

# Dark Skies

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# Chapter 1

A single light hung down from the low ceiling of the darkened room. Beneath the light was a table, upon which rested a wooden case of green bottles. The dark blue sludge inside seemed to glow ominously. With his front hooves planted on the table, a lean steel-grey pegasus leaned his head into the light. His short mane was done up in slender, blunt planks, forming a choppy mohawk which wilted slightly in the humid air of the warehouse. He cleared his throat and spoke in a smooth, low voice.

"Spin Juice. Imported. Pure Poison Joke in near pure alcohol. And the best part is, I had a unicorn buddy of mine from Fillydelphia spike it with a little black magic to cause amplified senses and massive disorientation. It's ready to hit the market." Looking up at the pink pegasus adjacent to him, he added, "I'm sure it'll be a hit with your preppy friends and their money, Starry Skies."

Elegantly rising from her seated position, Starry Skies slowly stepped into the light. Her svelte, sexy figure was well framed by her flight suit, which she never seemed to take off. Tossing her airy pink mane and fluttering her sapphire eyes she responded in a lazily sensual voice, "Charger, I do believe you simply enjoy corrupting ponies; we both know with the money I bring in it isn't necessary for you to move this stuff." Stretching her wings, she circled Charger and the table slowly and deliberately, her beautiful form holding his gaze. She stopped only when a dark blue blur flung itself in front of her from across the table.

The entirely blue pegasus stood with hooves firmly planted on the floor in front of Starry Skies. Her bright pink eyes seemed to exude energy. Plastered on her face was a twitchy smile, stretched to the point where it seemed it could crack her face in half. At short and random intervals, small charges of visible electricity crackled through her spiky mane. She held her wings close to her body where they shivered as though ready to spring open at any second like feathered switchblade knives. With visible effort, she wiped the smile from her muzzle, contorting it into a pouty uncomfortable scowl. At nopony in particular, she whined in a squeaky girlish voice: "I'm boored!"

Visibly flustered, Starry Skies attempted to reign in the blue pony. "Blueball, sit still!"

Blueball Biltz blew a thick, wet raspberry at Starry Skies, causing her to growl in anger. Blueball giggled with glee at this reaction. She seemed to materialize in front of Charger. In less time than it took for him to blink in surprise, she was lying atop the table looking at him upside down. Before he could react she spoke again, drawing out her words for emphasis.

"Chargerrr, I wanna do something fuuun! Aren't you supposed to be doing something with that pretty mare friend of yours tonight?"

Charger maintained his cool and retorted, "Yeah I was, but when Nightshade calls an emergency meeting everything else takes a back seat."

Blitz resumed pouting. "Darn! I was gonna steal her from you, too." In a blink, she stood next to Charger and addressed a dark corner of the room. "Stratus, are we gonna get to hurt somepony soon?"

When no response came, Blitz darted up and hovered above the table. She took the hot steel shade of the overhead light in her mouth and shone the light in the corner to which she had spoken.

In the harsh light stood a massive pegasus. His dull white coat was crisscrossed with scars and his large frame was disjointed at places from broken bones healing improperly. His venom green eyes contracted swiftly and he turned his face away, revealing his spiky ice-blue mane. Blitz took the hint and dropped the light, becoming abnormally quiet and still. She materialized next to Starry Skies, making a point of giving Stratus a wide berth. Stepping into the light, Stratus scowled, stretching a particularly thick scar on the left side of his muzzle. He spoke in a low raspy growl.

"We may. We'll see when Nightshade gets here." He said nothing more and turned towards the wall of the warehouse where he knew a door was.

As if on cue, the door exploded open and a black wall of smoke darker than the night outside obscured the doorway. A pair of reflective gold flight

goggles poked through the smoke and it swiftly dissipated. In its wake stood a mare, a fifth pegasus with a steel-grey coat and dark indigo mane. Taking a powerful commanding stance in front of the other four, she spoke in a crisp clear voice.

"Suit up, everypony. We're moving a whole crate of this stuff tonight. We're in for a fairly lengthy trip, too; we gotta get just south of this clean-cut little town called Ponyville before we can rest."

She lifted her flight goggles, revealing her gold eyes. Stratus had seen those eyes many times before, and though Nightshade's dark gaze still commanded his attention, he found his eyes subconsciously drifting to her neck. He couldn't see it, but he knew the scar was there under her flight suit. Stratus found his mind drifting back to the day he saw her get that scar, the day she almost died, the day they became friends.

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The tryouts alone had had a massive turnout. After thousands had shown up, only 32 pegasi had made it to the tournament portion. Over the course of 3 grueling days those 32 ponies competed in races, flight shows, trick contests, and various other manners of competition meant to test their flying abilities. The winner would get a rather large sum of money in addition to being inducted as the newest member of the most renowned competitive flying team in Equestria: The Wonderbolts. At the end of the competition, only two very gifted pegasi remained. The first was a bright easy-going young mare with a vibrant orange coat and flame-colored mane. Her name was Spitfire, and upon reaching Pegasus Magic Velocity (sometimes called PMV for short) she could streak the sky with trails of flame. The second of the two was another young mare, a cocky and aggressive pegasus whose PMV talent was the ability to block almost any ray of light with black magic smoke. This pony was called Nightshade.

Stratus remembered the first time he saw her. At the time he had been working as part of the Royal Guard. A seasoned veteran, Stratus rarely had to enter the Royal City; his combat expertise served Celestia better when he was working to round up dangerous creatures and criminals in the wilderness between cities or in lawless towns outside of the more peaceful cities like Canterlot and Ponyville. However, for this particular event Stratus was brought in to guard the Princess; she was scheduled to raise the sun

just as the winner of the competition was announced for dramatic effect. At the time of the sun raising his duty was to keep careful watch over Celestia, but until then he was free to watch the beginning of the event.

Stratus first saw Nightshade as she strode into place at the starting line, next to Spitfire. They were both smiling, but Nightshade had a certain quality about her. While the orange pegasus looked excited and happy, Nightshade had a particularly darker and far more powerful expression in her eyes. She looked hungry for victory. She didn't seem simply determined to win, she seemed to need to. This event was a simple race around a large elliptical track. All that mattered was speed. Nightshade looked confident, but in her eyes there was a drive, a hunger. Stratus noticed it immediately.

The race started and Stratus was moved to the pavilion area where the Princess would be raising the sun. As he glided to his post, he noticed the race heating up; the two competitors had become a swirl of grey and orange as they jockeyed for position, looking as though they would force each other off the track as they were rounding the halfway point. He turned away just a moment too soon to see the orange pony slam into the grey one. The race was far out of his line of sight when he reached his post; he didn't see the race escalate into a ramming match. All Stratus knew at the time was that after a load of cheering, a breathless pegasus brought Celestia the name of the winner. According to his account, the race was really close until the orange pegasus rocketed into the lead coming out of the shoving match. Celestia nodded and took her position. As an awe-stricken crowd watched, Celestia brought light to the entire land; at exactly the moment the sun reached its peak an announcer stepped onto the stage, taking his place beneath Celestia.

Clearing his throat, the announcer read from a card. "And the winner of the Wonderbolts' Top Flier of Equestria competition is... Spitfire!"

From his position at one side of the stage, Stratus watched the crowd cheer wildly as the young pegasus eagerly strode onto the stage to accept her trophy and the coveted title of "Newest Wonderbolt". Stratus noticed one face in the crowd wasn't smiling. As he looked closer, he noticed the expression on that particular steel-grey face was one of pure rage. Stratus blinked and looked into the crowd again, and his stomach dropped when he saw that same face flying up into the sky, higher than Celestia.

Stratus was among the first of the guards to react; always a slow flier, he lugged his bulky armor-covered frame up after the speedy pegasus as she rocketed straight up. Reaching an impossibly high point above the crowd, she turned towards the stage. Tucking her wings back, she threw her body forward and dropped like a missile. As Stratus ascended he heard her screech, "Spitfire, you bitch! That title is MINE!"

With appalling suddenness, the enraged pony reached PMV and the sky was torn asunder as darkness exploded over Celestia's sunrise. The less experienced members of the Royal Guard were forced to stop mid-flight, unable to see through the black wave of smoke which blotted out the sun; the more bold veterans, Stratus included, charged forward anyway. After a few seconds that seemed like an eternity, Celestia managed to blast away the black cloud of magic with a flare of sunlight, revealing the scene above her. Two guard pegasi under Stratus's command were on an intercept course and closing in on Nightshade. Stratus's blood ran cold. He knew from years of being on the Royal Guard that if either pegasus collided with her at that speed the impact alone could well kill her. The fact that both guards were wearing the standard issued edged armor didn't help the crazed mare's chances. In spite of all this, the most dangerous factor was the fall; from that height, if she landed wrong she ran the risk of shattering her bones.

Stratus knew he would never reach Nightshade in time. Straining his wings, he blasted toward the closer guard, shouting ahead of him, "Decelerate, you foal! You'll cut her in half at that speed!" He tossed off his armor in direct defiance of protocol. It gave him just the boost of speed he needed. Just in the nick of time, Status collided full force with the guard closer to him; he could not stop the other from grazing Nightshade with an outstretched armor-clad wing. In a flash of blood, the grey pegasus was thrown off course and plummeted to the ground. Stratus was also careening downward, dazed from impact. Relying on years of flying experience, he twisted in the air and righted himself, landing hard on his hooves. He looked to where Nightshade fell to see she wasn't so lucky.

Judging by her posture she had managed to flare her wings and skid into the dirt at the least dangerous angle possible but she still tumbled head over hooves, rolling to a stop a few dozen yards away. Stratus sprinted to her side. Just before he reached her, another guard cut him off.

"That's enough, Stratus! Step away from the criminal!"

Stratus attempted to push past him. "She's injured, you foal! Without medical attention she could die!"

The younger guard pushed back. "She's a terrorist; she'll get exactly what she deserves."

"She's a kid, damn it!" Stratus slipped to the younger guard's left and turned, slamming a massive rear hoof into his side. The younger guard's gleaming armor folded inward with a loud clank and a crunch. He toppled over with a shout of pain, his ribs cracked.

Nightshade lay in the dirt, dazed and afraid. She could feel the life leaving her. The only warmth she could feel was her own blood pooling around her head. As she drifted out of consciousness, she felt the sensation of being lifted...

Nightshade awoke to bright lights. She took in her surroundings: warm blankets, peaceful room, and the beep of some form of machinery just out of her sight. She gathered she must be in the hospital. In a rush, her memory came flooding back. Everything flashed before her eyes: the race, the fight, the ceremony, Spitfire, herself creating a Nightblast in broad daylight, being hit, feeling cold... Nightshade shuddered as she remembered the feeling of her neck being sliced open. At that moment it struck her that the soreness she was feeling must be that exact wound healing. She slowly tried to crane her head to see it, when a low gruff voice stopped her.

"Don't try to turn your head yet. You'll tear your stitches and bleed out."

Nightshade fought back tears as she turned her upper half to face the massive pegasus in the corner of the room. Trying to take in everything at once, she said the only thing that came to her mind clearly.

"You're the one who saved me."

The pegasus in the corner also kept his emotions unreadable. "You would have died if I hadn't."



The silence which followed seemed to become gradually louder to Nightshade; finally she couldn't stand it anymore, and hesitantly spoke again. "Are you, you know, okay?"

Again the large white pegasus answered without emotion. "Physically, of course; I've taken hits before." He paused momentarily, shifting his weight. Looking directly at Nightshade, he continued. "I was discharged from the Royal Guard for saving your life. Of course the way they framed it was that I was 'disregarding protocol, attacking Royal Guards, and endangering, above all others, Her Highness, Princess Celestia by interfering in the apprehension of a dangerous terrorist.'" Stratus stepped closer, looking down at Nightshade. His face was now perfectly readable. "If that's justice", he spat, narrowing his eyes, "then screw justice."

Stratus turned to leave. He stopped at the door, turning back to Nightshade. With a cynical laugh he said, "Oh yeah, thought you should know this. Not only did that Spitfire get inducted into the Wonderbolts, she became a national hero for surviving your 'terrorist attack.'"

Nightshade's rage boiled over as she leapt from the hospital bed. The rest of her body felt fine, but she held her head perfectly still as not to tear her stitches. She glared back at Stratus with an intensity that impressed the veteran of the Royal Guard. Her voice quivering with fury, she stammered, "She stole that title from me. She knocked me back. She cheated and she took that title from me! That BITCH took my title, my dreams, my aspirations from me!" Nightshade poured all of her willpower into fighting back the tears forming in the corners of her eyes; she refused to look weak. She also knew if she started crying she would never be able to stop.

Stratus snorted. "Well, that's the Wonderbolts for you, I guess."

Nightshade's gaze narrowed. Hatred seeped from her eyes at a low burn. "If that's the Wonderbolts", she growled, "then screw the Wonderbolts."

Stratus met her gaze for a minute. He stood, contemplating the shattered pegasus before him. He couldn't help but see himself in her place; she was young, but strong willed. Finally he said, "I like you, kid. Get back in bed and rest up. We leave in two days."

As Nightshade began to calm down, she began thinking rationally. "I can't leave. I'm a 'terrorist', as you put it. They'll mark me as a criminal on a vengeance mission."

"That's what you are. That's what we both are now. We may as well stick together. And face it, every good criminal needs a partner."

Nightshade turned away from Stratus, considering this. "No," she said, "I'll need more than one..."

# Chapter 2

The Shadowbolts tore across the night sky, their black and purple flight suits providing some camouflage as they left the small urban factory town on the outskirts of Detrot. They flew in formation with Nightshade leading, keeping an eye out for trouble ahead. Starry Skies, a slower flier than the rest, hung back with Stratus, who was hauling the crate full of Spin Juice. His strong wings made him the only pony who could carry it the whole way, but it slowed him down more than Nightshade would have liked. It made them far too vulnerable and more easily spotted. She had Charger and Blitz fly a few dozen yards out to each side to help watch for any unwanted attention. As they approached the sleepy town of Ponyville, Nightshade's nerves heightened; the town was so quiet and quaint it just had to be populated with "nice" ponies. "Nice" ponies tended to be too trusting, too curious; they could cause problems if the gang was spotted. As she always did when she became nervous on missions, Nightshade mentally ran over the dossiers of her team.

She thought each of them over carefully, noting their strengths and weaknesses as they had been presented to her and as she had learned them through experience.

First came Stratus. He started off normal enough, aside from his size. He was a pegasus on the Royal Guard who made up for his clumsy and slow flying with excellence in combat and unflagging bravery. Over the years, he fought many a monster and took down many a criminal. He also lost many a comrade. As the years ticked by, Stratus's spirit darkened. He went from charismatic and outgoing to brooding, gruff, and introverted. He also gained a propensity for unnecessary violence. He would never kill a criminal but he would come quite close to it, even in cases when it wasn't necessary. After a few of these excessive incidents, he was facing dishonorable discharge as though it was a personal goal of his. It was one he attained the week he met Nightshade. Stratus never seemed to miss his military career. If anything, he poured his passions more into being a mentor to Nightshade and training her in combat. It didn't seem to bother him that the Royal Guard dismissed him for "upholding his own personal values as opposed to their own", as he liked to put it. But Stratus, though irrefutably the most

valuable member of the team to Nightshade, was also only one of four other elements of the team.

The easiest to analyze was Starry Skies. Born rich, she grew up an over-privileged pegasus in Cloudsdale. She was always a shining example of the term "Daddy's Little Princess". She always got what she wanted from her parents. Due to being spoiled from the beginning, she never really grew up, which affected her long term; she utterly lacked the ability to cope with not getting what she wanted. She had at one point tried to join the Wonderbolts. However, due to the fact that she had never had to lift a hoof in her life, she was a weak flyer. She flew at above average speeds, but she was uncoordinated and became easily frustrated with her own mistakes. After a pitiful audition she tried to fall back on her father's money once more, bribing the flight team a hefty sum of money. She was turned down, which shattered her spirits.

In the months that followed she hoarded as much of her father's money as she could and left to pursue a life of her own, dedicating herself to two things: irresponsible hedonism and seeking revenge on the Wonderbolts for crushing her dreams. As she was constantly exhausting her limited supply of money pursuing her chosen lifestyle, she began to use her beauty and sophistication to attract young wealthy stallions; in the end, she would always leave them penniless. But Starry Skies, insatiably greedy and horribly spoiled, always wanted more. Her drive to get more money led her to take up pick-pocketing and eventually, cat burglary. It was precisely this skill that got Nightshade's attention; Starry Skies was apprehended by Stratus trying to steal from the abandoned house which served as the hideout for Stratus and Nightshade.

She had snuck in an open window and crept quietly along the floor, avoiding making any noise. As it was nighttime and the house was abandoned, she didn't necessarily need to worry about disturbing anypony, but she knew from experience that unwanted noise brought unwanted attention. She had made it to the main room of the house which Stratus and Nightshade shared; by observing them for the previous week, she knew they'd be out at this hour. She quietly picked her way through their belongings, pocketing stacks of bits. This an easy job, she thought. She would have gotten away with all of Stratus and Nightshade's money had she not gotten cocky and used the front door. As she walked out, she walked right into Stratus. Had he not seen her leaving the building, she

may well have never been caught; upon examining the house, Stratus found nothing out of place except the money in Starry Skies's saddlebags. By sweet talking her way out of being thrown - literally - out through a window, she earned a meeting with Nightshade. Upon learning of her skill at burglary and her seething hatred of the Wonderbolts, Nightshade readily accepted Starry Skies as her second partner.

