as if looking for the flaws in its very being. "These past few years have just been the eye of the storm. Everything's finally going right for me, and now this war business comes around. Everypony's spooked and those who aren't are pretending everything's going just like it used to."

"I hear ya," Eye replied, setting his lick to the side. "The Army used to be a big, fat, bloated piece of aristocratic manure. No offense. But now, I'm losing senior officers all over the place to these new qualifications, and I can't even stand-"

He paused, suddenly, blinking as his ear twitched. Something had just come to his attention, a sound that seemed to be not there at all, yet was quite audible to him.

"Eagle? Are you alright-"

"Shh!"

Slowly, ever so slowly, Eagle Eye reached down, a hoof feeling for the yoke under his desk. It would be rather obvious as soon as he pulled it out, let alone tried to slip it on. Fortunately, its shock value would make up for any lack of subtlety, and he continued listening as he glanced around. It almost sounded like...

Hissing. Hissing which had abruptly stopped.

"Get down!" he hollered, rolling onto the desk and using his momentum to simultaneously shove Fancy Pants to the floor and haul on the scattergun yoke he'd been working to pull out, just as the ventilation shaft above his chair burst open, and a lithe, skinny form flashed down, impacting with the chair and quickly slithering out of sight, mere milliseconds before two thunderclaps sounded and a storm of buckshot tore the chair to splinters.

"ASSASSIN!" Eye called as he lined up his next shot on the blurred form of the snake as it slithered up into his bookshelf. "VIPERIAN ASSASSIN!"

Canada, Eastern Region

Capital City of Ottapaw, Parliament Chambers

Public Debate to Discuss Funding for Military Expenditures and Status of War

Canada had long ago let the official ruling of 'pack' lay to rest, starting with their revolution when they had wrested control of their lands back from France, negligent after the passing of Emperor Neighpoleon. After this, it was decided that the only acceptable form of governing below that of a nation was the Line. It was all a matter of each doing what they were best at, and this policy had been what first started Canada's ruthless system of narrowing down assets to their best.

The largest contributing factor to the dog rapid rise to power as a nationalized species was a system of ruthless specialization. In the beginning, when dog populations were small, each tribe or Pack only kept careful watch on their population levels, to ensure they did not drain the resources around them. However, after the French left, the format changed. Each Pack decided on certain breeding priorities, like speed, sense of smell, or digging ability and then restricted breeding privileges to those who best embodied the desired trait. The new specialized phenotypes within the Packs were called 'Breeds' and quickly supplanted the Pack in importance as populations grew and Breeds with the same parent Pack became too distinct to share the same priorities. Each Breed contained a number of large extended families called Lines that were governed by a ruling Alpha and a Keeper. The Alpha reigned in matters of politics and merit (deciding who gets to breed) while the Keeper was tasked with deciding what would be the most advantageous pairings and maintenance of the Line's breeding records. Litters of pups from members of two different Lines were common, but had to be agreed upon by the Keeper and Alphas of both lines, with the pups joining the maternal Line. Determination of breeding fitness varied from Line to Line, including simple favoritism by the Alpha, but the method used by the most successful lines is a series of Trials in which the top finishers win breeding privileges.

To sum it all up, this rigid form of keeping between the different Breeds inspired the Lines themselves to keep the blood flowing pure and ensure that each could do their best at what they had been ordained to do. While

this modified Caste system had been looked down upon by many nations, several more had to agree that it worked for the Hegemony. Without the worry of overpopulation, they could instead focus on other matters.

Like war. Or politics. Essentially the same thing.

Prime Minister Dale Mation stood at his podium in Parliament's meeting hall, watching the crowd before him ebb and swell with dozens of different breeds. Labradors, pitbulls, huskies, dalmations (his heart swelled a little with pride at that) and even a few smaller Breeds such as Chihuahuas and Poodles. Some were reporters, their cameras flashing and their pencils scribbling away at notepads, but many more were politicians from the Labour Party and the Global Union, come to watch the developments. Though they were not in any position to change rulings made by Parliament, they had the right to protest, and could most definitely throw up a cloud of negative publicity and red tape. Which was why the Evolutionary Democrat Party (EDP as it was called in the papers) allowed the other two political alliances to attend these sessions. Any kind of blockout at all resulted in a massive uproar that took forever to quell.

Unfortunately, he could only assume their intentions until he saw them for himself. The EDP may rule Parliament at the moment, but one wrong slip and power could shift at any moment. Everyone knew the Labour Party was gathering its supporters to bulk up their efforts, and the Global Union had been suspiciously quiet, as of late. Mation didn't trust them at all, with their peace-mongering ways. At least Labour knew there was no way to avoid the inevitable facts before them.

The current topic was, of course, military funding, and what they would have to take away money from. The debate had been going on calmly for almost a month, but Mation knew it was going to get heated sooner than later. Much like Hippogryph politics, tempers commonly flared, and Parliament never felt any restraint to keep from yelling, barking and howling at each other during a debate. Fortunately, it at least never came to blows like in the griffons' own debate chambers.

Finally, the buzzing died down, and all eyes were upon the Dalmatian at the head of the chamber, letting the Prime Minister know that it was at last time to begin the debates and finally pull the cork on this stewed up bottle.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Mation began, smiling at the photographers as he spoke clearly into the microphone. "Those of Parliament and other political parties. I welcome you to the sixth debate of the year, our second emergency council this season." A light smattering of applause greeted him, and he was quite aware of those who didn't clap. They were not to be worried over, but not to be forgotten either. The Global Union had walked out of the last emergency session the second war was brought up, and the Labor Party had strongly disagreed to any such measure of hostilities. "Many of you are already aware of our topics this morning, so we can hopefully manage to cut right to the subject at hand here. As discussed in our last emergency session, we must decide once and for all our position on the global stage in relation to other powers. Our economy is on a fragile cliff, and if we don't do something to push ourselves back, we may find ourselves slipping into a crisis that will snowball out of control. To that end, we must then decide the finality of military budgeting. Now that the points have been addressed, we can begin the debate and hopefully reach a conclusion on the Hegemony's next course of action."

With any luck, as Mation had subtly planned and coerced, this 'free meeting' would go exactly as expected; the eventual conclusion that war was the only way.

It would not be good year to be an equine.

Chapter 5

Trouble on the Homefront

Canterlot

Equestrian Armed Forces High Command

Office of Field Marshal Eagle Eye

He fired again, reducing a shelf full of military theory tomes and history scrolls he'd been pouring over for the last few months to scraps of paper and splinters of wood, the buckshot rendering everything before it into a twisted mess. Eye was half-crouched behind his desk now, Fancy Pants on the floor but, surprisingly, not panicking. But he couldn't see the snake anywhere.

"The hay?" he muttered, straightening as he kept his teeth around the scattergun's bit-trigger. Abruptly, a bullet bit into the desktop, burrowing itself deep into the surface mere inches from where he was. Needless to say, this was all the inspiration the Marshal needed to duck down once more, pumping out two more shells into the general area.

"Well, this is definitely new," he said once his belly was on the floor next to Fancy Pants. The business-stallion was definitely shaken, but still seemed all together enough to remain calm as he smartly remarked "What, don't you get assassins all the time, Eagle?"

"Fraid not," Eye returned. His head snapped around, the weapon with it as the door slid open, admitting two armored MPs from the hallway, repeater yokes up and ready.

"Marshall, we heard shots fired! Are you okay-"

"Get down, you idiots!" yelled Eye as another bullet zoomed past, slamming into one of the MPs' chest armor, causing him to stagger and gasp, blood oozing from the wound as he fell. The other snapped to the

floor, firing a few retaliatory shots before she scooted over, her black beret forgotten in the chaos.

"Sir, all due respect, but what the buck is going on?"