The third pegasus to ally himself with Nightshade and her duo was Charger. By this point the gang had begun to call themselves the Shadowbolts. They quickly earned a reputation as a formidable street crew in the rough urban neighborhoods of east Clopton and began taking over underground businesses to bring in cash. Stratus would use his size and fighting prowess to muscle out weaker gang leaders, allowing the group to take over underground rings of gambling clubs, stolen goods smugglers, and street racing teams. Though they lacked the numbers to be a full street racing team, Nightshade participated in solo races. No pony could out-fly her, and this flying prowess earned a comfortable living and the attention of one of the best street racers in Equestria: Charger.

Charger was a skilled flyer from a young age. He grew up on the streets of Manehattan, spending more time running around with the dropouts and chasing pretty mares than going to school or work. His flying prowess became his main source of income. While only a bit faster than everypony else in his class, he had the sharpest reflexes by a long shot. His particular skill was Extreme Low-Altitude street-racing; the premise was flying along at less than ten feet off the ground, dodging all of the obstacles in the street. Sometimes the track would be set up as a specific obstacle course. Other times, the participants would simply fly between buildings along a predetermined route and pray no pony stepped out in front of them. Charger excelled at both types of racing. As his reputation grew, so did his crew, and in only a few years' time he became the leader of the best illegal racing crew in Manehattan. Due to the size of his organization he turned to drug smuggling to help support his crew financially; the resulting increase in attention from the authorities drove him to leave Manehattan for Clopton. He excelled there too. As he had before, he soon gained a massive following, and with it, control over most of Clopton's underground. So of course when he heard about a young mare and her two friends taking over rackets in his city, he had to find out more.

An incorrigible womanizer, Charger was at first more impressed with the

appearances of the two mares on the team than he was with their reputation. Being a colt of good instincts, he picked Starry Skies for a gold-digger the second he saw her. He turned his eyes to Nightshade, working his natural charm. But Nightshade was impervious. She already knew Charger's type, his motivations and aspirations. She explained her ultimate goal and the benefits of siding with her, and finally offered him a position on the team, knowing he would refuse at first. When he did she raised the stakes with a simple challenge.

"We race, you and me. One on one. You win, I join you. I win, you join us."

Charger couldn't say no.

The setup of the race was vastly complex, as Nightshade expected it to be. Charger was playing to his strengths. Tight quarters, sharp turns, and only two straight stretches of track. If Nightshade was to win the race, she would have to do it there. The second the race began Nightshade rocketed ahead, going through the obstacles as swiftly as she could, swerving, dodging, braking, and flaring her wings at the last second to catch a hairpin turn time and time again. Even on this short obstacle course Nightshade's wings grew tired; she was far more accustomed to flying in open air. About halfway through the course, a few turns before the first straightway, Charger blew past Nightshade as though he had flown the frustrating track every day of his life. Nightshade scrambled to the open straightway and rocketed forward, taking the lead again. However, as she turned the last few obstacles before the final straightway, Charger passed her once more, bumping her into a bale of hay. Nightshade wasted precious seconds righting herself. By the time she got to the straightway, Charger was almost halfway across. Nightshade blasted forward at breakneck speeds. Her goggles pressed hard on her eyes. As she accelerated as fast as she could, she felt herself reaching a critical point; all at once black smoke exploded around her as she overtook Charger. Blinded, Charger crashed and slid over the finish line two full seconds after Nightshade.

While he was furious that he had lost, Charger was vastly impressed that Nightshade had reached PMV on such a short straightway. He readily joined the talented pony and her team, eager to expand his business and get into all kinds of trouble with his new friends.

The final and most recent addition to the team was Blueball Blitz. Blitz was

a different breed. She was smaller and lighter than the other Shadowbolts, more than likely due to the fact that she was younger than all of them; she had hardly reached adulthood when she joined. She had an unbelievable amount of raw talent as a racer, but never had the patience or discipline to participate in more than a couple of scattered street races every other week or so. She also displayed heavy signs of mental instability from a young age. She seemed to have an inability to assess or acknowledge any form of risk; while this meant that she had to be supervised almost constantly, it also helped her become a virtuoso flyer and stuntmare. Due to having no fear of death, Blitz was able to fly faster, brake later, turn sharper, and dive longer than any other pegasus would ever dare to. This lack of fear also earned her a job as a vent clearer for one of Cloudsdale's Storm Cloud factories. After the clouds were made they needed to be passed through a vent to a high-energy conductor which charged them with lightning. At times clouds would get stuck on the way through. It was Blitz's job to fly into the vent and kick the clouds through so the machinery wouldn't back up. This job paid extremely well, but was also extremely high risk. Every time Blitz went into the vent she had a chance of being pushed into the conductor by an incoming cloud. And one fateful day that was exactly what happened.

Blitz had gone in to clear a particularly large cloud, which wouldn't budge. She slammed into it with her entire body. When it broke free, she fell in after it. She turned to dart away and ran right into another cloud which pushed her into the conductor. All her coworkers could do was watch in horror as the bubbly blue pony was hit with thousands of volts of electricity, enough to kill most pegasi. After about a minute, she came out on the other end of the conveyor belt unconscious and still crackling with electricity. In only a few weeks she recovered fully, but seemed to become even less mentally stable. She began to display violent tendencies, attacking her own doctors. The day she fled medical supervision was the day the blue pony discovered the skill that would make her one of the greatest assets to the Shadowbolts.

Blitz had trampled one of her supervising doctors, and authorities were on their way to the medical facility to take her away. She couldn't comprehend why; she just wanted the doctor to go away. "If I wanted to kill him, I would have stomped on his stupid head, not his body, you dumb doctors", she muttered to herself as she lazily bound through the glass window of her room. Wiping the blood from the cuts on her face, she accelerated to

escape the mental hospital as quickly as possible, making wind noises with her mouth as she flew. As Blitz tore through the sky away from the medical facility she felt the electricity surging through her. Her whole body felt as if it were vibrating. The air around her began to crackle. She accelerated even harder. Bolts of lightning began to shoot past her. The electricity in her body present since her accident seemed to agitate, and small currents of electricity jumped off of her body, joining the lightning all around her. With one final push, she reached PMV and her mind shut down. She stopped thinking and began to feel. Time slowed to a crawl. A lightning bolt floated lazily past Blitz, and a sudden urge struck her. Almost involuntarily she grabbed onto it, laying her body along it; energy surged through her, and it became all that mattered. She pulled and the lightning bolt moved with her. By guiding it she was able to make it turn with her body, making it an extension of herself. She flew this way for a few minutes, past a group of other pegasi. She couldn't help but giggle at how slowly they were flying; they looked immobile. She waved and giggled loudly as she passed them. After a while, the lightning began to flicker; Blitz felt herself tiring. She guided the lightning to the ground at an angle, flared her wings, and braked, skidding to a stop. As her senses returned to normal, she realized her ears were filled with ringing. She was breathless. Her whole body felt sore. Her hooves felt as though they were on fire. Looking back at the patch of open grass where she landed, she saw a scorched patch of earth with deep charred skid marks leading to where she stood. The realization struck her that she had literally ridden the lightning. Her luminous pink eyes widened.

"Cool!" Blitz grinned from ear to ear, her mane now buzzing with electrical charges.

"Very cool indeed", called a crisp voice from behind her. Blitz turned to see the group of ponies she had passed earlier. She couldn't help but notice the pink one, how well her flight suit fit, the way she stood. Blitz was immediately entranced by her big blue eyes. She zipped over to the pegasi and skidded to a stop in front of Starry Skies.

"Hey there," chirped Blitz. "What's your name? My name's Blueball Blitz. You can call me Blitz for short!" Still grinning, Blitz began to blush.

Before Starry Skies could respond, Nightshade stepped in between them. "You rode lightning. I've never seen a pegasus do that until now.



Blitz quickly looked back to the scorch she left on the earth, as though to make sure it was still there. "Neither have I! The doctors say I shouldn't fly like that because they say it may be a sort of mental trigger or something, but I don't really know what that means so I don't listen to them because they're boring, which is why sometimes I have to attack them so they go away and stop boring me so much so I can get out and have some fun!"

Nightshade blinked and continued. "Miss... Blitz, was it? How would you like to be a part of my team? You'd get to fly as fast as you wanted on certain missions, and on others you'd get to attack whoever you wanted. How's that sound?"

Blitz's mane stood on end and began to crackle violently. "That sounds SO AWESOME!" She shook hooves with Nightshade, causing Nightshade's mane to stand on end too. Blitz giggled at this. And so the fifth Shadowbolt was born.

Nightshade withdrew herself from thought. It seemed they made it over the town okay. They were approaching the edge of a forest. they were totally safe once they were over it. Nothing had gone wrong.

"Hey, Nightshade!" Charger called. "We got company!"

Nightshade's stomach turned. She stopped and spun around to see a sky blue pony with a rainbow colored mane racing towards the gang.

Nightshade sighed to herself. "I really didn't wanna have to go through this tonight", she muttered. Turning to her team, she called out, "Charger! Blitz! Take care of her!"

# Chapter 3

Rainbow Dash had been doing one of the things she does best when she happened to see something interesting. She was just perfecting her slalom using the trees at the edge of the Everfree forest when she looked up and saw a group of pegasi she had never seen before. Leading the group was a dark grey one with a blue mane; out to either side of her was another, a slightly darker grey colt with a mohawk on one side and a blue pony who looked to be about Rainbow's age if not younger out on the other side. In back of the group was a lean sexy pink pegasus who was flying with a massive white stallion lugging a crate. The thing Rainbow Dash noticed most about these pegasi was that they all had matching flight suits. She was instantly jealous; she had to find out where to get one. She raced towards the group, eager to find out where this flashy group of fliers got their gear.

"Hey, you guys! Wait up!" she called, ascending to their height. The lead pegasus shouted something to the ones out to each side. They turned around and started flying towards Rainbow Dash, much to her delight. The dark grey colt flew up to her; the blue mare stayed a few yards back. Now that she was closer, Rainbow Dash noticed that her mane and tail seemed to have electricity flashing through them.

"Whoa", she murmured to herself.

The grey colt came within a few feet of Rainbow Dash and spoke to her in a smooth but firm tone. "There's nothin' to see here, sweetheart. You should go home."

Rainbow Dash was undeterred. "But I just wanna know where you got those cool fli-"

Charger cut her off by placing a hoof over her mouth, and speaking even more smoothly. "Come on now gorgeous, be a good girl and go on home. This is a dangerous place for a pretty mare like you", he crooned.

The plan backfired. Rainbow Dash became angry, swatting away Charger's

hooves. "Back off, dude! I don't even roll that way!"

The grey pegasus hovered, thinking. He turned to his comrade. "Blitz, keep an eye on me. You'll know when to make this interesting."

Rainbow Dash's anger continued mounting; she became aggressive, bringing her face near Charger's as she shouted, "Make WHAT interesting, chump?"

Before Rainbow Dash had a chance to react, Charger brought the edge of a hoof across her face, snapping her head to the side. He darted away from her, shouting behind him, "Come get me, girly!"

Rainbow Dash rocketed after him, yelling ahead, "You're toast, you jerk!" Charger stopped just short of the forest, letting Rainbow Dash charge at him full speed. At the last second, he rolled out of the way causing her to careen past him, straight at a wall of trees. She flared her wings hard and managed to turn just in time. The very tips of tree branches whizzed past her stomach as she turned around and stopped, facing away from the forest. She looked around to see the grey pegasus coming at her like a freight train. She readied herself, drawing back a hoof; the second he got close enough, she'd knock his lights out. Just as Charger was closing in, Rainbow Dash threw her hoof forward with all her might, spinning herself around. At the last second, the colt turned straight up and flew over Rainbow Dash at perfect ninety degree angles, something she didn't believe possible.

From her position over the trees, Blitz giggled and cheered. "Woo! Go Charger!"

Rainbow Dash looked into the forest. Hovering in a clearing in the trees, smiling devilishly, was Charger. Rainbow Dash darted in after him, feeling confident. "I've been flying this stretch of forest for years now; there's no way he can out maneuver me here", she thought to herself.

As it turned out, she was wrong. She chased Charger high and low, left and right, through the tightest clusters of branches that allowed room to fly through. He was deliberately avoiding open space and with good reason. Any time he went longer than a few seconds without turning, Rainbow Dash would catch up to him, only to lose him again at a hairpin turn. A few

times he even went so far as to do a loop and end up behind her, which infuriated her to no end. Finally it became so frustrating that Rainbow Dash had to think of a way to outsmart this agile flier. She cut a hard right and exited the forest, gliding along the tree line. Upon catching sight of Charger she anticipated his flight path and rushed ahead, darting in on an intercept course. For a moment it seemed like she would tackle Charger right out of the air. At the last second he caught sight of her and dropped extra low. His belly brushed the ground as Rainbow Dash whizzed over him. Despite evading the attack, Charger was not happy. He didn't like close calls that he didn't set up on purpose, and that was as close as he was about to let any call get. He turned his head skyward as Rainbow Dash curved around for another charge.

"Blitz, eyes on me!"

Charger blasted off in a straight line, trying to put as much distance between himself and Rainbow Dash as possible. Rainbow Dash blasted forward, accelerating as fast as she dared to accelerate this low to the ground. She was gaining on him, but he had a massive lead.

Meanwhile, Blueball Blitz watched intensely from above. She made her way over to a more strategic position, deeper in the forest. With the tree line on Charger's left, Blitz knew she'd be less visible if she were to stay to his right. She bolted ahead of them both, settled down in the shadow of a tree, and waited patiently. When she saw the two ponies approach, she blasted upwards.

Charger poured all of his strength into accelerating forward, but Rainbow Dash kept gaining on him. Finally, she felt as though with one more push she just might reach him. She pushed forward a little more, reaching dangerously high speeds for her current altitude. Suddenly, she was forced to throw her hooves into the dirt and flare her wings, skidding to a very hard stop. A lightning bolt had cut her off, shooting across her path completely horizontally. Rainbow Dash followed it with her eyes. It arced up high into the sky like a firework, but instead of exploding, it curved high over her head and suddenly blasted straight towards her. Before she could move, it struck the ground to her right.

Rainbow Dash never had a chance to react to the dark blue pegasus skidding towards her; she drew back her rear hooves and slammed them

into Rainbow Dash's side. The fierce electric buck sent Rainbow Dash sprawling across the ground with a loud crack. She felt a popping sensation in her side as she rolled along the ground, somehow managing to hold her wings to her body to prevent them from being snapped. She rolled to a stop just outside the treeline. Her body twitched and jerked; she tried to scream in pain, but the muscles in her throat were still seizing up. As the electric current subsided, Rainbow Dash began to regain a degree of control. She weakly voiced the only thought she had.

"H-help..."

Rainbow Dash tried to stand, but the explosive pain in her side caused her legs to buckle. Her breathing became quick and shallow; it hurt to inhale. She knew she wasn't in immediate danger of dying, but she had to fight to keep from passing out from the pain. Her vision blurred. A grey blob suddenly hovered over her. A crisp voice said to nopony she could see, "What a shame. The Shadowbolts could have used a flier like that." She heard the clop of hooves trotting away. The sound of hooves grew again as somepony stepped into Rainbow Dash's fading line of sight. It was the blue pegasus. She had removed her flight goggles and Rainbow Dash had the privilege of looking into her bright pink eyes. The contracted irises acted as funnels for the insanity pouring out of them. She was grinning from ear to ear.

Blueball Blitz leaned close to the sky blue pony and spoke in a bubbly voice, barely audible over the violent crackling of her mane. "Bye-bye, cutie-pie! Sleep tight!" She giggled and kissed Rainbow Dash on the forehead before turning and popping her right in the mouth with a swift hind hoof. Rainbow Dash's head snapped back, and she succumbed to her injuries, fading out of consciousness.

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Apple Jack ambled gently along in the cool night breeze. Having worked hard all day, she felt that she needed to do something to help her relax. She just happened to be out for a peaceful night walk when she saw the bolt of lightning strike the edge of the Everfree Forest. She thought nothing of it until that same bolt of lightning left the forest at a horizontal angle, arced upward in a massive circle, and struck again.

"Now what in tarnation was THAT?"

Worried somepony may be in danger, Apple Jack began to walk towards the forest. As she got nearer, she saw a troupe of pegasi flying away. One of them was carrying a large crate. Something stirred in Apple Jack's stomach. Her blood ran cold. She became stricken with worry, then fear, then all out panic as she sprinted to the edge of the forest. She felt, she knew, something about those pegasi spelled trouble. As she crested the slight hill leading to the treeline, she saw a crumpled shape in the moonlight. She would have missed it had it not been bright blue. Apple Jack's heart began to race as she ran towards the blue shape; upon getting closer, her suspicions were confirmed. It had a rainbow colored mane and tail. It wasn't moving.

"RAINBOW DASH!"

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Rainbow Dash awoke to the sound of hooves and her name being called. Her immediate first reaction was to scream in pain; her ribs felt as though they were being pried from her body. As she began to gain a bit of control, she spat out a mouthful of blood. She was relieved to find that it came from a severely split lip as opposed to a punctured lung. Craning her neck, she looked around and saw an orange earth pony trotting mercifully towards her. No longer in a state of total panic, Rainbow Dash let tears of pain, frustration, and shame flow freely from her eyes. Apple Jack began to run upon hearing Rainbow Dash sob, and when she reached her friend, she couldn't help but gasp.

Rainbow Dash's side had swollen up where her ribs were clearly cracked if not broken altogether. Her mouth was red and swollen from where she had gotten kicked. Apple Jack quickly put her muzzle under Rainbow Dash's head and began to help her up.

"Now don't you fret none, sugar cube", Apple Jack said nervously, scarcely concealing the trembling in her rushed voice. "You're gonna be alright. We're gonna get you to Nurse Redheart right away, ya hear?"

Rainbow Dash whimpered in pain as she forced herself to her feet. She leaned her uninjured side against Apple Jack as they began the slow

painful walk to the Ponyville Hospital.

Luckily, Nurse Redheart was awake, tending to a pony with a stomach virus. Upon seeing Rainbow Dash, she also gasped. Nurse Redheart helped her into a bed, gave her a mild sedative, and started her on an IV to restore hydration. When Rainbow Dash complained that she couldn't sit comfortably Nurse Redheart also administered a mild painkiller which helped to calm Rainbow Dash down considerably. She dimmed the lights as she walked out with Apple Jack in tow. Outside of her room, Nurse Redheart interrogated Apple Jack about Rainbow Dash's condition.

"Apple Jack, what happened to that poor pony? No mere flying accident could crack her ribs like that. And she looks like she took a hoof to the mouth!"

"Ah couldn't tell ya exactly what went on, Nurse Redheart. Ah'm not too sure mahself. All Ah know is Ah saw this crazy bolt of lightning strike the Everfree Forest and then shoot back up in the sky and strike it again. Ah rushed over to see what all the commotion was, and Ah saw these five nasty looking pegasus ponies flyin' away. Ah'd never seen 'em before, but from what Ah can gather, they messed up Rainbow real bad."

Nurse Redheart was shocked; violence was never a problem in Ponyville. "Do you know if she's made any enemies recently?"

"Well, she can be a mite hard to get along with at times, but Ah can't think'a any reason anypony would haul off n' wail on poor Rainbow Dash like that."

Nurse Redheart nodded. She made some quick notes on Rainbow Dash's chart and moved to walk away when something stopped her.

From the room a scratchy voice called weakly. "AJ..."

Apple Jack's face was stricken with worry. "Ah'm comin, sugar cube."

Apple Jack stood by Rainbow Dash's side as she tried to explain the events of the evening. "They call themselves the Shadowbolts. They're a group of pegasi. Criminals or something. They had a big box with them." She coughed, causing her to wince in pain

Apple Jack could tell her friend was struggling. Gently she coaxed, "Take yer time, sugar cube. No pony's rushin' you."

Rainbow Dash continued, dazed from her injuries and the painkillers. "There was one named Charger, and one named Blitz. Blitz was the one who hit me. She's got some weird power. She can ride a lightning bolt."

"That musta been what Ah saw", Apple Jack muttered to Nurse Redheart.

Rainbow Dash finished. "I tried to catch them, but they were too fast." Tears came to her eyes as she said this. She looked up at Apple Jack. Her voice cracked as she spoke. "It's a good thing you came along when you did. Otherwise I might have had to tell everypony I won the fight", she laughed weakly, wincing once more. Apple Jack wrapped her front legs around her friend's neck, resting her chin on her head.

Nurse Redheart moved toward the door, softly saying, "I'll give you two some time."

Rainbow Dash was silent for a moment, but Apple Jack could feel her tears on the base of her neck. Rainbow Dash spoke again in a whisper. "I was so scared, AJ."

"Ah was too, sugar cube. For a minute, Ah thought you were..." Apple Jack's lips trembled furiously; she couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence. Tears flowed freely from her emerald eyes. She kept Rainbow Dash wrapped in her forelegs for a few minutes longer, pressing her face into Rainbow Dash's mane; she feebly returned the hug with one foreleg, crying softly into Apple Jack's neck. Finally, as she began to calm down, Rainbow Dash spoke again.

"If you tell anypony you saw me cry, I'll buck your teeth out."

Apple Jack laughed weakly, wiping her eyes. As she gazed upon the fragile face of the blue pony before her, she was again moved with emotion, and an urge struck her; she moved her face towards Rainbow Dash's. She stopped only when she remembered her painfully swollen mouth; hesitating, she raised her lips and lovingly kissed her friend on the forehead, hoping she hadn't sent the wrong message to her. She hadn't, judging by the weak smile of understanding and appreciation on Rainbow



Dash's battered face. Though she said nothing, Rainbow Dash felt her heart flutter; the gesture was nicer and was much more welcome coming from kind beautiful Apple Jack, her dearest friend, than from murderous wild-eyed Blueball Blitz, the psychopath who nearly ended her life. Rainbow Dash pulled from the hug, wincing in pain, and spoke again.

"We've got to get Twilight to tell Celestia about the Shadowbolts. Those pegasi are a dangerous bunch."

Apple Jack nodded in agreement. "It sure is a dark sky that that bunch flies in. Ah'm just glad yer alright."

"Me too. I'm gonna get some rest, AJ. Come see me in the morning." The final sentence seemed to be more of a plea than a command. Apple Jack nodded and ran a gentle hoof over Rainbow Dash's ear and mane before she walked out. Each pony prayed her blush would not be noticeable to the other.

As Rainbow Dash sat in the dark quiet room, her thoughts turned back to the Shadowbolts, specifically Blitz. Those insane eyes were burned into her mind forever. As Rainbow Dash sat wincing in pain every time she inhaled, she found a new resolution to work towards once she was fully healed.

Rainbow Dash vowed to take down the Shadowbolts by any means necessary.

# Chapter 4

Blitz flew along restlessly, circling the group, doing barrell rolls, and making wind noises with her mouth. As this continued to grate on Stratus's nerves, he began to grind his teeth. Finally he shouted in exasperation, "Blitz, did you kill that filly?"

Blitz rolled over to Stratus, hovering just over his head. Craning her neck to look at him upside down, she responded, "Nah. She was too cute to kill. Why? Did you think she was pretty, too?"

Stratus grunted. "We don't need the extra attention that comes with killing innocents."

Blitz shrugged.

As Blitz circled the group she did something she rarely ever did: she became lost in thought. She couldn't help but ponder at Stratus's aversion to killing ponies. Killing can be fun, she thought, and Stratus really enjoys fighting. I don't get why he doesn't ever finish the job. Blitz frowned as she struggled to see through Stratus's eyes. How can a pony as grouchy and scary as Stratus not see that some ponies just need to stop being alive?

Blitz thought back to the first time she had killed a pony, the day she escaped the mental institution.

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Sleep. Eat. Medication. Therapy. Group time. Eat. Medication. Alone time. Eat. Medication. Sleep. Life had become numbers on a chart. Life had become a clockwork hell, predictable and boring, day in and day out. The first few days were almost fun, like a game. Blitz eagerly took the pills, played the games, talked with the other "crazy" ponies. It was all a game. But then day two was the same. And day three was the same. And day four was the same. More pills, more dull conversation with other sedated ponies, more talking to droning doctors in dull white coats. Some days were more tolerable than others. Sometimes there was some action. Every so

often a pony would have an outburst and start breaking things or screaming and running around, eyes full of fear. Blitz loved when this happened. It always made her feel... alive. Less than a week before her escape Blitz had witnessed the breakdown that prompted her to decide to leave.

The day had started boring enough. Everything happened right on schedule. But during group time that changed. Just as one of the more boring ponies was beginning to drone on about how he saw ponies that weren't really there, the doors burst open. A brown colt with an hourglass cutie mark stood in the doorway, his chest heaving. His eyes were what Blitz noticed most. They weren't wild or panicky. They were full of fire, determination, life. Unlike the other ponies who went wild, this colt didn't seem frantic and scared. He wasn't running aimlessly. He was looking for a way out. After a few seconds he spoke in a rich powerful voice.

"Where is it? Where's my phone box? I need to get out of this dimension, damn it!"

He began to cross the room when the doors at the opposite end burst open. Two burly earth ponies in white coats moved towards the brown colt.

"Doc, we need you to come with us."

The brown colt lowered his head, backing way indignantly. "It's 'Doctor', not 'Doc'! I'm a Time Lord, you bloody foal!"

Two more strong earth ponies approached him from behind. Suddenly one reared up and planted his front hooves on the brown colt's flank hard enough to buckle his hind legs.

The second planted a firm hoof between his shoulders, holding him tight.

"Release me! You don't know what you're interfering with!"

From the front, a third pony approached with a needle. Blitz recognized those needles; they were full of extra strong medicine. She hated them. They made ponies so slow and quiet. Sometimes they put them to sleep altogether. The brown colt turned his eyes to Blitz. Commanding her attention, he shouted, "You! You're young, you're strong! Resist! Fight back! If you can get out, you can let all of us out! Don't take the medicine!"

With calmness and precision the burly pony jabbed the needle into the brown colt's neck and his screams of protest fell silent. The four big ponies dragged him out of the room.

The other ponies crowding around began to slowly resume their dull dispositions; the affect the needle had on the crazed Doctor seemed to spread by osmosis. The sight of such a strong brave colt being taken down seemed to crush every pony's spirit further. All except Blitz. Blitz resolved right then and there that the Doctor had the right idea, just not the right methods; Blitz thought to herself, He coulda made it out! Had he rushed those big dummies instead of backing up, he coulda made it!

That night Blitz didn't take her medicine. The next day she no longer felt sluggish, calm, carefree. For the first time in weeks she felt like flying. But she knew she wouldn't be able to pull off an escape just yet. The day crawled by, but when the medicine came around Blitz held the pill in her cheek long enough for the doctor to look away, at which point she spat it into the nearest trash bin. She did the same with her night pills.

Over the next three days Blitz continued her little routine; this was her kind of game. Cheeking pills, feigning sedation, and carefully watching the doctors, seeing which ones were faster or stronger or smarter, noting which ones came by her room more often. It all became a matter of waiting for the young meek colt to come by; not only was he physically no threat, but Blitz could tell he was afraid of her, and with good reason. In the past few days her subtle increase in energy had become completely noticeable and had put everypony on edge, including the other patients. She had finally snapped and put a swift hoof to a doctor's chin. This got her locked in her room for the next two days. She was only visited at meal and medication time by one of two doctors, a bold and assertive mare and the meek colt.

The day he came into her room, she was ready for him. He didn't stand a chance. As he stepped closer to her with the needle in his mouth, she made her move. A turn, a buck, and his head snapped back. The needle skittered across the floor. The other doctor outside started screaming and an alarm was raised. Blitz panicked. Her doctor was groggy but still standing. She reared and stomped on his shoulder, bringing him to the floor. His grunts of pain became sobs of fear as Blitz slammed her front hooves into his sides again and again. Finally there was a sobering crunch. The doctor whimpered and coughed a spray of red onto the white tile floor.

Blitz giggled nervously. "Oopsie."

Blitz knew the doors were no longer an option. The window didn't have a screen or bars in it. With a crash she leapt through it face first and accelerated towards a new life.

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"Blitz, are you even awake?"

Blitz shook herself from thought. Apparently she and the other Shadowbolts were now closing in on the rim of south Manehattan. This is where they would meet their contact and make the exchange.

"Yup! Are we there yet?"

Starry Skies indicated the scattering of lights below. "It would seem so, dear."

The group circled in and landed just inside of the city in an open lot, presumably where a building would soon be erected. This city was considerably less innocent than Ponyville; despite the darkness a few ponies were still out. A young mare with a feather in her mane stood on a nearby corner with her tail held high and her face painted up with cheap make-up. An old stallion, probably once young and strong like Charger, stumbled out of a building across the street. He teetered on two hooves for a moment before flopping over on the ground, mumbling incoherently. A bottle rolled out of one of his saddlebags.

Nightshade surveyed the city before them. Turning to Stratus and the rest of the group she commanded, "Our contact is in that office building over there. Don't cause trouble. No pony should bother us here; these ponies are used to bad company."

Upon entering the windowless building the group was greeted by another small group of ponies. Two large earth ponies stood in each corner of the dimly lit room. They were clearly security. A dark green unicorn mare with sky blue eyes and a spiky blue mane sat between them. She remained silent as the Shadowbolts filed into the room. When all five had entered,

she stood and looked straight to Charger. He stopped cold. With his flight goggles still on it was difficult to read his emotions. Still staring him down, the unicorn spoke in a low, refined voice.

"Charger, how nice to see you again, dear. It looks like you survived Manehattan."

Charger cracked a bitter smile. "And Clopton." He gave a hollow laugh. "I almost didn't recognize you, Sharkey. It's been awhile."

Sharkey held her poker face. "That it has." She paused, smiling. "Surely you aren't still in a tiff about that little incident back home, sweetie." The final word dripped from Sharkey's lips as more of a taunt than a pet name.

Nightshade stepped forward, breaking the electric tension in the room. "Miss Sharkey, if you don't mind, I'd like to get this train rolling."

Sharkey took a step forward from her seat, her horn glowing. Starry Skies felt Stratus tense up in anticipation of trouble as she unhooked the crate of Spin Juice from Stratus's harness. She rolled it towards the center of the room. Nightshade stopped it with a hoof. Sharkey, using magic, rolled her own crate forward. She and the crate stopped about a foot away from Nightshade. At the same time, each pony shoved the crate on their side to the other pony.

Nightshade weighed up her odds. Sharkey was unarmed, technically, but unicorns could be dangerous with magic. From this distance, Nightshade wouldn't be able to respond in time if attacked. It all came down to numbers; there were five Shadowbolts versus Sharkey and two guards. Starry Skies wasn't much in a fight, but Charger, Nightshade, and Stratus had seen everything from gang brawls to all-out military assaults. And Blitz was fast and reckless enough to provide a challenge for anypony. That put four solid fighters against three. Nightshade relaxed a hair as Sharkey busied herself inspecting a bottle of Spin Juice. Mirroring her, Nightshade opened the crate on her end and pulled out the five smaller boxes inside, tossing one to each member of her team. They eagerly opened them, pulling out the contents.

Each box contained four steel shoes with leather straps. On each front shoe were two long, curved blades protruding forward from each side of the

hoof. Each rear shoe had similar shorter blades on the front and a single long blade coming out of the back.

"Hoof Blades. You have no idea how much trouble I had to go through to get them here."

Blitz strapped hers on. She pawed at the air and kicked a few times, trying them out. "Ooh, cozy!"

Sharkey continued, smiling "Of course. They're fitted to the specifications Nightshade gave me." After a moment she continued, "So where are the other crates?"

Stratus's ears perked up. He slowly began to turn towards Sharkey's guards. Charger walked around to the other side of Nightshade.

"What other crates?", Nightshade asked.

Sharkey's smile left her face. "We agreed on five crates for the blades."

"No, our agreement was five cases for five sets of blades. There's five cases in that crate. We're even."

Sharkey's voice rose. As she took a more aggressive stance her guards took a step forward. "The agreement was five CRATES, Nightshade!"

"You're wrong, Sharkey!"

"I'll be keeping the payment until you've given me the product!"

Nightshade turned, her temper flaring. "Eat me, Sharkey. You have what you asked for. We're leaving."

"The hell you are, bitch!"

Sharkey darted forward, slamming the door shut with magic. Her guards moved to stop Nightshade, but were intercepted by Charger and Stratus. Charger, wearing his blades, turned and slammed both rear hooves into the face of his attacker. He reared back, blood flowing from his mangled muzzle. Before he could react Charger flew up and slammed his front

hooves down on top of his head, throwing the incapacitated guard to the floor. Simultaneously, Stratus had taken down his opponent using an old Royal Guard move: a swift hind hoof to a front leg dropped his face to the floor, where Stratus shattered his jaw with a stomp. The two stallions turned to Sharkey.

Sharkey was sending blast after blast of magic at Blitz, striking the spots the pony had been just a split second before. None of the Shadowbolts could make a move with bolts of magic - and Blitz - flying around the room so quickly. Finally Blitz bounded forward and tackled Sharkey, stomping her horn and pinning her to the floor. She held a blade to her throat.

Helpless without her magic, Sharkey turned her eyes to Charger. "Charger! Please! You can't let her do this!"

Charger walked over to Sharkey. His face was blank. Blitz looked up at him, grinning. "It's your call, Charger."

Leaning down, Charger brought his face level with Sharkey's. Looking into her eyes, he hissed, "Sorry, Sharkey. It's only business."

"No, Charger! Please!"