"I'll explain once I understand it myself," Eye remarked, peering over the edge once more and muttering "He must have armor-piercing bullets. Crafty buckler..." As he spoke, another one of those bullets slammed into the desk again, this time punching all the way through into the floor. Fancy finally showed his first signs of panicking, his forelegs over his head as he cried out in alarm, the round ricocheting not too far from him.

Meantime, the MP mare keyed her radio headset. "We have a trooper down, repeat, trooper down in the North Wing, Sector 6! Field Marshall Eye is under attack! We need immediate reinforcements!"

As if these words were a catalyst, an angry hiss split the air, and Eye stood once more, blasting the bookshelves again and again until they collapsed. But this didn't end the threat, oh no. Instead, a flash leapt out of the wreckage, flying over their heads and finding residence among the filing cabinets.

"Over the top!" Eye commanded, and the mare leapt forward with him, rolling over the desk to the other side as Fancy, still at least in his thinking mind, scuttered over the floor to join them.

"Eagle, do something!" Fancy yelled, wincing as another bullet cut the air, this one slamming into the already wrecked chair. Eye winced as he heard the bullet cut past, thinking to himself.

"Okay, no grenades, no automatic suppressing weapons...how many rounds has he fired, four? Can't imagine him having more than...what, six? Maybe seven? Anything more would be too large, too bulky to carry around easily..."

Another armor-piercing bullet sliced past, this one again rather close. Eye wasn't wearing his personal vest of Army combat mesh, but he knew it wouldn't do any good here regardless. The dead Army MP in the doorway was proof enough of that. Armor piercing rounds could, depending on the caliber, punch through thick inches of plate steel, rendering what protection the vests usually offered against light-caliber rounds null and void.

"Why's he still around, sir?" the MP questioned, her repeater hanging at a readied position as she released the bit to speak clearly. "He missed his first shot, shouldn't he be gone already?"

"Good point," Eye muttered, listening closely. All he could hear was the clatter of hooves on concrete as their supposed reinforcements, a squad of heavily armed and armored regular Army troopers, came galloping to their rescue. No hissing, no more shots, nothing. Slowly, Eye began to stand once more.

"Careful, sir!" the MP hissed, reaching out to push him back down, but he shooed her off, bringing his scattergun up to rest on the desk as he scanned the office. Nothing. No bullets snapped past, no hissing met his ears. The entire exchange could only have taken less than a minute, but the office was already a ruin, filing cabinets split open by armor-piercing rounds and the walls cratered by buckshot. The desk was ripped to pieces and his chair was...nonexistent now.

He waited a few more seconds, raising another inch or so, a target no assassin in his right mind would ignore, before he stood up fully, declaring "We're clear."

Northwestern Hippogryph

Capital City of Istanbeak

Mobile Airbase "Alpha Dominatus"

When the griffons as a species halted their tribalistic ways and banded together to begin forming a nation some thousands of years ago, they done so here, on the peninsula in the middle of the Sea of Grafton, a trapped body of water connected to the Arcana Ocean by a sixty mile long river, wide enough for a herd of elephants to swim down without needing to change their natural pattern. This north-flowing river was known as the Strait of Grafton, the only way in or out of the Sea of Grafton from the water, and to get there meant you had to go through Istanbeak. As such, while the Strait was heavily fortified with naval forts and ancient towers bristling with heavy, old artillery guns, the Sea was relatively undefended

from the water. The thought process was that, while griffons would easily be able to get in and out of the city at their leisure, the same feat for an invading army had to be nigh impossible.

Of course, now that every nation capable of waging war had some form of flight, that point had been rendered rather moot. Instead of a naval armada or a marching army, a group of airborne infantry could simply parachute into the city. Rather, they could if not for the heavy amounts of flak cannons, the numerous Airborne Legion and Ground Forces battalions stationed in the city, the six Sky Navy service fields in and around both parts of the city and the four enormous mobile airbases that constantly kept watch on the area.

Largest among them was the Alpha Dominatus, the biggest flying construct ever made in the history of the world. Stretching twice as large as a normal mobile airbase, the Dominatus not only held Airborne Legionnaires, but also had the lift power and storage space to hold several dozen Ground Force tanks, sixteen wings of Sky Navy planes and was connected to dozens of barrage balloons, and dirigible light airbases, all of which formed a cloud of canvas around the glorious flying fortress. It served as the Matriarchy's command center for their entire military, and always got top priority on fuel. In fact, as a precaution to ensure that the airbase remain flying, several tubes lined the bottom of the construct, each filled to capacity with captured cloud, made as dry as could be thanks to the steam valve network lining the airbase, providing maximum lift and taking the strain off the enormous engines. While all mobile airbases copied this pattern with box-cells filled with hydrogen and more dry clouds, only Alpha Dominatus used the techniques in such large amounts. The extra tubes were not on any other construct.

The Alpha Dominatus was a work of art, proving its superiority over its lesser brethren and sheltering the city of fliers below from not only foreign invasion but the desert sun as well, on occasion. The city now straddled the Strait, pouring over both sides to extend outwards. While the griffons were a technologically modern species (comparatively speaking, that is, being nowhere near Canida's or that island nation in isolation's high points) the city was old, its stone walls and towers still standing after millennia of age, and the newer parts echoed their former constructions, made of stone and brick taken from the sands themselves, making a strong city that would endure through the ages. So the thought went.

A pair of Squall Interceptors tore past, their liquid fuel engines roaring as they peeled around the collection of hydrogen inflated balloons, twisting away out of sight. While the Matriarchy, like Equestria, powered most of their machines with smokeless coal, the far more powerful (if more expensive) ethanol was a perfect counterpart to the Canid kerosene, and the griffons grew wide swathes of corn in their more lush southern regions just for this purpose. While Equestria was flipped the other way (due to their unnatural magic emanating from the central helix of magic energy in Canterlot) Hippogryph was completely natural, which caused quite a few weather phenomenon on a regular basis at the border, where the two ecosystems met unnaturally.

Matriarch Scythia Steelclaw shook her head as she turned from the magnificent view of the scrubland beyond, trying to steer her mind away from the ponies. Damn Luna and her new war-preparations! It was thanks to ponies that they were in this mess to begin with.

Steelclaw turned to the assembled officers before her, all of them wearing green uniforms save for two. Also like Equestria, the Ground Forces wore tan, and Colonel Bloodwing even had his peaked black cap pulled low over his brow, the medals pinned to his chest gleaming in the bright electric lamps. The Matriarchy placed emphasis on female rights, pointedly excluding males, which meant that for Bloodwing to have reached the level he did in his lifetime was nothing short of astounding, promptly earning him respect in several circles, even the most sexist, male-hating groups. As such, Steelclaw made sure he was put in charge of the Ground Forces defending their capital, as such a blow here would mean the disabling of the entire empire at large. As they weren't meant to be mobile and fast as the Airborne Legion, Ground Forces (though lacking in number and more advanced equipment, using older weapons instead) had access to heavy armor instead, ranging from Welterweight light tanks (much more heavily armored and armed than the Legion's Featherweights) and the Cruiserweight medium tanks (kingpin of the Matriarchy's armored vehicles) that crawled along beneath them, patrolling the city for any signs of invasion, to the Bantam half-tracks that carried soldiers back and forth in warzones. After all, griffons didn't possess magic, and couldn't fly more than a few feet in heavy combat armor (the biggest difference between the Legion and the Ground Forces).

A blue uniform was nearby, adorning one Fleet Mistress Ravenspar, commander of all mobile airbases from here to the Protectorate of Kodiak. As the Matriarchy possessed no warships, the Equestrian modeled Sky Navy had absorbed many maritime traditions from its Royal nautical counterpart...another thing based on the ponies, Steelclaw growled to herself angrily.

Then there was Major Axeclaw. While not in full command of anything, the griffon had proven herself by uncovering Lieutenant Colonel Coldheart's incompetency, and had helped reorganize the airbase Artemis. As such, Gilda was here as part of an envoy of six Airborne Legion officers, all of them dressed in green and wearing their service pins on their lapels. This, at least, the Matriarchy had found on their own, rather than copied from Equestria.