Charger turned to leave, followed by Starry Skies, Stratus, and Nightshade. As he walked out the doorway, he said without looking back, "Do it."

Blitz leaned her weight forward. There was a wet slicing sound. Blitz raised her blood covered face, smiling. "All done!"



# Chapter 5

Charger stomped along ahead of the group, eager to get to the Shadowbolts' Fillydelphia safe house. Nightshade walked behind him, keeping a careful watch. Blitz hopped gleefully around, ostensibly oblivious to the blood on her face and mane. Bringing up the rear, Stratus pulled the large crate which now contained five cases of Spin Juice and five sets of hoof blades. Starry Skies walked along beside him. She had always enjoyed his and Charger's company most, and despite his unapproachable demeanor, he was always a bit less gruff with her. His presence was comforting to her; his strength and bravery made up for her lack thereof. Finally to break the silence, she spoke.

"Stratus, do you know what's wrong with Charger?"

"He had some history with that dealer. Not sure what kind of history exactly. He should be fine."

At that moment Blitz landed gently between the two. "Charger will be okay. He stopped crying a few blocks back."

Starry Skies was taken aback at this. "I've never seen Charger cry."

Stratus looked to Blitz, his face devoid of emotion as usual. "Blitz, why'd you kill that little mare?"

Blitz reared up and shrugged. "I dunno. Charger said to. It was fun."

Stratus gave a grunt. "I just don't get you, kid. You kill like it's nothing."

Blitz rolled over onto her back, hovering in mid air. Looking up at the night sky she responded, "It is. Death hasn't really bothered me since Mom, Dad, and Sissy died in that fire. After that, the idea of ponies dying didn't really bother me. They just stop being here. No big deal."

Up ahead, Charger's mind was elsewhere. He was entirely unaware his hooves were carrying him forward. His mind kept drifting backward to the

streets of Manehatten.

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Age eight.

Charger sat on the floor, flipping through the little book with its hard cardboard pages. The crudely scribbled ponies before him looked so happy. Their house was a pretty stone one with wood supports and a wood roof. It was nothing like Charger's brick apartment house. There weren't holes in any of their walls. The ponies in the story book didn't have to worry about rats stealing food, or about running out of it, for that matter. Their roof didn't look like it leaked. Charger looked up from the book, sighing.

"Mama, I'm hungry. Can we eat yet?"

Charger's mother raised her head, tossing her unkempt black mane from her purple face. Her tired sunken eyes always seemed to be brimming with tears now days. In a quiet trembling voice, she addressed her young colt. "Charger, maybe you should go outside and play for a bit. Your father will be home soon."

No sooner than the words left her mouth did a stout brown pegasus with a grey mane burst through the door. He reeked of musk and alcohol. His dark eyes scanned the near-empty room and he inhaled deeply. He turned to his wife, speaking in a rough slurry voice.

"Sunflower, the hell are you cooking? Smells awful."

Sunflower cringed a bit. "Leftovers. We don't have anything fresh."

The brown pegasus stepped forward aggressively. "What about that bushel of soft alfalfa?"

The purple pony squirmed in her seat, her voice breaking. "It's for Charger, Thunder, I got it especially for-"

Thunder cut her off, mocking, "'It's for Charger!' Ha! The little shit doesn't contribute, why should he eat? When I was his age I was already pullin' the coal carts! Make his fuckin' ass work for food like I do!"

Thunder stomped towards his wife, still yelling. From behind him he heard a small voice cry out, "Stop being mean to mom!"

Thunder halted and turned, murder in his eyes. "The hell'd you say to me, boy?" He stepped forward as he spat the last word out.

"Thunder, don't!"

Charger stood and boldly faced his father. "Leave her alone!"

Thunder smiled daggers. "Okay then. You want me to be mean to you then, you little bastard? Huh?" Advancing on the cowering colt, he brought the edge of a hoof across his face, hard enough to sprawl him out on the floor.

"You don't talk to me like that, boy! You don't tell me shit! Your ass is mine! I fuckin' own you, boy!" The blows rained down on Charger's face, head, and back, one after another. Finally the drunken pegasus wore himself out. He stopped, coughing and hacking as his chest heaved. Without a word he walked into the kitchen and served himself.

Charger's mother wept in the corner as Charger lay immobile on the floor, sobbing and whimpering quietly.

Age twelve.

Charger sprinted from the house. His father was too drunk to pursue. He didn't care anymore. He just wanted to be gone. He wanted to run until he hit a wall, and if it didn't kill him, he wanted to hit it again. Tears streamed from his eyes as he ran forward. Not looking where he was going, he collided with something soft. He and the pony he ran into sprawled across the dirt of the Manehatten park.

"Ow! Watch where you're going, doofus", a female voice chastised.

Charger stood and wiped the tears from his eyes. Before him stood a rather disgruntled green unicorn filly.

"Sorry", he mumbled, turning away. In a flash of light the filly was in front of

him.

"It's okay", she chirped, brushing the dirt from her blue mane. She was smiling. Charger wasn't used to being smiled at. It made his stomach feel funny. This pretty filly was actually smiling at him; she wasn't yelling or hitting him. He felt his cheeks grow warm.

"My name's Charger", he blurted out, feeling stupid.

The filly giggled. "I'm Sharkey."

The two stood in silence for a moment. Suddenly, Sharkey blurted out, "Hey, I gotta go now. Wanna hang out here tomorrow?"

Charger nodded, unable to speak for the lump in his throat. A friend! I made a friend!

Sharkey giggled again. "Bye, doofus", she chirped. A thick blush rose in her face as she gave him a quick peck on the cheek and sprinted off, giggling.

Age sixteen.

Charger kicked out the fourth-story window. As he was about to leap out he turned to the filly in the bed behind him, chirping, "Later Moonshine!"

"Sunbeam", she corrected, her face falling.

At just that moment a slightly larger pegasus kicked open the door. "What the hell were you doing with my sister?!"

Charger threw himself from the window, plummeting downwards. At the last minute, just inches before his hooves would have hit the ground, he threw his weight upwards, flaring his wings and redirecting his momentum. He rocketed forward, dodging between dozens of stunned pedestrians. Making it across the street, he weaved in to an alleyway, turning to look behind him. The older brother had no chance of pursuing through that kind of traffic. Charger grinned as he took off, rocketing up alleys, throwing himself into hairpin turns. He came up on a plot of building spaced too close together for him to fly through.

At least, to close to fly through upright.

At the last second Charger rolled and held himself in the air, flying with the ground on his right and the sky on his left. The brick of the buildings whizzed by his stomach as his wingtip skimmed a puddle of water. As he exploded out of the alley he barrel-rolled across the busy street and through both open windows of the apartment on the other side. Charger's heart was pounding. He could feel the adrenaline coursing through his veins. His face hurt from smiling. As he rocketed towards the club house of his little gang of delinquents, he thought to himself, Wait till I tell Sharkey about this!

Age twenty one.

Charger rolled over onto his back, his chest heaving as he wiped the sweat from his brow. He stretched his still-rigid wings, shuddering. The figure beside him, also breathless, turned her face towards his. Her soft lips pressed against mouth . He smiled, not breaking the kiss; he'd never been so happy. As the green furred lips broke from his own, he spoke.

"I love you, Sharkey."

She simply smiled, burying her face in his neck and running gentle hooves over his lean body.

The past nine years had been easier for Charger. With the troublemaker Sharkey as a friend, everything seemed a little nicer. And one year before when he finally told her how he felt about her, things became perfect. Having gotten sucked into the underground racing crowd he found his true calling, and after only a few years he ran his own crew of street racing pegasi. They were fast enough to run the little borough of Manehattan in which he had grown up. There was really only one rival group. And they weren't worth dealing with. They were a serious bunch. Dealers. Thieves. Killers. They were run by a series of under bosses, all of whom answered to an extremely wealthy and ruthless pegasus, Rain, who'd had his eye on Charger's turf for a while. Because of his newfound prominence as a racer as well as a gang leader, Charger was untouchable; killing him could start an all-out gang war. Because of this, Rain and Charger had kept an uneasy truce, staying well away from each other to avoid conflict.

Sharkey sat up. "Oh hey, we have that meeting tonight with Derby and his buddies."

Charger rolled out of bed and stood, looking out the window. He felt Sharkey's front hooves on his shoulders as she kissed his face and neck, pressing her warm chest into his back. "Sharkey, I dunno about this race. The set up seems sketchy. Derby's always been straight with us, but I can't figure out why he'd wanna meet at that old packing plant first. We're on the same crew. Something isn't right about him not wanting to use the safe house."

Sharkey crooned into his ear, "It'll be fine, babe. I promise. And don't worry about me, but I'll be a bit late, I've gotta run some errands near Horseshoe park."

Charger tensed. "That's Rain's turf. You be careful."

"You're silly. Rain wouldn't try anything. He's too sophisticated and uppity to draw attention to himself or his crew like that."

Charger grunted in agreement as Sharkey pulled him back onto the bed, her horn glowing with excitement.

That night Charger couldn't shake the feeling of uneasiness as he entered the old packing plant. The place was so dimly lit, and the boxes stacked to the ceiling made it uncomfortably hard to tell how many ponies might be in the room. He walked to the most brightly lit area and pressed his rump against a stack of boxes. If nothing else, he'd see somepony coming. Man, I really wish Sharkey would hurry up; this place is creeping me the hell out, he thought.

Suddenly a pony stepped forward. Charger snapped his wings open, ready to bolt.

"Charger, it's just me!", Sharkey said quickly.

Charger relaxed, stepping forward. As he approached his girlfriend, he couldn't help but feel that something was still wrong. From behind a large shipping container stepped a tall grey pegasus, his short black mane swept back from his face. Charger recognized him simply by his cutie mark, a bit

with a knife through it.

"Rain", Charger hissed. "What the hell are you doing here? Where's Derby?"

Rain chuckled softly. "Derby's dead, Charger. He has been for three days. You were supposed to be killed this morning, but I decided to give you an option." Rain tossed his head, giving Charger a glimpse of the scar running back from his jaw line up the side of his head. "We would make a great team, you know. Join me, Charger."

"Or what?", Charger asked, knowing the answer.

Just then, six large earth ponies entered the lit part of the room, encircling Charger.

Rain gave a cold amused laugh. "Choose wisely, my boy."

"Fuck you, Rain," Charger roared.

Rain smiled. "I told you he wouldn't come around, Sharkey," he sighed. "We better get going, dear, before we miss the train to Fillydelphia. I know you'll just love the loft I've bought us."

Charger's stomach dropped as Rain put a wing over Sharkey. She didn't resist as he craned his neck and planted his open mouth on her own.

Charger heard his tears softly hitting the floor before he realized he was crying. He never saw the first blow coming. In a flash, he was on the floor as the burly earth ponies slammed rough hooves into his face, neck, back, and stomach. There came a pause in the blows as Sharkey stepped forward.

Sharkey looked at Charger, her face blank, with only a fleeting hint of remorse.

"Sorry Charger. It's only business."

With this, Sharkey delivered the blow to the side of Charger's head that rendered him unconscious.

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Charger trudged onward, cold tears still clinging to his eyelashes. He entered the safehouse, presumably unaware of the other Shadowbolts behind him. As Stratus entered dragging the crate, Charger popped open the lid and took a bottle of Spin Juice. Without a word he popped open the bottle, drained its contents, and flopped down on the low cot in his room. The powerful concoction was working its magic; his emotions melted away, making room for a blur of warped sounds and bright colors. Feeling spitefully apathetic, he stood and spread his wings. He was going to blast through the window and fly until he dropped from the sky, to hell with everypony else. With a jolt, Charger attempted to fly forward but instead rotated forward ninety degrees and slammed face first into the floor. He lay there chuckling cynically until he fell asleep.

Nightshade addressed the group, indicating Charger's room. "He actually has the right idea. It's been a long night for all of us. Everypony kick back, get some sleep. Tomorrow's gonna be a bit more fun."



# Chapter 6

It was only a few hours past midnight when Starry Skies crept into Charger's room.

"Charger?"

The drunken pegasus rolled over and sat up, holding his throbbing head in one hoof. As the magical drink began to wear off he felt as though he'd been hit by a freight train. Groggily he inquired, "Why're you up so late, Star?"

Gently, she knelt down beside him. "I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"Well, that's sweet of you. Any particular reason why?"

"You're my friend, dear. And in all honesty, it was a bit unsettling to see you being so emotional. I'm used to you and Stratus being personal symbols of bravery, chivalry, power." She laughed. "Irony, isn't it? A mare from Uptown Cloudsdale finds her shining examples of bold gentlecolts in the company of ruffians like our little group?"

Charger reclined in a more comfortable position, indicating that Starry Skies could sit on the cot next to him. "You're from Uptown Cloudsdale? I didn't know that. You know, you never told me much about you, Star."

She smiled. "There's not much to tell."

The silence hung heavy on the room. Starry Skies, more perceptive than she appeared, quietly asked, "You loved her, didn't you?"

Charger sighed. He explained his history with Sharkey. When he finished he rolled over, facing away from Starry Skies. "It was a long time ago."

Starry Skies rested a gentle hoof on his shoulder. "I understand. I know how long those wounds can take to heal."

Suddenly interested, Charger faced Starry Skies again. "I never picked you as the sentimental type."

Starry Skies chuckled. "I was before all of this. Would you believe I actually saved myself for a colt I thought I was in love with?"

"No way", Charger laughed. "Really? I gotta hear this story."

Starry Skies laid her head on her crossed front hooves and started her story from its beginning, when she left her father's house.

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There were two things that appealed to her from the start: material things and the idea of being the center of attention. These two things were all that Starry Skies had in mind the day she had her father arrange for her to meet with the Wonderbolts to discuss the possibility of her joining their group.

The athletic flight crew sat somewhat uncomfortably in the posh living room. Starry Skies, wearing her best dress, eagerly awaited her father's signal for her to enter the room. As the aging stallion dropped her name she glided gracefully into the room, landing silently on the expensive rug and giving a dainty bow.

"How very nice to meet you all", she said, adding the slightest hints of additional refinement to her moneyed voice.

"As you can see", her father added, "She's very graceful. She's also fairly quick in the air, and has received formal training in aerial ballet. My daughter would add to the team an element of sophistication and beauty that would no doubt draw a crowd with more selective tastes."

Doc, the captain of the team at the time, shifted in his seat. "Well, she seems to be quite the talent, sir, but we ARE first and foremost a stunt flight team. She would have to be able to fly exceptionally fast and with great coordination. She would also have to fit into the team dynamic. We can't agree to allow her to join without at least seeing an audition."

Twenty minutes later, Starry Skies breathed deeply as she began her routine over her father's lake. Speed and coordination; not exactly ballet, but I can do this!, she thought to herself.

She was wrong.

"Miss Skies", Doc said, trying to be gentle, "We simply cannot accept your application. While your determination and perseverance were... interesting, you simply lack proper coordination at higher speeds. And you never accelerated to the speeds we normally fly at. And if you were to crash into an actual crowd like that, you risk killing somepony. I encourage you to train hard, practice daily, and never give up, though; maybe one day you'll fly with us."

Doc and his team walked out, hastily pursued by Starry Skies's father.

"Mr. Doc", the stallion stammered, "You don't understand. My daughter, this is her dream-"

Doc cut him off. "Sir, we realize that. But somepony who flies as slowly as your daughter and is entirely incapable of clearing an obstacle at AVERAGE flying speed will never be a Wonderbolt."

The stallion lowered his voice, his face serious. "Listen. Your group could profit by having my daughter in it. I'm a very powerful businesscolt, I could have you perform at the best venues, you'd get the best endorsement deals... You simply can't lose."

Doc shook his head, tossing his graying mane. "Sir. No amount of money can buy your daughter the skill she needs to join. Good day."

The team turned and left, taking the few aspirations young Starry Skies had with them.

For the next day or so she wouldn't leave her room. She hardly ate or slept. For the first time in her life, simply being part of the Cloudsdale aristocracy was not enough. It shattered her. A couple of over-dramatic, half hearted suicide attempts later she emerged from her depression a bit wiser and considerably darker. Despite being horribly spoiled, Starry Skies realized she had no future if she couldn't learn to solve problems without relying on

her father to solve them for her. However, this change was not entirely positive. With it came a sort of moral apathy; Starry Skies was reborn with enough drive and determination to get what she wanted by her own means, but no qualms about using dishonest means to get it. After a couple of months of selfishly hoarding her father's money she left to pursue her own life with two things in mind. One was finding a steady source of income. The other was somehow, sometime, destroying the Wonderbolts for crushing her dreams.

The days seemed to swirl by as a boring grey blur. Starry Skies had bought a small apartment which she used as a base of operations as she mulled over possible jobs and ponies to rob blind. Finally she took a job as an office worker. The monotonous hell of pushing papers, crunching numbers, and pretending to care about the faceless corporation she stole items and money from daily was only broken when a few of her office friends took her clubbing.

Having been raised as a sophisticated socialite, Starry Skies had never attended a party that did not require formal wear. The food she was used to was small portions of elegantly prepared vegetables fashionable among the aristocracy, not heaping plates of hay fries or platters full of sweets. She had tasted alcohol, but only champagne, and never enough to get her drunk. She had danced, but always in a ballroom setting or as a ballerina, never in a hot, bouncing club where the mares gyrated and grinded upon each other like wild animals. She had never seen so many beautifully liberated ponies, all letting loose and succumbing to such primal urges until now.

And she liked it.

From that first night, which ended around eight the next morning with Starry Skies enjoying a stolen breakfast in the unfamiliar apartment she woke up in, Starry Skies had found her calling in life; hedonism. Every night and every pay check thereafter was spent in a club, drinking, eating, and reveling in the attention paid to her model's figure by the colts and mares. But eventually her father's money began to run out, and her meager pay check couldn't support her refined tastes and horribly unrefined spending habits. Starry Skies found that if she danced a little closer to certain colts or mares, they'd buy her drinks. She took in every little subtle hint of body language she could, using it to earn her more attention. The ponies she

danced with, they wanted her. And they were willing to buy her drinks, and food, and give her a ride home when she was too drunk to fly, all just to be near her. All she had to do was pay attention to them, be flirty and fun and use her appearance to her advantage, and they were putty in her hooves. Some nights she would go out and have the time of her life and not spend a single bit. But the ponies she leached off of wanted more.

She was lucky enough to get away with a dance here, a kiss there, for the first few months. But eventually colts started to hint at the thing Starry Skies refused to give up: sex. Despite her behavior Starry Skies had maintained one last shred of innocence. And she utterly refused to let go of it. The thought of it made her feel unclean. It wasn't that she wished to abstain forever. Far from it. Starry Skies was previously oblivious to dating and the concept of love thanks to her over-protective father. She saw love as it was depicted in the stuffy old ballet stories. She felt she could only achieve true love if she met a beautiful colt willing to give up everything for her in exchange for her innocence and hoof in marriage. That sacrifice was the only way she could ever find a happily ever after.

One night, Starry Skies stumbled upon her prince charming. He was a lean earth pony by the name of Quickstep. His flowing, chestnut colored mane was clinging to his muzzle from perspiration as he glided across the dance floor. He was easily the best dancer in the place. His glistening white coat reflected the lights of the club in a way that made him look like a glowing marble statue. He was confident, good looking, and rich. A perfect target for Starry Skies. She moved in for the kill, drawing him in with a wink. But when he came over and sat next to her he did the last thing she expected: he started an intelligent conversation. No cheesy pick-up lines, no sob-stories, not even the straight-forward, 'Can I buy you a drink?' line. He began to talk to her about the music, which led to a very civilized and engaging discussion about musical theory that brought Starry Skies back to her formal education days.

Starry Skies was so thrown out of her own element that she agreed to see him the next night. And the next. And the next.

Four months later, Starry Skies was head-over-hooves in love. Quickstep was perfect. He was fun and witty. He was a gentlecolt. He was sophisticated, but not stuffy. He was rich, but not opulent or greedy. And most of all, he had no problem supporting her. He truly was her Prince

Charming. Finally after weeks of her dropping hints, he asked her to marry him.

That night, Starry Skies made a decision. It was time for happily ever after. She anxiously waited in the bed for Quickstep to return with wine. The smile on his face put her at ease, but at his touch the butterflies in her stomach returned. Doing her best to avoid seeming nervous Starry Skies gave the most important part of herself, her innocence and purity, to the colt of her dreams, her true love.

The next day she woke up late; the clock read nearly noon. She sat up, groggy and still sore. Rubbing her eyes, she realized she had a pounding headache and that her body felt considerably sorer than she was ever told it would. I must have had more wine than I thought last night, she thought, because I feel like we made love a million times and hardly remember anything. She turned over in bed. Quickstep wasn't there next to her.

Starry Skies felt her stomach drop. He's probably in the shower or cooking breakfast, she assured herself.

She looked in the bathroom and kitchen. No Quickstep. She began to frantically scour the entire apartment. Upon opening her closet she found that the shoebox containing her savings was gone. So was her jewelry. So were her most expensive outfits. As she sprinted through the front room, something caught her eye. A note. It read simply, "Sorry kid, you're nice, but I'm not about to settle down. Love, Q. P.S., if you feel really queasy and lightheaded, you may wanna call poison control about a medication overdose."

At that moment, something in Starry Skies's heart broke irreparably. She felt so used, so unclean, so filthy and worthless. The room spun. She fell to the ground, unable to stand. She gagged. She vomited. She wept. It took roughly twelve hours to recover from the uncontrollable sobbing, dry heaves, and sickness due to a slight sedative overdose. When she did recover, she found she was incapable of caring. The little part of her that broke opened a gate to purely apathetic hedonism. She now had no reservations about sleeping with anypony; she wanted to embrace physical pleasure, the only kind that couldn't be taken away. Emotional pleasure was a lie. Sex was real. Alcohol was real. Physical pleasure was real. This, and destroying the Wonderbolts, and Quickstep if ever she saw him again,

became all that mattered.

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Charger looked pensively at Starry Skies. "Star, I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

She gave a half-smile. "We all have our baggage, Charger."

"Yeah, but the past is the past, we can live with that." He sat up. "You know what really scares me? The future."

Starry Skies blinked. "You know, I never thought about that. What are you gonna do after this deal with Nightshade is over?"

Charger stood, looking out the window. "I dunno. Maybe spend the rest of my days chasing tequila with spicy food and good music down in Mexicolt City." He turned back to Starry Skies. "Hell, maybe you could come with me. Keep me company."

Starry Skies smiled. "Maybe."

The next morning Nightshade had everypony up bright and early. She stood in front of a cork board full of extraneous papers hastily tacked to it. On the table in front of it was a stack of binders. In the crate next to her were everypony's hoof blades. In a larger crate on the other side of her were rolled up maps, new padded flight suits, and all of the materials required for makeshift explosives.

When Nightshade spoke, her crisp clear voice was considerably darker. Her words were charged, muddled with hate.

"Alright. This is it. We begin training today. Combat, armed and unarmed. Trick flying and aerial attacks. Stealth operations to avoid security. Mixing, assembling, wiring, setting, triggering, and even disarming small explosives. And most importantly of all", she added, sliding a binder to each pony, "We're gonna know our enemy."

Each pony began to flip through the dossiers of the Wonderbolts. First came Soarin', the athletic but loveably stupid second captain. Next came

Blue Blazer, Doc, Smokey Trails and a few others, old or unrecognized due to being outshined by the more prominent members. Next came the page that made Nightshade quake with hatred, Spitfire's page. She was now the captain of the team as well as the star of every show. After the Wonderbolts themselves were a few pages on their security teams, tech teams, and various other unimportant ponies. Standard business. The last page featured their newest manager, a tall grey pegasus with a short black mane and a knife through a bit as his cutie mark.

Simultaneously, Charger and Stratus blurted, "Rain!"

Charger turned to Stratus. "How do you know him?"

"Back in my days as an enforcer in Manehattan, he was my first real case. We tried to take down his little racket, but nothing ever stuck to the bastard; he dropped off the radar. How about you?"

Charger made brief eye contact with Starry Skies. "We have history."

Nightshade stepped forward. "History or not, we need to be prepared to face every pony in this book." Her voice dropped, dripping with malice. "We need to be prepared to kill every pony in this book." Silently, she thought to herself, And oh how prepared I am to kill you, Spitfire...



# Chapter 7

The days crept by. Magic had sped the healing process considerably, but at least a month of recovery was needed. Each day the bandages became less comfortable. Walking the halls of the Ponyville Hospital wasn't nearly enough exercise. Rainbow Dash longed to do the one thing her broken ribs wouldn't allow. She wanted to fly. She sorely missed the feeling of the wind combing her mane back, her muscles straining as she rocketed forward, the feeling of complete euphoria as she completed anything from a Sonic Rainboom to a slightly intricate trick... It all seemed a world away to her. And this feeling of intense longing only served to fuel her hatred for her assailant. Every day the image of those bright pink eyes was the first thing she saw when she woke up and the last thing she saw before she fell asleep. It was burned into her mind. That face, that insane face, became fuel for the fire in Rainbow Dash's heart. It drove her to recover. Once she recovered she would be able to fly. And once she was able to fly again she'd be able to hunt down Blitz and the rest of the Shadowbolts.

Finally the long awaited day came. All of her friends had come to the hospital just to be there when the bandages came off. Applejack stood close by, a hopeful smile on her face as Nurse Redheart gently unwrapped the bandages binding Rainbow's torso. The thick cloth pooled on the ground, and Rainbow Dash smiled. Slowly, tentatively, she stretched her wings. The smile left her face instantly.

"They feel so weak", she muttered, looking at her wings. Indeed her lean solid back muscles had become softer and flatter. Her taut chest had become spongy. She had only managed to keep a bit of muscle in her legs with daily walks. Everypony's face fell as she flapped hard and fast, struggling to circle the room. As Rainbow Dash landed Twilight stepped forward.

"Rainbow, your muscles have been inactive for some time. Maybe you should take it slow. Try flying low and slow first; my books tell me that it shouldn't take more than a few of weeks of consistent training to get back to your previous state of fitness." Twilight smiled brightly but Rainbow Dash still looked distraught.

"A few weeks? I can't wait 'a few weeks', the Shadowbolts are probably on the move right now! Who knows how far they've gotten?" She quickly turned on the purple unicorn. "Twilight, isn't there any magic you could do to make me stronger instantly?"

Concern crossed Twilight's face. "Rainbow, I don't recommend it. Bodily transfiguration is not only dangerous but rarely permanent. You remember what happened to Rarity in Cloudsdale."

At her name, the elegant white unicorn stepped forward. "Rainbow, darling", she said, "I may not be nearly as knowledgeable as Twilight in matters of magic but I do see her point. That was my only experience with bodily transfiguration and it would have killed me had you not been there to save me. Oh, darling, I know it's not much but I may have some magazines I can lend you. They offer great advice on maintaining a lean sexy figure." She moved closer. "It's the least I could do, dear. I do owe you my life, after all."

Rainbow Dash smiled weakly. "Thanks, Rarity. But I'd rather do it my own way." She flapped her wings hard, holding herself airborne in the center of the room. She threw her chest out, striking a formidable pose. "Aerial boot camp."

Rarity smiled, gently teasing, "You're so rough-and-tumble, darling. But we all support you, and if you need anything, we're all here for you." The others nodded in agreement.

Rainbow Dash landed, sweat beads forming on her brow. "Thanks, guys. I'm gonna go home and rest a bit. I'll catch up with you all later, okay?"

As Twilight, Pinkie, Fluttershy, and Rarity left, Applejack stayed behind. Rainbow Dash was still filling out release forms. As she finished she turned to see the orange earth pony, an uncomfortable look on her face. After a few seconds of silence Applejack spoke. "You really are goin' after the Shadowbolts, aren't ya?"

"AJ, somepony has to stop them. They're obviously dangerous." Her gaze darkened as she continued. "And I've got a personal score to settle."

Applejack stepped forward. "Rainbow, you'd be better off lettin' it go, sugarcube."

Frustrated, Rainbow Dash blurted, "I can't, AJ! Every time I close my eyes, I see her, that blue pony. Those big, wild eyes. I can't sleep well knowing she's still out there somewhere." Her voice softened. "Some nights I can't sleep at all. I need to do this, AJ."

Applejack smiled weakly. "Then Ah'll help ya train up. But for now, you get some rest, ya hear? Come find me down on the farm when you're ready." She turned to leave. Only a few steps up the hall, something stopped her. "Rainbow?"

Rainbow Dash approached her friend. "What's up, AJ?"

After a moment of maddening silence, it happened. All at once, Applejack's lips were pressed against Rainbow's. In that instant time froze for Rainbow Dash, and she found herself unable to form a coherent thought. She was totally lost in the gentle pressure and slight tickle of Applejack's lips brushing against her own. As suddenly as it began the meek tender kiss ended, leaving both ponies blushing furiously. Rainbow sputtered, "AJ, I... I didn't know y-you were-"

"Ah ain't, consarnit! Ah... Ah don't know. Ah'm not a filly-fooler, but..." She sighed. "Ah'm still tryin'a figure it all out. Look, Ah ain't the mushy type, but Rainbow, Ah care about you more than anypony Ah know, and... Tarnation, just take it for what it is!", she finished quickly. As she stomped up the hall, Applejack turned, calling behind her, "And for the love of Equestria, don't TALK about it. Ah don't take too kindly to no drama, neither. Come by the farm whenever you're ready."

Rainbow Dash sat dumbfounded. She touched a gentle hoof to her lips as if to make sure the kiss had actually been there.

Early the next morning Rainbow Dash stood nervously at the edge of the Apple family orchard. She approached Applejack, who lounged near the gate with buckets of apples by her side. Without looking up, Applejack said, "Put on the harness and have a flight around the farm. All the way around, low altitude. Don't go no faster than ya feel comfortable with, cuz ya got a long day ahead o' ya."

Rainbow Dash slipped into the harness, taking note of the rather heavy buckets of apples attached to it. She flapped furiously, managing to get a couple dozen feet off the ground. With a lurch, she began to move forward. Rainbow Dash skirted the orchard slowly and unsteadily, unused to flying with so much weight on her back. Sweat began to drip off her face as she rounded the halfway point. Her wing muscles were weak from disuse, and the sudden burst of activity had set them on fire. As Rainbow Dash glided toward the starting point her side began to ache. She skidded to a stop next to Applejack, breathing hard.

Her gaze firm but caring, Applejack said. "Not bad. Take five, then get ready to do it backwards." Seeing Rainbow Dash's appalled expression, she added tenderly, "With only half the weight, sugar cube."

The training continued in this fashion every morning for the next few weeks. Laps around the farm with varying amounts of weight were the most common exercise. These exercises were perfect for rebuilding Rainbow's free-form flying skill. The lengthy flights rebuilt her endurance, and the extra weight helped her rebuild the lean powerful muscles in her chest and back. In addition to this, Applejack had set up a series of exercises to train Rainbow Dash's agility, reflexes, and speed.

The agility exercise combined a tight slalom with a relay. Applejack would set up a slalom track marked with gold apples, easy to spot amongst the fallen red. Rainbow Dash would slalom through the trees as fast as possible, picking up the gold apples and tossing them into baskets mounted on trees ahead, some higher, some lower. The tracks became increasingly more complex and never followed the same route.

The reflex exercise was the least enjoyable. Rainbow Dash would stand with her rump against a barn door while Applejack bucked hard unripe apples for her to dodge. The starting distance was roughly thirty feet. As Rainbow's reaction time improved, it shrunk as low as ten feet, much to Rainbow Dash's dismay.

The speed exercise made everything worth it. Applejack would have Rainbow Dash wait at the edge of the farm while she launched an apple straight up from a catapult. Rainbow's task would be to try to catch the apple as quickly as possible. The quicker she got, the further she stood. On

the day she completed her training, she stood on Twilight's balcony with a pair of binoculars, waiting to see the golden speck over the orchard. Finally, she saw the large apple soaring upward. She launched herself forward, hooves outstretched. Her mane pulled straight back in the wind. Tears streaked from her eyes. Her wings became a blue blur over her back. The apple had reached its apex and was now careening toward the ground. Rainbow wasn't even at the far edge of the orchard.

Rainbow flashed back to the night she was attacked. She saw Blitz astride the lightning bolt, grinning stupidly.

You're not the only one who's fast, she thought. She accelerated hard. Quite suddenly she felt a new sensation against her hooves, only faintly familiar. But faint as it was, it filled her with euphoria. She knew what was coming. One more push, and it happened; all at once, the sky was torn apart in a blast of color, and Rainbow Dash shot forward like a rocket. The resounding explosion behind her brought every last inhabitant of Ponyville outside just in time to see a rainbow blur splattering an apple mid-flight as a vibrant color wheel rippled through the air.

Exhausted from the Sonic Rainboom, Rainbow Dash used her momentum to circle the farm and land hard in front of Applejack. With a slight smile the earth pony said, "Ah think you're ready, sugar cube."

The sun was hardly up the next morning as Rainbow Dash set off towards Fillydelphia. She had just reached the edge of town when a voice stopped her. She glanced down, reluctant to stop. Applejack. She breathed deeply and landed, facing her concerned friend.

"AJ, I have to go. I have to do this."

Applejack's eyes were full of worry as she said, "And Ah know Ah can't stop ya. Just promise me you'll be careful." She moved closer. "Promise me you'll come back."

Rainbow Dash leaned in. "I promise."

Rainbow Dash made the first move this time. She brought her mouth to Applejack's, only a little nervous. There was no hesitation, no fear, only warmth as Applejack tenderly returned the genuine display of affection. The

two parted, smiling. This moment together had brought them each some peace. Rainbow Dash turned and began to fly away, calling back, "See ya later, AJ."