Steelclaw smirked privately as she caught the venomous glances between Ravenspar and several of the Legion commanders. True, the Navy may command the mobile airbases, but the Legion had their own, and were gaining more and more all the time. The way things were going, it looked like Ravenspar and her fliers would have nothing left but planes, something even the Legion wouldn't touch.

Despite her amusement at the unraveling of military politics, she decided it was time to get to work, and cleared her throat, bringing all the officers to attention before her.

"You all know why we're here. We've got a lot of problems, so I won't spare any time for pretty openings. Kodiak's rising up, Canida's bulking up, and Equestria's arming up. Three very distinct problems and only one answer; war. One way or another, the Matriarchy will be pulled into this world war whether we want to or not, so no use fighting the inevitable. We need to choose a course of action and lay into it, not dilly-dally around with peace talks like Celestia thinks will work. So without further delays, give me your ideas."

Steelclaw liked to spring proposals and meetings upon her underlings to keep them on their toes and ready for anything. As such, though none of them brought any files or paperwork, she knew they each had at least a dozen thoughts running through their heads to have on hand for whatever she'd call them up for. As it happened, Bloodwing stepped forward first.

"The Ground Forces' immediate concern is, of course, the defense of the homeland and the capital city," the Colonel began, his voice steady and his eyes unwavering. "Though we're normally used in a defensive fashion, I think I can point out several reasons to expand our funding, grant us access to newer equipment and deploy the Forces worldwide."

Steelclaw tilted her head, ignoring the pointed looks the other officers sent at the Colonel. Bloodwing had always been a to the point male, someone who didn't dither around and said exactly what was on his mind.

"I'm listening, go on."

"It's simple. Though warfare has moved from the trenches back into the open field and is once more shifting from large formations to fast strikes and urban battles, the Legion is not suited for holding positions. They are primarily a lightning quick strike force meant to hit the enemy fast. While this means they and the Sky Navy can circumvent static defenses and fortresses easily enough, the enemy still exists in fortified areas that cannot be taken by their light infantry and armor. We've seen this before, and are seeing it again in Kodiak."

If looks could kill, thought Steelclaw as she glanced over at the Legionnaire commanders, all of them glaring venomously at the back of Colonel Bloodwing's head, then the male would be nothing but cinders at this point. Regardless, the Matriarch knew it was true what he was saying, and did not interrupt him.

"So, here's my plan; expand the Ground Forces and have them replace the Legion in Kodiak and the world at large in the territories that need to be garrisoned. It keeps heavy armor in defensive positions and frees the Legion and Navy for offensive moves instead of holding actions they would be unable to hold."

Scythia nodded, slowly. The plan had merit, and would free up the decidedly more attack-oriented Legion for offensive operations. As for the Sky Navy, they operated thirty-eight Mobile Airbases, not including the sixteen under the command of the Legion. Having all fifty-four of those monstrosities able to deploy and attack enemy nations would be like unleashing hell itself upon whoever opposed them.

Colonel Bloodwing stepped back, and Major Axeclaw suddenly pushed past her superiors, a sneer on her beak as if she'd just bitten into something extremely unpleasant.

"With all due respect to the Colonel, Your Grace, I have to say no. Replacing all the Legionnaires around the world would take too much time and too many resources. Kodiak is a problem, sure, but just send more Legionnaires there. We beat them once before, we can beat them again. Instead, we emphasize on what the Airborne Legion has to offer us in terms of a military that can expand globally and take positions before moving on. Sure, pop the Ground Forces in there if you like, but I say we concentrate on improving our best asset, not fixing something that isn't broken...You Grace."

Suddenly, Gilda looked nervous and apprehensive, all traces of confidence gone. The officers around her shared a knowing glance, expecting Steelclaw to bellow at her and kick her out of the armed forces for gross disrespect and insubordination.

To everyone's surprise, Scythia simply laughed, reaching forward and patting the good Major on the shoulder.

"Axeclaw...you remind me of myself at your age. I think you and I ought to have a discussion about the amount of pony weapons filtering into Kodiak..."

Canida, Eastern Region

Capital City of Ottapaw

Shandrahaus Pub

Shandrahaus had originally been established about fifty years ago by a griffon, back when the effects of the infamous Trench Wars (both of them) had been felt worldwide, and everyone was living in either misery or luxury. For those of the former, pubs were an excellent way to get those miserable souls off the streets and together again, keeping each other strong through the hard times.

Now, with the economy on a downturn, unemployment at record high levels and inflation ready to burst through the roof, the only thing that seemed to remain cheap was liquor, and lots of it. Dogs, griffons and ponies alike drank here, listening to upbeat tunes and playing card games in the corners. At the doors stood two large Mastiff thugs, both of them rippling with muscle and tall enough to reach for the ceiling with no effort. While the lethargic looks on their faces and large bulks belied laziness, the pair were twins from the same litter, and as such had both learned side-by-side how to put off a disarming appearance. In reality, they were more than ready to spring into action and separate any disorder in the pub. They didn't even need guns or clubs like a lot of enforcers carried, instead relying on their massive strength and paws.

Tonight, Shandrahaus was nearly full, though noise level was kept at a minimum. In one corner, a group of dogs played poker, smoking cigars and sipping beer from mugs as they bet with money they didn't really own. In the Pool Pit, another group racked the balls and played a gamble against a group of traveling Prench merchants who knew at least enough Common to get by. Over by the jukebox, two griffons were conversing quietly as they sipped at their drinks, their finished meals in front of them, licked clean to the bone. Almost everyone in here was some kind of worker or salesman down on their luck, looking for a place to be among friends.

But there was also another union keeping them united.

The door opened to admit a cold blast of air, sending snowflakes flying as the single visitor entered, dressed in a threadbare coat, thin driving cap and a red wool scarf. He was big, but that was simply because he was a Saint Bernard (actually, he was a little on the small side for his Breed) and his muzzle had many gray hairs around it, betraying his age. The two Mastiffs nodded in unison to him, and he nodded back, offering a quiet greeting. They knew this dog like their father.

Lionel Marks carefully removed his cap, scarf and hat, revealing the plain business suit beneath. Black, a single red tie, white shirt underneath and casual shoes. He didn't need the kind of elegance and luxury so many of his office associates desired, and wouldn't know what to do with it anyway. As the elderly dog moved through the pub, many called his name, waving to him with smiles of joy on their faces. Wearily, but still warmly, he waved back as he made his way to the bar, seating himself on a stool. Almost

instantly, a cup of coffee appeared in front of him, and he picked it up, nodding and smiling at the Dachshund bartender who had given it to him.

"So, Comrade Marks," said a voice nearby, as six dogs suddenly surrounded him. "What did the imperialists say in Parliament?"

They were not gathering to antagonize him, nor were they trying to bother him unnecessarily. Here, they were all family, for they were all members of the Global Union, sick and tired of the way the ECD lorded over Canida like they were kings themselves, and everyone knew the Labor Party was being paid off with money and favors to keep the threat of them gaining any real power. But the Union had had enough.

Marks drank his coffee, not saying anything at first. This was not intentionally rude or a plot of any kind. He really needed to wake himself up and warm his old bones, and this was the easiest way to do it. Finally, he finished and set down his empty mug, smacking his lips before saying, in a deep bass, "Comrades, the imperialists are moving forward with their plans to launch the war." Groans and sighs emanated from the pub, for all had gathered around to hear the news. "And, to make matters worse, they will take the money they need not from the undeserving few, but from the bludgeoned many. As they have before." Shouts and barks of anger rang out this time, as workers felt their rage rise within them.

Nearby, a beagle stared down at his paws, his expression thoughtful before looking back up at Marks. "Then...what now, Comrade?"