There were only a few towns to stop at between Ponyville and Fillydelphia. Rainbow Dash knew that she would need to learn more about the Shadowbolts if she was going to take them on, so she decided to stop at each of them. The first town was but a short flight away, just a few miles out. It was a small town, more of a trading and community hub than a town. The ponies in it all came from outlying farm land. They were a gruff bunch, hardened by farm work like Macintosh, but less kind. One directed her with an extended hoof and a grunt to the town hall, so much so as it was. The building also doubled as the sheriff's office and a court when needed. Rainbow Dash approached the sheriff, a stock earth pony with a thick walrus mustache. It turned out he knew of the Shadowbolts, but only by reputation.

"Fierce nasty lot," he drawled. "Not to be trifled with. They supposedly run crime rings across Equestria. I heard from a lieutenant peacekeeper that they've set up firm footholds in Manehattan, Clopton, Fillydelphia, and Detrot. Last I heard they was headed for Fillydelphia. Course that was a couple months back. You head straight there you may find somepony who knows something."

Rainbow Dash rocketed towards Fillydelphia, passing the second town altogether. At the third town she had to stop and rest. The town was a dump. It mirrored the first in many ways but it had all the friendliness and charm of an outhouse. Instead of bothering with the law she went straight to the place any and every criminal would go in a town like this: the local bar.

Ponyville doesn't even have a bar, Rainbow Dash thought. She approached the bar, ignoring the stares from the patrons. The females regarded her with indifference at best. At worst, their eyes oozed suspicion if not outright aggression. The males looked at her in a far more menacing way; she felt their hungry eyes on her lips, her firm flank, her lean body. In an effort to look tough she leaned a foreleg on the bar, grunting at the bartender with indifference, "shot o' whiskey."

He obliged. She downed her shot and scarcely managed to stifle a grimace

and a gag. Rainbow Dash never could get used to hard liquor. Continuing her tough act by channeling a bit of Gilda, she said, "So, I'm looking for a group of chumps called the Shadowbolts."

The bartender gave a harsh laugh. "You poor filly, you musta lost your mind. That group a' savages would shred you."

Hiding her nervousness she retorted, "I've faced 'em before."

The bartender poured Dash another shot, which she politely declined. He added, "Not recently you haven't; they've supposedly dropped off the radar between Fillydelphia and Manehattan after beheading that dealer."

Rainbow Dash fought to keep the fear out of her voice as she walked towards the door. "Well then I better stop them before they hurt anypony else."

No sooner than she had left she heard a voice behind her. "Hey kid, wait."

At first she thought it might have been Gilda, but she turned to see a pegasus, a few years older than herself. Her appearance was ghastly. Her indigo coat contrasted sharply with her eyes, a glassy shade of red. Her long thick mane, dyed black, hung down over one side of her face, obscuring it completely. The other side of her face was bathed in moonlight. A thick scar ran from her right ear to the bridge of her muzzle. She stepped forward, her lips twisted into a scowl. Her words were less scary than her appearance.

"You really lookin' for the Shadowbolts?"

Rainbow Dash held her ground. "Yeah, you know 'em?"

The other pony's face drifted downward. "You could say that. Why are you after 'em?"

Rainbow's voice seethed hatred. "I've got a score to settle with one of them."

The older pegasus tossed her head back, revealing both sides of her face. The left side caused Rainbow to gasp. Her face and neck were horribly

burnt. The fur was gone, leaving taut warped skin in its place. The exposed flesh was hideously discolored. The effect caused the left eye to look wild and panicked and twisted the left side of the pony's mouth into a hideous permanent scowl.

"So do I", she growled. "Blueshift Blaze. If you're gonna take on the Shadowbolts, you'll need help. I know them better than anyone else. Well, anyone who can help you, that is. Every other pony they've come in contact with is too scared to talk or dead. But I can take you to them. All I ask is that you let me pick which one I kill."

"Name's Dash, and if you can take me to them, you can have whichever one you want."

Blaze tossed her mane forward, hiding her mangled face. "We're going to the Wonderbolt's Mansion in Manehattan. The Shadowbolts are planning a mass assassination. If we're lucky, we'll kill them before they kill the Wonderbolts. But that's secondary."

Rainbow's temper flared. "No it isn't! The Wonderbolts?! They're my idols, I'm not letting that bunch of psychos kill them!"

Blaze smiled darkly. "You've got fire in you, kid. It'll come in handy. Let's get going."



# Chapter 8

"Go!"

At Nightshade's command, Blitz shot forward like a bullet. The straw pony stood helpless before her. Blitz's field of vision narrowed until her focus was fixed on the torso of the target. She grinned with excitement and rotated her hooves, facing her blades outward in front of her. With perfect timing, she swept her legs outward, cutting the target in half lengthwise and scattering straw everywhere. The legs of the straw pony toppled out from under the shredded top half. The rest of the Shadowbolts stood with eyes wide.

While Rainbow Dash had been recovering in Ponyville, the Shadowbolts had been holding these training sessions in a hot windowless warehouse just south of Manehattan. The abandoned building had a great deal of floor space and the high ceiling made it a suitable building for some aerial training as well. Nightshade had taken the liberty of setting up cardboard and straw ponies for target and combat practice. The Shadowbolts had been subjected to daily exercise like Rainbow Dash. They had also studied the more technical aspects of their mission each night. Combat theory, bomb assembly, and stealth infiltration classes filled their evenings. Stratus fell back on his Royal Guard days to teach combat. Nightshade and Charger combined knowledge from their days in gangs to teach explosives. And Starry Skies taught stealth infiltration from her own personal experience. During the day, however, the Shadowbolts made as much use of the warehouse as possible.

Nightshade raised her eyebrows, indicating the shredded target with a hoof. "Not bad. I suppose if you don't mind being covered in blood and gore, that'll work as well as the quick kill." She crossed the warehouse, turning to a second target. "But this is what we're going for."

Nightshade drew her front half low, stretching her front legs. She paced a few steps side to side, concentrating on the weight of the blades.

Perfection is the only way, rang a voice in her head.

She started at a gallop and then took flight, gliding in low and fast. In a flash she threw her left hoof across the back of the target's neck, sailing past it and skidding to a smooth, quiet stop a few yards past. Everypony turned to the target. Its straw head hung limp, attached by a layer of cloth representing flesh at the front of the neck.

"Silent, quick, and completely effective and efficient. One swift movement." Nightshade walked over to Blitz's target. "Effective, but inefficient. That strike took a bit out of you. It took a great deal more out of him, but that's beside the point. It definitely got the job done, but it was loud, flashy, and messy. Overkill."

She walked back to her own target. "This. Perfection. Quick, refined, and clean. One swift cut, instant kill. No wasted energy, minimal noise, and I was able to keep going afterwards. Had there been more guards I wouldn't have been too winded to make short work of them, too." She turned to Starry Skies. "Star, you're up next."

The elegant pink pony gracefully pawed at the air. Her swipes were made no less intimidating by her approach. She made her way to the far wall and turned, breathing deeply. Quite suddenly she rocketed forward. As she approached the target, she swiped outward. Her perfect swipe was hindered by her low speed; the target was knocked over from impact, but the head remained attached.

"Damn", she hissed.

As Nightshade approached Starry Skies, Blitz voiced the thought every one else was having. "Uh-oh", she giggled. She materialized on top of a high stack of crates to get a better view of the action.

Nightshade looked from the target to Starry Skies. "What was that?"

Starry Skies sighed. "I missed, Nightshade, I'm sor-"

"It was failure", Nightshade growled. "Pure failure! We don't need failure, we need success!"

Nightshade spoke, but her voice was not the one she heard in her head.

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"We need success, damn it! Do you think you're ever going to get anywhere in life like this?"

Nightshade cringed, pressing her rump into the leather chair. Her mother's office had always been a place of great discomfort for her. Everything about it was formidable. The walls were so white that the glare sometimes hurt her eyes. The furniture was all masterfully crafted mahogany. Despite her wealth, Cloudy Night was not one for elegance. Her blunt aggressive demeanor was able to manifest itself in things as mundane as her furniture choice. The tall shelves packed with thick heavy books seemed to lean inward, creating the sensation that they would crush somepony at any moment, much like Cloudy Night would in a courtroom.

Cloudy Night, ever the workaholic, was buried in work. Somehow the fact that she never looked her daughter in the eye when criticizing her made it hurt even worse. The many piles of paper on her desk were hastily organized in a way that left a small patch of work space which was now occupied by a school report card. The little leaflet was riddled with D's and C's.

"Explain."

The command hit Nightshade like a slap across the face. Only ten years old, she looked up at her mother, unable to find words. "I... Mommy, it-"

Writing with one hoof while flipping through files with another, Cloudy Night coaxed, "Come on, out with it. Surely you know why you're doing poorly in school."

Finally Nightshade blurted, "I'm not good at school!"

Cloudy Night paused her work for a moment. She looked at Nightshade with a fierce incredulity. Another intangible slap. "Well then try harder! You think I was good at being a lawyer when I was a filly? I put some effort into it, now I'm here, problem solved."

Nightshade remained in her seat, confused and hurt.

Her mother looked up again, clearly angry. "I've gone and solved your damn problem for you, now you go fix it!"

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Nightshade glared at Starry Skies. "Did you hear me? Go again, fix it!"

Blitz held a hoof over her mouth as she giggled with excitement.

Visibly flustered, Starry Skies huffed and walked to the other end of the warehouse. With more force than necessary she ran the exercise again, this time cleaving right through the neck of the target.

Examining the target, Nightshade nodded. "Acceptable. I guess this just isn't what you're best at."

Starry Skies became indignant. "Nightshade, that's absurd, I did exactly what you did!"

"And I did it better", Nightshade snapped back. "You've got to be the best at SOMETHING, or you're useless!"

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"It doesn't matter what you do, just do it better than everyone else!"

Nightshade stood in her mother's home office. The home office was considerably less terrifying than the corporate office in Manehattan. It was less cluttered, less busy. The heavy mahogany furniture was gone, leaving in its place warm, homey oak pieces. The piles of extraneous papers and stacks of case files were all neatly put away, with the exception of a few cases which Cloudy Night planned on working on during her break. There was even a small photograph of Nightshade with her father, taken about two years before his death when she was eight. About the only thing in the room that lacked warmth or peace was Nightshade's mother.

Nightshade's mother sighed, pushing away her largest stack of papers. "I can tell this is gonna be a family moment. Can we make it quick? I'm off break in twenty."

Nightshade shuffled her hooves. "Mom, you don't have to be anywhere today, you can put it aside until whenever."

Without looking up from her papers, Cloudy Night answered, "Yeah, just like your father did with getting his cutie mark." Seeing the affect her words had on her daughter, she continued, "Nightshade, he was nice, but he was a loser. He had no ambition. The only thing he ever did well was spending time with you, and even then, he only put in eight years at that until he gave up on the only thing he did consistently, which was being alive."

Holding back the tears, Nightshade deflected, "Mom, Dad had cancer..." Recovering from her pause, she continued forcefully, "Mom, I'm not going to law school. I'm an athlete, not a lawyer."

Cloudy Skies seemed to look right through her daughter as she said, "Okay. Be the best damn athlete on the circuit. Follow your dreams, whatever, but be the best. Because if you fuck it up and fall flat, you have nopony to blame but yourself."

"I don't have to be the best to be successful, Mom."

Cloudy Skies stood. "That's bullshit, Nightshade! Why would anypony settle for any less than the best? You can't get by on doing what makes you happy! You have to get by on winning! If you aren't the best, you don't matter!"

Visibly hurt, Nightshade poured venom into her voice as she stammered, "Especially not to you, right?"

Cloudy Night was immune. Without looking up, she retorted apathetically, "Damn right. If you aren't the best you don't matter to anypony."

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"If you weren't the best at something, I wouldn't even have you around. At least this is all you've fucked up today."

Nightshade's words struck Starry Skies like knives; this was the first time Nightshade had ever really yelled at anypony. Her serious and aggressive demeanor had always been enough to keep everypony in check. Tirades of

this sort had never been necessary, nor had Nightshade ever used them before.

"Whoa, hey, cool it," Charger warned.

Stratus stepped forward, taking Nightshade by the ear. Through gritted teeth he spat, "We need to talk."

Outside the warehouse, Stratus pressed Nightshade into the adjacent wall.

"What the hell's wrong with you?", she growled.

"What's wrong with YOU? Tearing into your own team? That's not only unnecessary, that's childish. You've worked awfully hard to earn their respect to lose it with temper tantrums."

"I'm scared, Stratus!", Nightshade blurted. Her voice became quiet. "I'm terrified."

His voiced considerably more gentle, Stratus inquired, "Of what?"

"Of fucking it all up. I've poured years of my life into this, and now that it's here and we're actually staring it in the face, I'm terrified. We only get one shot. I'm realizing now, I have no idea what the hell I'm doing. But it's too late to turn back. I'm in way over my head. I'm scared, I'm confused, Strat."

Stratus sat down next to Nightshade, motioning for her to do the same.

"You've come a very long way, kid."

Nightshade wiped the tears of frustration from her eyes. "I guess."

Stratus gazed off into the woods and did something he rarely did: he smiled. "You remember the very first crime we committed together?"

"Which one?"

"The mugging, that very first one?"

Nightshade put a hoof over her face, remembering the story very well.

"Yes. Yes I do."

Stratus chuckled as he reminisced, "You told the punk to give you all his money. And he did. And then you smiled and thanked him and apologized for inconveniencing him."

Nightshade laughed, and Stratus laughed with her. He continued, "You're gonna be alright, kid."

Nightshade felt better after hearing these words, but she was still unconvinced. "We only have one shot at this. If anything goes wrong, the whole operation could go down the drain."

Stratus gave her a firm pat on the back, nearly knocking her over. "Trust me, kid. I've never lied to you before. I've got your back. We all do. We're gonna make this thing happen. Now get back in there, apologize to Star, and lead your team. Tomorrow night's gonna be the biggest night of their lives. It'd be comforting to know that their leader hasn't gone off the deep end."

Feeling considerably more confident, Nightshade strode back into the warehouse. She first took a minute with Starry Skies, explaining her outburst. Next she stood in front of the group, addressing them all. "Alright everypony, listen up. We've got a big day tomorrow."

The group assembled in front of their leader. Stratus cracked a hint of a smile.

Nightshade turned to Starry Skies. "Star, you're the first to split from the group. You're setting up the bomb in the main living quarters. If you somehow fail, Blitz is your backup. Otherwise, Blitz, you'll be covering the rear as cleanup. Anything gets up and tries to follow us, kill it."

She turned to Charger. "Charger, you get to pursue vengeance. You clean up anypony else in the mansion and then head to the manager's office. I'm sure you'll enjoy that. If you fall short, I'll send in Stratus. Otherwise, Stratus is with me, taking out any Wonderbolts running about. Any questions?"

A resounding "No ma'am!"

"Good. Everyone get some rest."



# Chapter 9

Stratus had just gotten into his room when a blue blur slammed into his bed, throwing the blankets to the ceiling.

Stratus sighed. "Blitz. Why are you in my bed?"

Blitz rolled over in Stratus's bed, facing him. "I wanna talk to you."

Stratus was intrigued. Blitz rarely wanted to talk to anypony. "And why is that, Blitz?"

Blitz gazed into Stratus's eyes, her face filled with longing. "Because I'm in love with you."

Stratus was caught completely off guard. He couldn't think of anything specific he had done to earn the filly's favor. He wasn't particularly fond of her, either. But he wasn't about to create emotional tension before a big mission. Finally he managed to stammer out, "Really?"

Blitz rolled off the bed, roaring with laughter. "Of course not! You're not a filly!" She finally regained some control over herself and said, "Nightshade wanted me to ask you if you'd be able to kill ponies tomorrow."

Stratus scoffed. "She knows I won't."

Blitz rolled over on the floor, facing Stratus belly-up. "Why?"

Stratus responded, "I don't kill."

"Why?"

"It's a vow I made back when I was an enforcer."

"Why?"

Stratus put a hoof to his forehead, sighing. "I never told you about my days

as an enforcer?"

Blitz shook her head, causing a massive static buildup on the carpet.

Stratus breathed deeply. "Alright then. Here goes..."

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Stratus was on top of the world. The young, strong pegasus had achieved his dream. He had been accepted as a trainee for the enforcer program in Manehattan. The training alone was near deadly. Most applicants quit. Stratus was not one of these. The colt excelled at training and quickly worked his way up. While some of his graduating class mates were still grunts, answering petty calls like disorderly drunks, Stratus had gained the rank of responder, second division. The only ponies he answered to were first division responders and the district director. When assignments called for it he would have to answer to peacekeepers, the roaming bounty hunters of Equestria.

Stratus's parents were jubilant at his success. The night he made the rank of sergeant second division they took him to a local restaurant to celebrate. His favorite cousin decided to tag along. As the family sat around the table, Stratus noticed his younger cousin seemed distant.

"Hey, Spacey, what's up?"

The young colt, only fifteen years of age, pushed his food around on his plate. He didn't look up.

Stratus's mother gently nudged him. "Astro, dear, Stratus is talking to you."

The thin pony looked up. He was scrawny. Not exactly frail, but definitely not built like Stratus. He was a shut in and a daydreamer, more concerned with the stars in the sky than the world beneath his hooves. This earned him his cutie mark, a telescope, as well as his nickname, Spacey. Spacey turned to Stratus. "What'd ya say, cuz?"