Marks wiped off his mouth with a napkin, thanking the bartender as the next cup of coffee came with a bar pastry. He did not drink or eat it all this time, however, knowing he had to respond, taking only a bite and a sip, swallowing and saying "Comrades, we tried to appeal to reason. But the warlord Mation would not hear us, and the pretender Chewchill would not see us. We have tried to bring the imperialists to their senses for years. But now, it is enough. This war, if it fails, will be the ruin of Canida, not the savior of it. So now...we fight. Spread the word. Every member of the Party is to begin arming up and preparing for the revolution. We strike when the Hegemony is most off balance."

Equestrian Armed Forces High Command

Office of Field Marshal Eagle Eye

"But HOW was a SNAKE carrying a GUN?" Fancy Pants spluttered as he and Eagle Eye watched the MPs comb every inch of the office. The investigation had turned up no concealed snake, and they reasoned he must have slipped out through the secondary vent, which would make sense given its location next to the wall the snake had leapt at.

Eye looked at Fancy with a blank expression before replying "Magic. Snakes are one of the only other species in the world that can cast it."

"...you're not serious."

"You didn't know that? Look, here's how it goes. Viperia is like Equestria. It has a hub of magic energy at its middle. Theirs is not nearly as powerful, however. It allows them to at least lift things with telekinesis, at least, and they use weapons in this fashion."

He turned back to his friend, finding the large stallion staring at him with a 'you can't be serious' expression on his muzzle, his cracked monocle gone from his eye.

"You're just pulling my leg."

"No, really! Look, if I had a Viperian gun, I'd show you! It doesn't have a trigger, see? Or a handgrip, or a harness or any visible firing mechanism. It's because it doesn't need one. The snakes trigger it with their magic."

"Eagle, have you had your head checked? Maybe you hit it in the fight..."

Chapter 6

Luna Eclipsed, Part 1

Akal, Kush Region

Central Hippogryph

One Week Later

Akal was like many other cities out in the wilds of Hippogryph. It had simply sprouted up out of nowhere, as if it were one of the plants instead of a large collection of buildings and species, and the comparison might actually make sense with its flow of traffic and hum of energy being the equivalent of a pulse and heartbeat, respectively. It had also followed the staple for such rapid growth, mainly being the heavy amounts of ore in this area guiding in miners by the hundreds, leading to hangers-on and settler trains finding a place here, in the city at the top of the mesa, living off of providing (or stealing) from the prospectors and mining companies. Unfortunately, this meant that the place spilled over the edges, spreading out into the valley below, shacks and houses covering the mountainside, literally bolted into the side of the mesa on support struts. Where the excitement and thrill went, poverty and crime were sure to follow, as evident by the fact that Akal had one of the largest crime rates in the world, a veritable underworld that was practically untouchable by modern society and progressive law. This was, quite truly, a city still caught in the throes of oppression and fear.

But these things were only observed from Frost's mind at a factual distance as he and Boxer gently pushed through the crowds, attempting to find their way through. Boxer's contact was somewhere around this city, the dog had said, and it was up to them to sift through the poor, bedraggled crowds and find her. All around them, merchants called out their wares, various scents and sounds drifting from their stalls and shops. It was full rush-hour time right now, and no one was surprised to see two dogs pushing their way through the crowds, not when the area was rife with diamond dog activity. Of course, the two black ops soldiers would never pass for diamond dogs upon close inspection.

They were too clean.

But the dirty vests they wore and the fact that they barely concealed their handguns helped to maintain the illusion that they were simply a pair of no-good criminals stalking the streets, or going to an 'appointment' or even just miners going to dinner. At the very least, they'd avoid attention from the official authorities, what few were in this city. This was primarily why this area had been chosen for the meeting, seeing as such a small town didn't have any Ground Forces patrolling it, and the local police were lax and inattentive.

As they passed from the marketplace into an alleyway, Frost leaned in and muttered "Tell me about this contact of yours."

"She only goes by the name 'Hook.' Very prospective arms dealer and information seller. Very clever too," Boxer replied, glancing around at the numerous signs above them detailing various shops and businesses in the floors over their heads. "She's an ex-Legionnaire, and we can't pull up any personal information on her or anymore on her past. Completely covered her tracks for now. But it's only a matter of time."

Suddenly, Boxer turned, pushing through a thick, rusted door as he moved inside, prompting Frost to follow, leaving the grimy alley behind to be replaced by the gloomy interior of a warehouse, filled with packing crates and shelving to hold them. Occasionally, a flash of light would streak down from a window above, the ones that weren't caked in grime and dirt.

"This is Hook's place? Not very smart, leaving all her product sitting in the middle of town with no security."

"They're fakes," Boxer explained quietly, glancing at the shelves carefully. "She keeps only a little product on hand at any time. But all these boxes prompt the authorities to search the shelves when they pursue. It buys some time."

Frost nodded, mildly impressed by the ruse. From what he'd heard in just the last few minutes, it sounded as though Boxer had chosen well after all, which allayed Frost's worries. A little. Suddenly a flash of movement caught his eye, a quick motion from one aisle to another. He might have just imagined it, but Frost decided not to take any chances, turning and drawing his magnum, only for Boxer to push the weapon down with a paw.

"Easy," the captain muttered, glancing around warily. "Don't try anything. We'll be dead before we got to the door."

"Just how well do you know this woman? It sounds like you have her MO nailed down, but I don't want to leave anything to chance."

"Let's just say that sometimes, it's better to go to the ones who can't be tracked so easily. She'll get what we need, and she'll do it quietly." Boxer shook his head, immediately discarding the conversation as if it were water to be shaken out of his ears. "Anyway, what does it matter? We're here to do business, not investigate her or start a riot. Come on, Ice Dagger."

The two soldiers finally picked their way out of the shelves without incident, emerging on the other side in a large, wide open area devoid of anything save for a table and three chairs. A window overhead was open, casting a beam of light down on the three sets of furniture, bare save for a single manila folder on the top of the table. Frost frowned, but Boxer had been calling it right so far, and knew that if anything happened to him, the mission would be in good paws. Still, he got the sense that all of this was overly dramatic, like some stupid spy movie from the televisions.

They sat down, Frost expecting Hook to emerge from the shadows like some melodramatic villain coming in to monologue over their victims while the hired goods moved in from all sides. Instead, however, the two had to wait for several minutes before another door, on the other side of the warehouse, flew open, admitting a large, shadowy figure into the structure, followed by two more just like the first...and judging from her tone, the mood wasn't great.

"I've already told you lugs, either you keep them in line or I'm taking the cost of those mercs out of your organs and selling them on the market! No go do what I pay you to and make damn –sure- the Praetors don't catch wind of them!"

With a sense of finality, the griffon slammed the door in her goons' faces, huffing as she stalked into the warehouse on her rear legs, wings stretching and folding in irritation. She had all the earmarks of a soldier about her, from her walking stance and straight poise to the general way her arms swung at her sides, as if she was about to break into a parade march at any moment.

"Major Hound, how very nice to see you," she called out as she closed the distance. "I've been having an irritating week. It's about time I made –one-sale that I knew wouldn't blow up in my face."

"I'm afraid it's Captain now, Hook," Boxer replied as he leaned forward onto his elbows. Hook finally stepped into the light, and Frost took but a moment to study her over. A wicked scar across her face was concealed by the eyepatch over her right eye, telling that her discharge from the Legion wasn't quite voluntary. Strong wings twitched, folded along her back, ready to spring open at the slightest sign of a threat. She was still well built and sturdy, with several other scars cutting through her fur and feathers, though her overall appearance still well groomed and presentable. Obviously, she hadn't let herself go since she had left the armed forces.

"My apologies. You must have done something that couldn't be covered up."

"More like couldn't control it."

It was, at this point, that the griffon glanced over at Frost, frowning in suspicion. "You didn't mention you'd be bringing a guest, Hound. I don't need the Hegemony hunting me down as well like I'm some rabbit to be chased for dinner."

Frost scowled at that, not appreciating the insinuation that he was some kind of spy, but stayed quiet. This was Boxer's show, and he was playing by the rules so far.

"The Major is only here because he's in command of the operation. But we find ourselves in...interesting circumstances."

"Do you ever come to me when you're –not- Hound?" Hook replied, a smirk on her face as she too took a seat, flipping open the manila folder before her and perusing the contents, laying aside sheets of paper as she read them. The minutes stretched out, and Frost spotted another flash of movement in the dark around them. His eyes narrowed, and his paw twitched, but he left his service magnum alone. After all, this was Hook's ground. Might as well let her keep as much security as she thought she needed.

Finally, Hook reached the last page, flipping it over to join the rest of its companions before she closed the folder, saying nothing, her face blank. But Frost wasn't fooled at all, she had probably already reviewed the file and was simply doing this for show, to gauge their reactions and allow her to weigh that into her decision making. It was a game he'd played before with other contractors as well as Black Ops recruits, making sure he had everything in order. And Hook played the game very well, making it all seem quite natural.

"Hound, you realize what you're asking me to do, right?"

"Sixty contractors with light vehicle support isn't much more than what I've asked you for in the past.

"WITH standard issue Legionnaire equipment for all of them. And two Featherweights? Hound, you must not realize what you're asking of me."

Boxer shrugged, considering her words before nodding and replying "I'm asking you to put forward most of your heavy property and government-issue weapons for a deal in which you may possibly not only be traced and hunted down, but also one that will maybe have far-reaching consequences."

"Damn straight!" Hook growled, smacking the table with her fist, talons clacking off the tabletop. "I don't normally ask my clients what they do with the mercenaries I hire out, but knowing you, this is some serious shit. I'm going to need something else to make it all worthwhile."

Boxer finally got up off his elbows, crossing his arms over his chest, a brow raised. "And that would be?"

"Just what the hell you and those wolf assholes outside the city are up to. Gyrodyne heavy transports, stealth gear, -and- sixty griffon mercenaries with an airmobile halftrack tank? The Hegemony's planning something big, and it's either going to happen in Hippogryph or in Equestria. So why don't you tell me what I want to know, and maybe we all go away with our chances of survival a little bit higher."

"Negative," said Frost, finally interjecting. "The captain has revealed more information about this op than I authorized him, but the fact of the matter is that it is still Top Secret, need to know." The Catahoula Cur leaned

forwards, narrowing his eyes as he stared directly into Hook's own. "And you –don't- need to know."

Abruptly, the soldier turned criminal stood, fast enough and with enough force to send her chair tumbling over backwards. In the corner of his eye, Frost spotted more activity in the shadows, but he didn't back down.

"Then we have no business, *Major*," Hook snapped, turning the rank into more of an insult. Neither one back down, glaring at each other heavily for several seconds before Frost felt a paw on his shoulder, gently but insistently pushing him back.

"Ice Dagger. This is how things are done. In high profile ops like this, you need to give a little to get a little."

Frost glanced over at Boxer, a hackle raised as he prepared himself to bark at his teammate for insubordination and compromising the mission. However, just as he was about to let it loose, his lip lowered, and he took a deep breath to calm himself. He'd let his anger flare, let his composure break. That didn't happen often. This was Boxer's element, and he was getting himself frustrated. He should trust that Boxer wouldn't compromise the mission. Sighing, he sat back, gesturing for his teammate to continue.

"All yours, Berzerker."

Boxer stood, leaning in to bring himself to eye level with Hook.

"I recommend you stay as far away from the border as possible. Go to Istanbeak, Zebrabwe, the Viperian Confederacy, Prance, -anywhere- but around here. I guarantee you, within the next year; this place will either be in ruins or filled with ponies."

Ponyville

Nightmare Night

Though the festivities wouldn't be kicking off until the evening, Ponyville still wore the garish and ghoulish decorations commonly associated with the Equestrian holiday, the celebration of all things scary as well as the modern

form of the ancient ritual to keep away Nightmare Moon. Masks and scary faces, insects and other forms of scare-tacular dotted the town, across the booths and through the trees. Even Ponyville HQ was feeling the holiday cheer, with spider webs and scary signs decorating the barracks and mess halls. One of the Knights had even been found parked in front of the police station with what looked to be blood smeared on its treads and the front, a false severed head dangling from the cannon's barrel. Fortunately, the red liquid was simply paint, but the crew received a thorough dressing down and were ordered to clean it up...but not before Colonel Di'ac ordered a photo to be taken of the battlewagon before it was scrubbed down.

As Short trotted alongside his squad, listening to their hooves hit the ground in unison, he could feel in the air that winter was coming. The Weather Team had already begun casting in colder winds to encourage the plants to begin the next cycle, and most of the birds had already flown south for the winter. Rumor was, the new autumn camouflage uniforms and body armor would be coming in soon, prompting an immediate re-equip of all forces and the reapplication of camouflage paint to the Defender steamwagons and Knights patrolling the countryside and ferrying soldiers around (even though by the time the uniforms arrived, it would probably be time to switch to winter camouflage). It had only been a week so far, but the Army had so far managed to integrate itself nicely to Ponyville, and the troopers and steamwagons patrolling the streets were no longer a source of the many stares that had plagued their first few days.

But matters like that could be attended to later. As Ponyville came up once more on the horizon, Short trotted forward to put himself up at the front-left of the group, looking over the squad. Every morning, it was the same thing; get up and go trot for almost a full hour and come back, all with twenty-pound saddlebags on. The other fifty soldiers in the platoon were trotting in unison nearby as well, watched carefully by their sergeants. But it wasn't in silence, no.

"SERGEANT STOP!" called Lieutenant Roseluck, up at the head of the group, leading the exercise. "TAKE THE CALL!"

"Call to me!" Short replied, taking over order of the cadence, quickly pulling one from his mind, a popular rhyme Sergeant Gunn had liked to use when they were out in file.

"Up in the mornin', outta the rack!" he called out.

"UP IN THE MORNIN', OUTTA THE RACK!" the entire platoon replied.

"Greeted at dawn with an early attack!"

"GREETED AT DAWN WITH AN EARLY ATTACK!"

"The Sergeant rushes me off to chow!"

"THE SERGEANT RUSHES ME OFF TO CHOW!"

"But I don't eat it anyhow!"

"BUT I DON'T EAT IT ANYHOW!"

"Hail oh hail oh Infantry!"

"HAIL OH HAIL OH INFANTRY!"

"Queen of battle, follow-"

"LIEUTENANT! ARMOR COMING UP!"

Suddenly, almost all of the platoon were glancing back, looking at the dust clouds on the horizon and staggering, off-march at the sudden revelation of armored vehicles on the same road as them. Fortunately, Roseluck heeded Sergeant Rivet's cry, snapping orders to her NCOs quickly. "Alright, c'mon! Move 'em off the road and out of the way!"

"Yes ma'am! You heard the lieutenant! Get off the road in file order and fall in, double time!"

Quickly, the column of mostly rookie soldiers fell in on itself, disorganized and confused for only a second before it reemerged on the side of the road, strung out into two long lines, every recruit right back in the order they had started in. Short felt a little hint of pride in his chest to see that the recruits' training was finally paying off. What they had learned in basic was still ingrained in them from all the blood, sweat and tears, and thanks to the exercises done every morning here, they were adjusting to the way the platoon worked with ease.

It didn't take long for the armored column to catch up to them. But while Short had expected Defender steamwagons or Knight battlewagons, what crested the hill and proceeded to roll past were neither and more at the same time. Large than a battlewagon by half-again, swathed in armor and wielding long-barreled cannons, the behemoths were enormous, noisy and intimidating, capturing the attention of everypony present, even the sergeants, most of whom were hardened soldiers who had fought with the 71st in Stalliongrad. Short glanced over at Azure, thinking she might have some clue as to the information about this mystery, but the draft mare looked as astonished as everypony else.