Stratus laughed as he answered, "I was asking if you're alright, airhead. You don't seem to be on this planet tonight", he teased gently.

Spacey smiled. "Oh, yeah. There's supposed to be a killer meteor shower in a few nights." Spacey turned to his aunt. "Hey, I'll be back, I gotta go." With this, he left the table.

As Spacey left the room, Stratus's mother moved closer to her son. "Stratus, there's something wrong with Astro. His mother tells me he's been hanging out with the wrong crowd lately."

Stratus was suddenly intrigued. "That's not like him at all. Does she know anything about them, the ponies he's hanging around with?"

"Apparently he's been made an errand boy for one of them. The ring leader of the little group is... Handsaw? No, Hammer, I believe. Astro's mother thinks they have him delivering drugs for their gang. She wants you to talk to him about it. You're closer to him than any of us have managed to get, she thinks maybe he'll open up to you."

Stratus nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Outside, Stratus caught his cousin by surprise.

"Hammer? Really? You're running around with Hammer now?"

Spacey was cornered. "Cuz, it's not like that!"

Stratus shot him a look. "He's a criminal, Spacey!"

Spacey sighed. "I know. And I'm not proud of it. But it's just small stuff. They pay me well. And they're not so bad. They're nice to me."

Stratus gave his cousin a swift bonk on the head as he answered, "Because you run drugs for them, you dope! Dealers like ponies who keep them in business!" He softened his voice. "Look, just get out of all that nonsense. Stay away from Hammer and his crew. They're bad news. I don't care how you do it, get away from those ponies."

Spacey's face fell. "Okay cuz. I'll tell him I'm out."

The next week of Stratus's life was uneventful. As a favor, Stratus had the captain of first division keep an eye on his cousin whenever he could. As

the week went by, he had nothing to report. Stratus forgot the whole affair until his cousin showed up at the door of his apartment. Stratus opened the door, gesturing for his cousin to enter. "What's up, Spacey?"

Spacey smiled brightly. "I talked to Hammer. He says it's cool that I wanna leave."

Stratus beamed. "Great! I'm glad to hear you're out of that business, cuz. You have a bright future, you don't need to screw it up."

Spacey sat down on the couch, nodding. "Yeah, he was really cool about it, too. I told him you set me straight. He thought that was really cool of you."

Hearing this, Stratus tensed. "Spacey, did you mention that I'm a cop?"

Spacey shook his head. "Uh, I don't think so. He wants to meet you. He should be here soon."

Stratus felt his stomach drop. "What the fuck, Spacey?! Did you tell him where I live?"

At that moment, there was a knock at the door. From behind the solid wood, a voice called, "Open up, Space-Boy. I wanna shake your cop cousin's hoof!" The sound of other ponies laughing could be heard.

Stratus jerked Spacey up off the couch. "Out the window, up the fire escape to the roof, I'll be along in just a minute. Don't question me, go! Keep quiet and stay out of sight!" As Spacey scaled the ladder, Stratus looked for an alternate exit. Something hit the door hard, and the wood bent inward, cracking. There were no other exits. Stratus looked out the window; Spacey was well on his way to the roof. He began to follow, pulling his bulky frame through the open window.

The door exploded inwards and a bulky earth pony stormed in, followed by two pegasi. The sand colored earth pony had a hammer cutie mark. He rushed into the room, pushing past the furniture. Spotting Stratus, he shouted to his partners, "He went up the ladder, get him!"

The two pegasi blasted out the window, sending Stratus tumbling to the ground. He righted himself and flew up after them, only to be passed by a

faster pegasus. Stratus recognized him as Magnum, the captain of the responders' first division.

"Mag!"

The speedy pegasus called back, "I followed them here! You take the goons, I'll take Hammer!"

As Stratus ascended, he called ahead of him, "Thank Celestia! You go find my cousin, keep him safe!"

Atop the roof, Stratus saw Spacey sprint over the high ridge of the building, followed closely by Hammer and Magnum. The two pegasi charged Stratus directly. The lead one slashed at him with a knife in his mouth. Stratus sidestepped and slammed his forehead into the joint of the attacker's jaw, sending the knife flying. He retreated, setting up another attack. Stratus turned to the other pegasus, who was still armed. The young colt rushed Stratus with his knife. Stratus flapped his wings hard and spun around, bringing the edge of a back hoof across the attacker's face. He sprawled out on the ground, unconscious.

Stratus looked to the other thug. The young pegasus shook his head, saying, "He ain't payin me enough for this shit!" He turned and galloped off the edge of the roof, flying away.

Having dealt with the goons, Stratus sprinted over the curve of the roof in time to see Magnum squaring off with Hammer on the second roof. Spacey stood against the door of a roof exit, trying to stay out of sight. As Spacey and Stratus watched the action, neither noticed the tall grey pegasus rising like a specter over the side of the building. He silently landed behind Spacey, a knife in his mouth. Stratus noticed the newcomer too late to keep him from slashing his long blade across Spacey's neck and down his side.

"SPACEY!"

All three other ponies looked to the fallen colt. In the break in the action, Hammer sprinted away. Magnum shouted to Stratus, "Strat, that's Rain! Get him!"

Stratus started after the criminal, but looked back to his cousin, gasping

and wheezing on the roof. "Mag, take care of my cousin! Get him help! Please!", he sobbed.

Mag looked from Spacey to Hammer. "Will do, Strat, just go!"

Stratus rocketed over rooftops, chasing the grey blur. The tiny speck on the horizon grew smaller and smaller. Finally, Stratus gave up the chase. He turned and frantically flew back to his cousin. Upon landing on the roof, Magnum was nowhere to be found. Spacey was still wheezing, blood pooling around him. Stratus knelt beside his cousin.

"Spacey! It's okay, cuz", he lied, "You're gonna get help. You'll be alright, I promise. Stay with me, cuz!"

Spacey looked up at Stratus, tears in his eyes. "Hey cuz", he asked weakly, "Do you think those old pony tales are true? That when a pony dies he becomes one of the stars in the sky?"

Stratus let the tears flow freely as he held his cousin's head, replying, "Yeah cuz. I know they are."

Spacey smiled faintly as blood trickled from his mouth. "I'm gonna be a star, cuz..." As the words left his lips, the young colt's body went limp.

Stratus felt himself shaking. A strange, horrible sound filled his ears. It was a wretched scream of agony. Stratus eventually realized that these screams were coming from himself. His long sorrowful sobs shattered the peace of the night. He only stopped when he felt a hoof on his shoulder. Magnum. Stratus reared up and turned on the captain.

"Magnum, he's dead! You let my cousin die! You left him here, you son of a bitch!" Sobbing, Stratus shook the captain by his shoulders, fighting the urge to hit him.

Magnum felt tears welling up in his own eyes when he saw the colt's body. "Stratus, I'm so sorry. Protocol dictated that I had to pursue the crimin-"

Stratus exploded, "FUCK PROTOCOL! You soulless fuck, you let him die because of protocol?!"

Magnum was silent for a moment. Finally, he indicated a bound and gagged figure on the roof next to him. "If it's any consolation, I caught Hammer. He won't be hurting anypony else."

A darkness fell across Stratus's face as he replied, "No. He won't." With this he lifted the earth pony by the neck with his teeth and flung him from the roof. A loud splat told Stratus that Hammer had fallen the full ten stories and landed on the cold pavement.

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Blitz rolled over. "How come you can't kill anymore after you killed Hammer?"

Looking up at the ceiling, Stratus replied, "It was later at Spacey's funeral that I realized the pain that killing brings. I felt it there. It's not like physical pain. It stays with you. I wouldn't wish that pain on anypony. From that day forward, I never could bring myself to kill a criminal; every time I tried, I saw my cousin, smiling up at me from a pool of his own blood."

Blitz shrugged. "I've never had that problem. Not since the fire."

Stratus sat up. There was something on his mind. "Blitz, you talk about that fire a lot. What happened?"

Blitz absentmindedly pawed at Stratus's sheets as she responded, "I forgot Mom, Dad, and Sissy were in the house when I set it on fire. I didn't remember until they started screaming. They stopped after a while", she finished casually.

Stratus reeled back in shock. "You seriously immolated your whole family... on accident?"

Blitz nodded. Through a yawn she added, "I'm sleepy, Strat. Your bed's too small for me so I'm going back to my room. Or maybe Nightshade's!"

Stratus raised an eyebrow. "Blitz, all the beds are the same size."

"I know", she crooned with a wink. With this she hopped out of the room, giggling.

Stratus laid back down. Sleep wouldn't come. For some reason all he could think about was death. He muttered to himself, "Everypony's gotta die someday." This thought didn't help distract him from wondering who would die tomorrow. And how many of those deaths would be his fault.



# Chapter 10

Rainbow Dash and Blueshift Blaze flew along silently towards the northern end of Manehattan. The less urban countryside served as a nice change in scenery, but the lack of distractions served to make the silence awkward. The sun was already well on its way down when finally Rainbow Dash asked, "So, Blaze, where you from?"

Without looking towards her, the dark blue pony responded, "I grew up in a little farming community in Mountana." She tossed her mane, revealing her face. "After this, I went down south to Horston, out by the Gulf of Mexicolit. I had some family out there who were nice enough to take me in for a while. It was okay, but I couldn't stand how crowded it was. The heat wasn't too nice, either. I finally got sick of the place and slowly made my way back north. Recently I came back to the outskirts of Fillydelphia. I've been working as an assistant in a forge ever since."

Dash nodded. "I was born in Cloudsdale, but Ponyville's my home. Aside from Cloudsdale, I haven't left it or the surrounding area until now. I've been to Apploosa and Canterlot, but only on visits."

Blaze grunted in acknowledgement.

Rainbow had a specific question on her mind. She avoided it to be polite and instead asked, "So what's your cutie mark mean?"

Blaze looked at her flank, regarding the fiery blue orb with contempt. She snorted. "It means I've been through too much shit to develop a special talent. By some sort of prophetic irony, my PMV skill leaves a trail of blue fire." She gave an empty laugh. "Fire seems to follow me I guess."

Rainbow Dash smiled, trying to brighten the mood a bit. "Mine's PMV based too! It means I'm a born racer and pretty much THE only pony capable of creating a Sonic Rainboom." She beamed with pride.

Blaze cracked a faint smile. "So that's what last week's unexplained explosion was. I knew it was magic of some sort, but unicorns tend to leave

the sky alone."

Dash grinned, basking in the praise. The silence descended upon the pair again, slowly wearing on her. Unable to keep her mind off of it, Rainbow Dash finally asked the question she had been stifling. As gently as possible she inquired, "Blaze, what happened to your face?"

Blaze stared Rainbow Dash down, her eyes dark. Her powerful gaze was full of emotions darker than simple anger. Like so many ghosts in a mirror they passed through her eyes, and the effect caused Rainbow Dash to fall silent and look away. Her voice dripping with sarcasm, Blaze responded, "I slipped and fell."

Rainbow Dash quietly responded, "I'm sorry."

As the two pegasi flew along silently, Rainbow couldn't help but analyze Blaze a bit more. Her scars, she deduced, must be related to the Shadowbolts. Rainbow absentmindedly put a hoof to her side, remembering how Blitz shattered her ribs. She had gotten lucky, she thought; couldn't help but wonder which Shadowbolt was crazy or evil enough to burn Blaze's face like that.

Similarly, Blaze analyzed Rainbow Dash silently. Looking upon the sky blue pony she couldn't help but see a bit of herself. She was so full of anger, but still so naïve. Blaze wondered just how badly she had been hurt to carry such a grudge. Surely it would come in handy in a fight, but the long term mental and emotional damage it would cause would leave her cold and cynical, if not outright empty. Like me, Blaze thought. The poor filly's gonna end up like me.

The pair flew along without words until they crested a hill. The hill sloped gently downwards to a large building. While only two stories tall, the building had a wide sprawling courtyard out front. The courtyard consisted of a stone path lined by tall stone pillars. On either side of the path, low hedges formed a miniature labyrinth. The back and sides of the property sloped off into a cliff face, the point of the cliff jutting out to the west. The front of the building was a single story, implying that the entire structure had been that way until recently. The back had a comparatively small second story portion that covered the back right corner of the building. In the center of the flat roof of the single story portion, near the back, there

was a large patch of shining glass, a skylight. Off to the far left, the wall was lined with a single strip of glass about as tall as an average pony. There were patches in the glass that were dark and reflective. These were walls between the rooms in the living quarters, presumably. There was a main area in the central part of the left wall that was all glass. It appeared to be a main commons area for the Wonderbolts. Even at this time, a couple of ponies could be seen lounging on the big leather sofa.

"This is it", Blaze muttered. Her mind was clearly elsewhere.

Rainbow Dash grinned from ear to ear. "The Wonderbolts private mansion... Wow." Her smile left her face as she added, "I wish we weren't here under these conditions." She stood up a little straighter and began to trot towards the house.

Blaze grabbed Dash by the tail. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I have to warn them that somepony's coming to kill them! I'm not gonna leave the Wonderbolts hanging!"

Blaze indicated the front door with a hoof. There were two burly earth ponies in front of it, and a unicorn above them on the shingled awning over the front door. She turned to Dash, warning, "They'd tear you apart before you had a chance to explain yourself. We can't just go barging in there. As hard as it will be, we have to wait until the action starts to slip in after the Shadowbolts. Then the real fun starts."

Dash lay down, never taking her eyes off the complex. After a while, she muttered, "Those pillars could be useful in a fight. Great for traps or surprise attacks." Blaze only nodded in response. Dash soon became restless. She turned to Blaze and asked, "So what exactly are we waiting for?"

No sooner than the words left her mouth, Blaze spotted movement along the tree line north of the house, near the main living quarters. She only had time to point in that general direction with a hoof before two blurs shot from the forest. One skimmed right behind the two main guards. Much to Rainbow Dash's horror, their necks jerked to one side and their heads slowly lolled forward. Blood poured out from their necks. The two ponies collapsed noiselessly onto the stone walkway. A second blur darted from

the forest, performing a similar maneuver on the unicorn lookout. He tumbled from the awning, his severed head landing with a dull splat beside him. The second attacker curved around and threw a small box-shaped object at the front door before taking off.

"Oh Celestia", Rainbow Dash murmured into her hooves, "What have I gotten myself into?"

Mere seconds later, Blaze and Dash were rocked backwards by a powerful explosion. The night became bright as day. The front of the mansion was obliterated in a plume of fire. Bricks and stones rained down like so much molten rock from a volcanic eruption. Two of the large pillars near the front of the house tumbled outward, shattering.

Blaze peered through the smoke. Walking into the house in formation she saw Nightshade, the leader; Stratus, her second in command; Charger, the racer; Starry Skies, the thief; and out to the far right, Blueball Blitz, the psychopath.

Blaze snapped her wings open, galloping down the hill. "Dash, on me!"

Rainbow Dash galloped down the hill after Blaze. Remembering something, she turned her head up and called out, "Blaze, take whoever you want, but Blitz is mine!"

Blaze didn't look back. Either she hadn't heard or hadn't cared.

Rainbow Dash spread her wings and glided in low and fast, coming to a smooth stop at the end of the walkway. Blaze landed just ahead of her, galloping forward toward the flaming remains of the front of the Wonderbolts' mansion.

Starry Skies had galloped off to the main living quarters with full saddlebags; a glimpse of wire hinted that they contained bombs. Charger had shot off towards the second story, murder in his eyes. Stratus and Nightshade were already making their way towards the back of the house. Blitz lingered at the front, making sure each guard was dead. This task proved to be rather simple, as all three bodies had been torn apart by the explosion. Blitz giggled and began to follow the others into the mansion, when she was stopped. Stepping through the dust and rubble, Blaze

shouted ahead of her, "Blueball Blitz!"

Blitz turned to see Blaze with Dash standing beside her. For the first time in as long as any of them could remember, Blitz's face filled with two foreign and rare emotions. The first was rage. The second was fear.

Blitz spread her hooves, planting herself firmly. Her mane crackled to life as her pink eyes darkened. The bubbly grin was gone, replaced with a hateful glare. Rainbow Dash summoned all of her courage to mirror the stance. Blaze was unable to add her own bravado to the standoff. She was quaking with fury. Blitz issued a squeaky growl which ran into a shout of rage.

Blaze gave a hollow laugh. "Surprised to see me?"

Blitz began to twitch as charges of electricity leapt from her. "I already killed you, Sissy!"

Dash reeled back in horror. "That MONSTER is your SISTER?!"

Without warning, Blitz charged, hooves outstretched. The cold blades gleamed in the light of the fire. Blaze rolled to the side, holding her wings in. The very un-pegasus-like move threw Blitz off and she instead turned on Rainbow Dash. Dash held her ground, sweat beading on her brow. Blitz drew within range, expecting a last second attempt at a dodge. Rainbow Dash had something else in mind.

A split second before Blitz would have torn her in half, Rainbow Dash blasted forward like a bullet, slamming a front hoof into Blitz's cheek. The Shadowbolt spun off course, skidding across the dirt. Blaze and Dash stood at the ready as she rose, spitting blood onto the ground. Blitz smiled daggers at Rainbow Dash.