Everypony except the lieutenant, it seemed. Roseluck simply watched calmly, nodding a bit as if slightly impressed but not completely sold on a cheap trick. She must have known the tanks were rolling by, but Short hadn't even known Equestria was producing the armored behemoths of their own.

As soon as the last tank rolled by, Lieutenant Roseluck stepped out in front of the platoon, calling out "Platoon, atten-shun!"

On reflex, all the stallions and mares swiftly slammed their hooves together, backs straight and heads held high, eyes fixed forward. From this position, nopony was allowed to move any part of their body, not even their eyes. Though the sergeants had to assume the same position, they at least did so where they could keep an eye on their soldiers, and quickly chew them out afterwards. While it was no longer basic training, maintaining soldiers in a war-prep environment meant you were always being watched.

"Troopers, the vehicles you saw were prototype Crusader tanks, belonging to the Royal Armed Forces of the Kingdom of Equestria. These glorious machines are here with the 34th Armored Battalion, who is field testing these weapons alongside our conventional Knights and troops. Hooah?"

"HOOAH!" the entire platoon roared back, eyes still fixed forward. Roseluck had simply made sure they were paying attention, not giving them a dismissal or the order to relax.

"Therefore," Roseluck continued, pacing in front of the platoon. "You are free to speak of it to each other and to the townspeople, as they will be in full sight of everypony in Ponyville. However, you are hereby ordered to not include their names or existence in your letters or divulge information

regarded as Classified that you may hear to –anypony-. Those who do so will find themselves court martialled. Hooah?"

"HOOAH!"

"Then let's get back, platoon, and prepare for the festivities tonight."

2 Hours Later

Fluttershy's House

"Angel, you need to –stop- feeding the Timberwolves, or they'll never go away and they'll scare everyone! Um, that is, if you would please?"

Angel Bunny was sick and tired of his owner's meekness and unwillingness to put a hoof forward for herself. It was like this all the time, the white rabbit knew as he ignored the pregnant mare, nibbling on a carrot with no haste as he listened to the radio lazily, rubbing his round belly. It was too easy living off of Fluttershy, he decided. He would leave for a more challenging prospect, but he had a good life here. Maybe he'd stick around for a while longer.

"ANGEL! Stop feeding the bucking Timberwolves, or so help me, I will RIP YOU APART!"

Abruptly, the rabbit had a very angry, very yellow, very pregnant mare in his face, and his eyes instantly widened, staring at the enraged Fluttershy before nodding slowly, not trusting himself to do anything else.

"Ah...good. Thank you, Angel," the mare said, straightening up with a bashful look on her face, causing Angel to immediately slide down off the chair and sneak off. He needed to get out of this crazy horse's house.

Fluttershy sighed, leaning forward and turning off the radio, not willing to listen to another news report about some Marine unit getting slaughtered in Zebraabwe or of the negotiations with Prance, or the troubles in Canida or any of the problems in the world. Why was everything falling apart at once? Why couldn't everypony just get along and learn to live with each other like

here in Ponyville?...but perhaps Ponyville wasn't such a good example after all.

Twilight...what had happened to her? She'd become so withdrawn and absorbed in little projects like translating books that she was forgetting to spend time with her friends. She never spoke of what happened in Stalliongrad, and not even Spike would relate the details. Fluttershy hoped that this was a phase, though she had to admit it was better than the mage shutting herself away for weeks on end.

Applejack was constantly distant, always distracted by something, though Fluttershy suspected it was Rainbow Dash running off to enlist that had set this course. The two of them had argued for an entire week before suddenly becoming quiet, and Dash had then just left.

Rarity and Pinkie Pie seemed to be the only ones unchanged through all of this, Rarity still keeping her chin up and trying to be supportive of everypony and Pinkie throwing parties and goofing off to keep them all entertained.

But Fluttershy knew that the truth was there; they were all being driven apart by this war, one way or another. Some nights, she would lie awake and wonder what life might be like if Stalliongrad, the root cause of all their problems, had never happened. Or, at least, if Twilight hadn't been there. What then?

She sighed, resigning herself to an early bedtime. These mood swings were really not doing much to help her out, but she still had several months left to suffer through and no sign of-

Knocking. At the door. Her head perked up a little, only half interested in finding out who it was. "It's unlocked. Come in." Really, maybe she should have thought that over. She had no clue who that was, and it might be some creepy stalker pony or maybe a burglar or maybe-

"Sweetcake?"

Or maybe, Fluttershy thought as her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, hooves coming up to cover her mouth in shock...

Maybe it was Mac, coming through the door dressed in his tan Royal Army uniform, removing the black cap from his head as he smiled softly down at her.

And maybe, she realized, she was hugging him and hadn't even remembered launching herself at him.

But, for the first time in a long time, Fluttershy found that she didn't really care about the details.

Public Library

That Night

The tome before her refused to surrender its secrets to Twilight. Though she had successfully opened the lock on the first night, the pages inside were inscribed in a language she didn't comprehend, and the book pulsed with an energy that, quite frankly, she was afraid to explore. And yet, all the translation tomes she had were hovering around her head, from dead languages, to obscure dialects to older, forgotten alphabets. But she hadn't gotten far, only connecting up a few words here and there, and the first time she had managed an entire sentence, it had simply been gibberish!

"What are you saying?" she muttered, a quill furiously scribbling notes onto a scroll of parchment nearby, already covered back and front with her notes written here and there. This word could mean that, or perhaps the sentence structure was like this, or maybe even-

"Come on, Twilight! We're going to be late for the Nightmare Night Festival!"

Twilight blinked, glancing down at herself and realizing that she was, in fact, staining her Starswirl the Bearded costume with ink, a tremendous annoyance since she spent so much time making the danged thing. Still, Spike's voice had been just what she'd needed to snap to once more, glancing at her clock and realizing that she was, indeed, late.

Another night, then. The tome would always be there, after all.

"Hey, look! We're here already! Should we get something to eat?"

"I think someone's already full, Twilight."

A quick glance over her shoulder confirmed her guess, and she grinned as Short emerged from behind a tent, dressed in his new orange and brown autumn fatigues, a duty cap squared away on his head. Unlike the residents of Ponyville, the soldiers had been forbidden by Colonel Di'ac for joining in on the celebration. No pony knew for certain why, but the current suspicion was that the commander believed Nightmare Night to be an insult to the Commander in Chief, and as such refused to partake of the holiday or let her troopers dress up.

"Short! You made it!"

The gray stallion shrugged, as if it wasn't much of an impressive feat, a small smile on his muzzle nonetheless. "I had a leave pass, and that hasn't changed."

The two glanced down as the little dragonling belched, Twilight staring in disapproval at Spike's embarrassed face. Giving the assistant a pat on the back, the sergeant pushed Spike back up into a sitting position, surreptitiously pushing Spike's incredibly large pile of candy (how the hay had he gotten his claws on that, anyway?) away before quickly changing the subject.

"You see the new reinforcements we got today? A whole column of armor from the 34th rolled through today! I'd love to see them in action."

Twilight frowned, trying to remember everything she could. Though it had been a spectacular sight, the tome had been first and foremost on her mind, and she'd spared the tanks only a few seconds before she turned back. But she did remember at least one thing about the strange, hulking iron behemoths.

"I don't remember seeing them anywhere in Stalliongrad. Do you?"

"No, because they're brand new. Prototype Crusader tanks, but I'm not allowed to say much more than that." Short gave a helpless 'what-are-you-

going-to-do' shrug, the look on his face begging Twilight to –not- ask more. Which was rather odd. Usually Short was more than willing to discuss the Army and the military in general. But, Twilight reasoned, if he had his orders, they were his orders. So, instead, Twilight smiled and replied "I'd actually like to get a better look at them. I'm afraid I was a little busy when they rolled through."

Relieved, Short nodded. "They'll be around a bit. And you'll definitely hear them, firing those big cannons. But I'm more curious about our air reinforcements."

"Wait. I thought the Army Sky Corps was absorbed into the Air Force."

"It was," said a voice from above, and all three heads swiveled upwards, two freezing in shock, eyes wide and jaws dropped. There, hovering right above them, was none other than Rainbow Dash herself! While Twilight had known Dash was a full-time combat flier in the Air Force, she hadn't realized exactly what that entailed, but now that she saw the padded ballistic armor and the blue flight-suit underneath, it took on a whole new meaning for her. She wouldn't even have realized it was Dash, but her mane and tail hadn't been covered, displaying that patented rainbow pattern. That and she'd taken off her helmet.

"Rainbow Dash?" she called, head tilting to the side in part confusion part relief. "What are you doing here?"

"That's Flight Lieutenant Rainbow Dash to you, civilian!" Dash said, rubbing her chest with a hoof before lazily inspecting it, as if she was some great hero absorbing the praise of her fans. "I'm here with the 16th Fighter Wing. And I'm technically supposed to be on patrol. But I'll see ya, Twilight! Spike!"

With that, the tomcolt twisted in the air, pulling away into the black sky with several strong flaps of her wings.

"So, that was Rainbow Dash?"

As Ace came up with an apple in his jaw, Applejack grinned, knowing the athlete would soon find the caramel filling she'd carefully prepared for her

apples. It was a new product she was selling, called Stuffed Apples. Hopefully, Nightmare Night would be the perfect way to market more of her family's business...if most of Ponyville wasn't already buying from Sweet Apple Acres. She frowned a little at that realization, but it was alright. Finally, after so many weeks, things were looking up for her, and she'd just pulled herself out from her funk...

"Happy Nightmare Night, Applejack!"

She turned to find Spike, Twilight and one of the Army soldiers in his brown and orange look-like-Granny-Smith's-vegetable-soup camouflage approaching. Judging by how Twilight had described him, Applejack assumed that this was the infamous Sergeant Short Stop ("Trying saying that ten times fast!" she'd joked the first time she'd heard his name) and she turned to the group.

"Howdy, Spike. Hey, Twilight. And you must be..."

"Sergeant Stop, at your service, ma'am."

"Polite too? Oh, Twilight you got yourself a good one."

She expected Twilight to color a bit at the cheeks and glance away shyly before changing the topic to her costume, but instead the mage was frowning, a troubled look on her face. Applejack felt her own smile slipping, a feeling of dread setting over her.

"Twilight...what's wrong?"

"Rainbow Dash is back."

Applejack blinked, feeling something jerk in her chest, which felt suspiciously like her heart skipping a beat.

"Wh...what?"

"We just saw her fly over, she's been stationed here, in Ponyville."

"When?"

"A few minutes ago-"

Quickly, Applejack pushed past, cantering into the crowd, her face affixed in determination and...hurt?

"What was that about?" asked Short, looking confused as he glanced between the disappearing Applejack and Twilight. Spike shrugged, all the subtle nuances of romance and relationships lost on him as well. Twilight sighed, knowing she now had to fight against the stereotypical male thickness of the head.

"Rainbow Dash and Applejack are an item, remember? Or...they were."

"Were?" Short muttered, frowning again as he glanced at the sky this time. "Well...I suppose I can see now. A lot of soldiers tell me deployments wreck more couples than anything else."

In the apple tub, Ditzzy popped up, the plug to the vessel clutched in her teeth as she pulled excitedly, mistaking it for an apple. Unfortunately, this had the effect of draining out the green water, and she frowned as she felt herself sinking.

"Everypony, drop some candy and let's get out of here!"

As Pinkie furiously upturned her candy bag, dumping out her hard earned chicken-suited loot, Short chuckled, shaking his head.

"In Savanneigh, we didn't give out that much candy. We believed Nightmare Moon hated sweets and would get even more offended. Instead, we all left a sample of our harvest at the base of her statue out in the Molasses Marsh, just to be sure..." He glanced down, hoping Twilight found some amusement in the contrast, but when he received no reply, he frowned. "Twilight? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" the student snapped, a look of frustration etched across her features. "What's wrong is things are going down the drain! My friends are all back, but nothing's getting better! Applejack and Rainbow Dash were fighting so much before Dash was deployed, they never sent each other letters! Nightmare Night was supposed to be a happy festival, but its already becoming another day ruined by everypony's issues."

"Calm down, Twilight. These things happen. Nothing we can do by lamenting on the past. Got to think of how to fix it in the future." Short smiled. "I mean, it's not like there's some pony with a time machine who just -happens- to travel back and forth to fix issues or something."

Miles away, next to his grand machine, a brown pony with an hourglass on his flank sneezed, dropping the gadget he'd been working so hard to keep in his hoof. He groaned, leaning down and trying to pick it up again...but it simply fell down once more.

Twilight shrugged, not looking entirely convinced, but at the very least not upset anymore. "Yeah...and who knows, at this rate, one of the Princesses might just come down out of the clouds and-"

She was interrupted, however, by a gust of wind blowing through, threatening to take off her hat and sending the fake beard she'd strapped on fluttering. Over their heads, the leaves on the trees rustled, branches creaking as the breeze intensified, turning into a full force wind that tugged at everypony's costumes.

"What the hay..." muttered Short, glancing around before he looked up, abruptly elbowing Twilight in the side. "Look! Look at the moon!"

As soon as Twilight glanced up, along with practically everypony else in the group, a bright light streaked out, like an explosion inside the very moon! Hurtling out of the flash like a dark specter on wings, a shadowy form emerged, all spikes and chains and blades, careening down from the clouds like a meteorite. As the shape approached the startled and fearful group below, the light finally subsided, revealing that the shape was a sinister looking black carriage, being pulled by a pair of dark, bat-winged Pegasi! It was impossible, that couldn't be true! But the carriage continued on, soaring right over the heads of the distressed cluster of foals (and Pinkie) before coming to an abrupt halt, hovering above them, allowing all to spot the hooded figure riding in the back of the carriage.

"AAAAAH!" screamed Pinkie, eyes wide as she bellowed "IT'S NIGHTMARE MOON! RUN! GET THE ARMY!" Screaming, howling and otherwise simply scared out of their skulls, the foals all chased after the chicken-dressed pony, Zecora on their hooves as they swiftly hoofed it back towards Ponyville, both to escape the terrifying visage, and to warn the rest of the town.

"Doesn't she realize that we -serve- the Moon Princess?" Short muttered, remarkably calm despite the events happening around them. Overhead, a bolt of lightning struck, illuminating the grinning face beneath the hood. The carriage moved on, dark clouds rolling in its wake, heading towards Ponyville.

"C'mon," Twilight said, cantering off towards the town once more, and it only took a moment for Short to follow in her wake. The two arrived just in time to see the hooded pony leap down from her carriage, falling what must have been two stories at least before landing gracefully, casting off her hood as another bolt of lightning struck. Immediately, ponies all around her fell to their bellies, bowing down to avoid retribution from the supposedly horrible and vengeful monarch. What had they done to deserve the wrath of the Alicorn of the Moon?

"Princess Luna!" Twilight exclaimed, starting forwards until her cape was snapped by Spike's claw, tugging her down to the ground and gently holding a claw to her lips to keep her quiet.

"COMMANDER ON DECK!" came a shout, and every Army pony in viewing distance of the Princess abruptly snapped to attention, leaving a few dozen forms around the square standing, their autumn colored fatigues suddenly appearing sickly in the dark light, Short especially as the colors contrasted his coat.

True, the call was a naval one, but the Army had never changed it to suit their needs, and it fit them just fine. Nearby, an officer (probably some lower lieutenant) called out "TROOPERS! PRESENT, ARMS!" Again, as one, all the soldiers saluted, hooves to the brims of their caps as Luna stepped forward, gazing out over the assembly. Not all of Ponyville was here, and neither was the entire regiment, but it seemed as though she'd simply landed in the largest open space with the most ponies in it. Menacingly, a flight of bats soared overhead, but Twilight suspected that was all simply part of the show. Or maybe they'd been disturbed from the forest. Or-

"CITIZENS OF PONYVILLE!" Luna bellowed, her voice so forcefully charged with magic that it seemed like a wind itself, blowing the caps off of several soldiers who squinted, but were forced to remain where they were, still saluting. "WE HAVE GRACED YOUR TINY VILLAGE WITH OUR

PRESENCE, SO THAT YOU MAY BEHOLD THE -REAL- PRINCESS OF THE NIGHT!"

Kodiak, Western Faunterra

Kermode City

Disputed by Hippogryph and Geisterbjorn Rebel Movement

It wasn't the first time Warden Tempestia Bravencrest had felt fear. But it was starting to look like it would be the last.

"Get to the doors! Make sure there's none in there!" she snapped, slamming to the ground at last. Around her, the rest of Salamander squad did the same, their shock-absorbing leg braces allowing them to push off towards the front doors of the Grand Hall, the bears' equivalent of a central governing structure, more like an enormous feasting hall than a city center, however. Scattered around the building were the remains of the Ground Forces sent to protect the structure, some behind sandbag barricades, and others in hastily dug trenches and foxholes. The bears had smashed through here less than an hour ago, even though they had been repulsed by the Legion. Rebel corpses lay scattered around as well, in proportion to the dead griffons. A Ground Forces brigade had deployed into the Kodiak capital city as a vanguard to help reinforce it with heavy weapons and armor while more regiments were being mobilized in the homeland, but now it seemed that they'd arrived too late, and had made little difference.

In the distance, the city burned as the fighting between bears and griffons reached its peak, the sky laced with anti-flier rounds and power-jumping griffons relocating to other places in the urban battlefield. This fight had started less than four hours ago, countless rebels flooding over the city walls, up out of the sewers, even flooding out from the damned –buildings-. They outnumbered the scant Ground Forces and Legionnaires in the city at least four to one, and that was apparently just the first wave!

Checking her ammunition reserves, Bravencrest found she was down to only a handful of magazines for her LSG. Knowing that was no good, she immediately began scanning the area for fallen soldiers bearing the same

weapon. Finding none in her immediate vicinity, she called out "Ammo check! If you need more, take from the dead!"

Swiftly, Salamander squad broke apart, those with low or no ammunition setting their weapons aside and either taking more rounds from the fallen armored griffons around them, some trading out for different weapons altogether. Tempestia herself set her LSG down and quickly picked up an HCR-27 automatic rifle from a dead Ground soldier, checking the magazine before collecting the rest of his ammunition and reloading. She'd fired so many rounds today her arms were numb, but she couldn't let her guard down for an instant, checking over the older weapon before confirming that it seemed to be alright. It was fitted with a rifle scope, and she tapped the adjustment screw a bit to set it to her eye, standing up after only a minute or so.

"Call 'em out!"

Two calls of "Set!" rang out, followed by "Need a minute!" The Warden sighed, glancing at her assembled soldiers in sadness and a bit of anger. She was down to three Legionnaires in her squad, not bad considering the fighting, but if they were the first reinforcements to reach here, they wouldn't be enough. She glanced over at the nearby burning husk of the destroyed Ground Forces Cruiserweight medium tank, grimacing as the smell of burnt flesh came to her nose. The bears were incredibly well equipped now, and had the numbers and organization to resemble an actual military at this point, and though she had no doubt that the tank had been split open by a Canid bazooka, she knew that most of the Geisterbjorn's heavy weapons were of Equestrian make, meaning they were lighter and more mobile for the big and powerful bears.

As if reading her thoughts, the chattering of heavy machine guns came to her ears, and she spun around to watch two Legionnaires get slammed out of the sky by a stream of tracers, tearing into the jump troopers and sending them plummeting back to earth. Another gunframe was nearby!

"Be ready!" she called, double-checking her new rifle. "There could be more of them around!"

Again, as if in reaction to her words, one of her Legionnaires suddenly spun around, falling to the ground a second later as the tardy boom of the gunshot rang out. The spray of blood pattered across the stone around the

Grand Hall, and Salamander squad instantly moved to cover on the main path, weapons ready as the plaza was suddenly –flooded- with enormous, furry forms, charging straight towards them crying "Urrah! Urrah!" in their guttural tongue. A few other shouts of "For the All-Father!" and "Valhalla awaits!" met her ears, but at this point she didn't particularly care, raising her rifle and hammering off a burst of heavy rounds.

The bears fell as they charged up, a dozen in the first few seconds as heavy fire tore into them. Overhead, a pair of Sky Navy P-21 Lightning tore past, their machine guns rattling as they tore up the charging rebels. However, a chorus of deep thumps sounded from the next block over, and one of the ground-attack planes was ripped apart by the autocannon fire, spiraling to the ground and exploding as the other peeled away, most likely not to return.

"Dammit!" Bravencrest snarled, firing off another burst before she was forced to swap her magazines again. In the second she'd let herself be distracted, the bears had replenished their numbers and were charging again! She knew they'd be overrun if they stayed, so she called out "Fall back! We need to fall back and regroup!"

But no one responded.

She dashed to the other side of the tank wreck, glancing out, looking for any flash of olive vest or helmet. Surely they were just too busy to respond, but she heard no return gunfire, only the bullets being sent her way-

And then a grenade clattered off the stones nearby, detonating before she could even turn to run and throwing the Warden into the air. Darkness overtook her...

She awoke to sunlight shining down on her face. The smell of smoke rolled past her nostrils, and she couldn't feel her lower half. She shifted, slightly, then found that her arms wouldn't respond. She was too weak to move, unable to feel anything. She opened her eyes, squinting up at the sky. Black clouds roiled past, clouds of smoke. It had been the middle of the night when the battle had started, and now it had to be at least noon. But why was she still laying here? Why didn't a medic come by or-?

"Has Mation received the message?"

"Yes, Lord Discord. He reports that Parliament has agreed to all proposed measures, and the Hegemonic war machine will be rolling full steam in the next few weeks."

"Excellent, General. Kodiak will be a little while in rebuilding, but I'm sure with the protection of our new allies, the Dominion will be able to contribute to the war quite well."

"Then, it will happen, Lord? We will invade Hippogryph?"

"Calm yourself, Krastos. Mation has already emphasized the need to knock out the ponies first, and I will let him take his glory prize in Prance. But the real threat is Celestia. That infernal witch can easily trap me again if she gets all the Elements together and so much as –hears- my voice."

"Then, shouldn't we be trying to neutralize her ability to harm you?"

"Ah, that's already being taken care of, Krastos. I have an inside dog making sure of it."

Slowly, with as much strength as she could muster, Bravencrest turned her head to the left, wincing as she did so. The plaza was full of bears, most of them striding past heavily on some errand or another, but a large group stood before the Great Hall, staring up at someone. At the front was none other than General Krastos, the leader of the rebel movement! There had been a bounty on his head for years, but the Matriarchy had never gotten close enough to find him!

Tempestia tried to reach for her belt, and her arm finally moved, inching slowly down to the ALP-15 pistol at her waist...

"Ah! We have a survivor!"

Her head suddenly snapped straight up, as her eyes opened wide in horror to find a tall, serpentine shape standing above her. Where the hell had he come from? He hadn't been there a second-

"Sorry, but the Geisterbjorn takes no prisoners. Annoying, really. I was so looking forward to interrogating a few of you, but every body has to be accounted for, or your government starts pestering."

The muzzle of a Canid J2F suddenly filled her view, the yawning black expanse of the barrel becoming all she could see, and Bravencrest knew that she was feeling fear for the very last time.

There was a bright flash, a streak of agonizing pain, and then...nothing.