"You wanna play rough this time, cutie pie?"

Dash deflected, "Bring it, nutcase."

Blitz rocketed forward, prompting Dash to take off in reverse. Flying backwards was one of the skills she honed to an art form while training with Applejack. She threw herself backwards, barreling towards the hill. Blitz was gaining on her quickly. At the last second, Dash redirected herself,

shooting straight up. The quick change in direction gave her a slight lead on Blitz, which she used to lead Blitz towards the ground.

Blitz wasn't through. She shot downward after Dash and swiped with her blades; Rainbow Dash felt the back edge of the cold steel brush against her rump. She glanced back over her shoulder to find she only had about four inches of her tail left. Blitz took advantage of this momentary lapse in concentration and shot past Rainbow Dash, swiping at her face. The tip of a blade sliced the bridge of Rainbow's muzzle; blood sprayed into her eyes, causing her to drop to the ground at a gallop, crying out in pain. Dash wiped the blood from her face and turned to see Blitz setting up another charge. She turned towards the edge of the cliff, calling to Blaze, "Watch me and get ready!"

Rainbow shot far out over the water. Blitz took the bait, hoping to drop her opponent into the sea. At a glance from Rainbow Dash, Blaze knowingly positioned herself at the front of the house along side the pillars lining the walkway. Rainbow Dash let Blitz gain on her just enough so that when she curved around the Shadowbolt would be right behind her. Now came the hard part.

Rainbow Dash visualized the life she could well lose. She shot forward, ignoring the blood running into her eyes. Her thoughts skimmed over all of Ponyville before coming to rest on a certain orange earth pony.

I promised I'd come back to my friends, she thought. One more push and her mane pulled straight back. She felt an elastic pressure against her hooves. Had her tail still been there, it would have been pulled straight back, too. She was still a ways off from the cliff. She pushed harder. Her face burned. Her side was throbbing. The pressure on her hooves was enormous. She chanced a look backwards.

Rainbow Dash's stomach dropped. Blitz was already flashing with electricity. She was considerably closer to PMV. Rainbow Dash threw herself forward. In an instant, the sky exploded outwards around her. Just as this happened, she heard a thunder crack. She turned to see Blitz flying behind her astride a lightning bolt, slowly gaining.

Time moved in slow motion. Dash passed the first pillar and began a tight slalom between the rest. Just as planned, Blitz followed in suit. In

anticipation of a kill, she stuck one of her blades into the lightning, letting the immense heat and energy bring the blade to an orange glow. She was gaining on Rainbow Dash inch by inch. As Dash passed the third pillar she heard fire roar to life behind her. Looking back she saw Blaze, a ball of blue flames, keeping pace with Blitz.

Blaze timed Blitz's slalom, flying along side the pillars. She knew if she weren't rocketing forward in a straight line she'd never catch her sister. Finally as they passed the eighth pillar Blaze threw herself sideways into Blitz, using her momentum to hold the electric pegasus in place as she shot straight at a pillar. Blaze became a conduit for Blitz's energy; her eyes rolled back into her head as she was hit with wave after wave of electricity. Nonetheless, the plan worked; Blitz spun out of control and slammed into the pillar sideways. The remaining lightning shattered the stone structure and both pegasi and the remnants of the pillar came crashing down.

Dash curved back around, gliding to the crumbled remains. She flapped her wings hard, trying to clear some of the dust. Peering through it, she saw Blaze rising up on wobbly legs, standing over Blitz. The Shadowbolt was sticking out from under a large chunk of stone, her back half crushed. Blaze knelt beside her.

Dash stepped forward, her eyes oozing contempt. "Are you going to finish her?"

Blitz looked up into Blaze's eyes; something was different in her face, something fragile. As she spoke, blood bubbled from her mouth. "Sissy", she whimpered, "I'm cold..."

Blaze took Blitz's head in her hooves, gently cooing, "It's okay. It's over now, Blu."

Tears ran from Blitz's eyes as they began to cloud over. Coughing, she stammered, "Do you think Mom and Dad will be mad at me?"

"Not anymore, Blu. I promise." Blaze kissed her sister on the forehead and closed her eyes. The last charges of electricity left Blitz's mane. Blaze gently laid the dead filly's head down.

Slowly, Blaze rose. She wasn't crying. Her eyes were devoid of tears.



Rainbow Dash noticed that they seemed devoid of everything, even life itself. The scarred pegasus looked hollow. Blaze turned to Dash. "I just killed the last living family I had. She and I shared a bed as fillies."

Dash stepped forward, tears in her eyes. "Blaze, I'm so sorry. I never meant for this to happen. I didn't know, I re-"

Blaze cut her off. "It's okay." She looked back to Blitz. "She's at peace now. She's free. She'll find more peace in death than she ever could have in life. There's nothing more anypony can do for her..." Blaze turned back to Dash. "But there is a way you can help me."

Rainbow raised her head. "Anything."

"Help me move this pillar. I want to give my baby sister a proper burial. Then..." She looked away. "Then, I don't know what. I guess I'll have to find somewhere to hide out after all this."

"You could come back to Ponyville with me", Dash offered. "It's full of really nice ponies." After a moment, she added, "It helps to be around friends when you're going through a tough time."

Blaze cracked a feeble smile. "I may do that. Hell, Rainbow Dash, you're the first friend I've made in quite a while." Hoisting Blitz across her back, she turned away from the mansion. "Come on. We're done here. The rest isn't our business."

Dash nodded. For once, the Wonderbolts didn't seem to be the most important thing in life.



# Chapter 11

While Dash and Blaze were battling Blitz outside the mansion, the other four Shadowbolts had gotten straight to work inside. Immediately, Starry Skies split from the group to take out as many Wonderbolts as possible with the bombs. Charger zipped through the elegant main hallway and up the stairs, looking for Rain's office. Nightshade and Stratus stalked straight forward, keeping their eyes peeled for Spitfire.

In the wake of the first explosion servants, personal friends, and the Wonderbolts themselves had scattered. A few of the less important team members were sprinting through the halls. At times they seemed completely oblivious to the black-and-purple suited ponies walking the halls like a pair of grim reapers, harbingers of death with bladed hooves. At one point a low-rank Wonderbolt, part of the background performance crew, barreled right into Nightshade. She responded by sinking both blades on her left hoof into his chest. He dropped to his knees and crashed to the ground. Stratus looked down at the body, discomfort on his face.

"I remember when that was difficult for you."

Nightshade scoffed. "It's work, nothing more. Keep moving."

Across the mansion, Starry Skies was moving towards the main living quarters. A few live-in servants crossed her path, but none dared to stop her. She not only was well armed but also carried with her a fair sized bomb. The state of the place was chaotic to say the least. The situation only seemed to worsen when three explosions were heard outside. The powerful blasts of magic came in rapid succession, signaling an intense aerial dogfight between multiple pegasi.

Blueball should be able to take care of it, Starry Skies told herself. She couldn't help but worry about the little blue pegasus; something in the pit of her stomach told her that she might not see her again. Starry Skies brushed away these thoughts, focusing on her objective. She moved onward through the artfully crafted building. She couldn't help but notice

how strangely familiar it felt to be in such a place of sophistication. This was truly her territory. She crossed a large foyer area which led to the next wing of the house, the living quarters. Upon reaching the large double doors to the main commons, she found them locked. She banged on the doors. No answer came.

Starry Skies dropped her refined demeanor; it served no purpose here. "Open the door, or I'll blow this entire wing sky high!"

Muffled voices could be heard from within. To increase her negotiating powers, Starry Skies withdrew a rigged bomb from one of her saddlebags. The door popped open and an old stallion, Doc, stepped forward, stammering, "Now look, you don't need to do anything drastic."

Starry Skies silently walked to the center of the room, placing the explosive on the floor between the couch and table. She noticed that there were six other ponies in the room. She made a point of being calm and collected; to show fear was to be overtaken, overpowered, and possibly even killed. She began arming the explosive.

Doc continued his pleading. "Please! I know you, child! I know your father! He wouldn't want you to do this!"

Starry Skies turned on the old pegasus. "My desires were of no concern to you so many years ago. Why should yours matter to me now?" A beep indicated that the timer had started. Starry Skies made her way towards the doors but was pushed back by Doc. Two other Wonderbolts slammed the doors shut, locking them again.

Starry Skies began to panic. "What are you doing? I command you to open those doors!"

Doc looked to his companions and back to Star. "Kill us if you must, but you're coming with us."

Starry Skies felt her stomach drop. "No..."

The timer hit five seconds.

"No!"

In a flash, Starry Skies leapt over the couch, kicking the bomb back towards the doors. It slid under the couch and across the floor, coming to rest a couple of feet from the far door. It wasn't far enough; the explosive was designed to obliterate the entire room. Adrenaline kicked in and time halted as Star looked for a way out. She blasted towards the windows, colliding full force with the glass wall. It cracked but did not shatter.

She slammed her hooves into the glass, breaking away small shards of it. "NO NO NO!"

In a brilliant flash, Starry Skies was hit with a concussive blast that flung her slender body through the damaged window. Flames engulfed the room behind her. The blast threw Wonderbolts in all directions and blasted the doors to the main house right out of their frame. Starry Skies tumbled head over hooves across the grass. She felt a pop in her side, followed by an intense wave of pain that told her she had snapped a wing. Finally she rolled to a stop. Her vision was blurry and dark. Her ears were filled with a high piercing ringing. Blood dripped from small cuts all over her body. Her fur was singed in places where her flight suit had been burnt away. Her legs quaked furiously as she tried to stand; she rose halfway before collapsing onto her side. Pain and shock overtook her as she lost consciousness.

Meanwhile, Charger was trotting towards Rain's office. He had found the main stairway, a walled-in hallway that lead upwards into the floor of the office. A security measure, no doubt. The tight hallway acted as a funnel, bringing any intruder up a very predictable path; any guard or Rain himself could be waiting at the top, and Charger wouldn't be able to see them without them seeing him. He tensed, anticipating combat.

As he put his hoof on the first stair up to the second floor, a blast of magic split the wood beneath him. A unicorn, no doubt Rain's personal guard, was sending powerful bolts of magic at him. Charger threw himself sideways and redirected upwards, staying just ahead of the projectiles. As he closed the space between himself and the unicorn, he moved in straight lines around the tight hallway, going up the walls and across the ceiling and floor. At the last second, the unicorn turned to run and Charger tackled him, driving his blades into the guard's back. The guard jerked and fell limp,

rolling down the stairs. His opponent down, Charger turned to the heavy wooden door. He wasted no time with ceremony or class; turning, he bucked the door inward and cautiously ascended the last few steps into the office.

The elegant office seemed, at first, entirely innocent and businesslike. As Charger took in his surroundings, he soon saw that this office was actually that of a very accomplished and very dangerous mob boss. In a corner lay a folded combat harness with padded sides. On top of it rested a set of hoof blades. Behind the desk in the center was a wall of bookshelves; along the horizontal board of one shelf a katana was mounted at about head height. On the desk was a knife, long and sharp. Next to the knife was a pile of green powder which had been finely chopped and set into lines. Behind the desk sat the most dangerous thing in the room: Rain.

Upon seeing Charger, he cracked a grin. Seemingly oblivious to Charger's presence, he lowered his face to the desk and pressed one nostril shut. He swiftly moved his face from left to right, snorting a line of the green powder. As the last of the dust entered his nose, he reeled back. His eyes were glowing. When Rain spoke to Charger, there was something different in his voice, something dark and mystical.

"Ground unicorn horn, my boy. It's a helluva drug." Rain flapped his wings twice, going airborne. "I finally got some use outta Sharkey after all", he sneered.

"You're a damn monster", Charger growled.

Rain laughed, his glowing eyes widening. "You killed her, boy! You condemned her to death!"

Charger took off his blades. It would have given him great satisfaction to shred Rain, but he wanted to end him with his own hooves. "And now I'm gonna kill you!"

Charger shot forward. In a blink Rain spun in mid air, bringing a back hoof across Charger's face. The stunned Shadowbolt spun to the floor, catching himself on the windowsill. He turned in time to see Rain barreling into him. The two tumbled out the window onto the roof of the mansion in a blur of wings and hooves.

The night air was hot with fire. Pegasi were zipping about in front of the mansion leaving various trails of pegasus magic. Blitz looks like she's having trouble, Charger thought briefly. The two combatants hit the roof hard. Rain rolled and kicked Charger into the air. Charger spun and shot back down towards him, pinning him to the roof.

"You know", Charger hissed, "There's a real irony in this situation. Had you not tried to kill me all those years ago in Manehattan, I wouldn't be trying to kill you now. You should have just left me and Sharkey alone!"

Rain squirmed, freeing his back legs. He brought a back hoof up and used it to pry Charger from his body. "What I should have done is killed you myself! Sharkey couldn't do anything right!" Rain stood, preparing for the next attack. "Sharkey was a whore, Charger! I did you a favor by taking her from you!" He grinned, his voice dripping with venom. "The only place she was any good was the bedroom."

Charger bounded forward, weaving to throw Rain off guard. "You ruined my life!" Throwing his full body weight forward, Charger tackled Rain through the skylight.

While Charger and Rain were rolling about on the roof, Nightshade and Stratus were closing in on their targets. Nightshade had gone on slightly ahead of Stratus and found the massive double doors to the back room of the mansion. The entire back end of the massive complex turned out to be an elegant ballroom, reminiscent of something one might expect to see at the Grand Galloping Gala. The marble floor gleamed beautifully under the low lights. The rear wall of the room was one massive stained glass window overlooking the last few dozen yards of the cliff and the sea below. The room was empty except for two pegasi. The first was Soarin, the brave second captain; behind him stood Spitfire. Upon seeing Nightshade, Soarin took a defensive stance. Nightshade trotted forward.

"Just leave! No one needs to get hurt!", Soarin warned.

Nightshade started what might have been the beginning of a contemptuous chuckle when she was tackled to the ground by an earth pony. A guard who had been waiting in the shadows, no doubt. Nightshade cursed her

carelessness; she should have been ready for roaming personal guards. The amateur mistake could very well cost her the mission if not her life now. The guard was considerably larger than she was; using only his weight, he pinned her to the floor.

"The enforcers have been called; they're sending a responder unit." He turned his head towards Soarin and Spitfire. "You two just stay back and wait for help to come."

Without warning, the guard's head jerked to the side. He fell limp on top of Nightshade. He was alive but unconscious. Something rolled the big earth pony to the side. Stratus.

Nightshade rose, brushing herself off with her wings.

"You have impeccable timing, Stratus."

Stratus grunted. He turned towards Soarin and Spitfire. "Well. This is it."

Nightshade did not respond. She moved like a shark, going forward with purpose and hunger. At the last minute, Soarin stepped in front of her, shouting, "If you wanna hurt Spitfire, you have to get through me!"

Nightshade almost apathetically pawed at Soarin's side, opening up a long gash from his front leg to his middle torso. The blue colt's eyes went wide with fear and shock. He toppled over. He was still alive and showed no signs of dying soon, but he would bleed out if given enough time, Nightshade had no doubt of that.

Spitfire reeled back in horror. "Oh Celestia, no!"

Tension thickened in the air as Nightshade stared Spitfire down. She stood silently, letting the hate build. She felt incredibly powerful watching the mare that destroyed her dreams cower in fear. As Nightshade was preparing to strike, the skylight shattered and two pegasi slammed into the hard marble floor in a shower of glass.

Charger and Rain rolled across the floor in a blur of hooves. Charger landed a powerful right hoof on the side of Rain's head, stunning him. He pinned him to the floor and planted a hoof on his neck, choking him out.

Rain turned his head, trying to slip free of the choke hold, but this only prompted Charger to press harder. Rain began to panic as he frantically squirmed to get free. Straining, he turned his head enough to grab a long shard of broken glass, and with lightning speed he swiveled his neck, bringing it across Charger's face. Blood flashed from Charger's muzzle as a line of red streaked from over his right eye down to the left side of his mouth. With a cry of rage and pain, Charger stomped at Rain's face, shattering the glass. While this left Rain unarmed, it also threw Charger off balance, giving Rain just enough mobility to slip away.

"Get back here, you fucking coward!", Charger roared.

Rain scrambled to get away, but in a flash Charger had leapt onto his back, throwing him to the floor again. Charger pressed the back of Rain's head to one side, bringing his muzzle upwards with the other hoof. Both pegasi were screaming with rage when Charger threw his weight downward. A loud crack told everyone that Rain's neck had been snapped. Charger sat immobile atop the fallen pegasus for a moment, his chest heaving. After a moment, he got up and turned to Stratus.

"Where's Star?"

Stratus turned towards the main house. "Dunno. The bomb went off, but I haven't seen her yet. You should probably go check on her."

Charger nodded. "And Blitz?"

Stratus turned to Nightshade. "I'll go find Blitz."

Nightshade gestured towards the door. "You two go clean up. I'll keep our guest of honor company until you get back." Nightshade turned to Spitfire with a toxic stare as she added, "Then we can all watch our hard work come to fruition."



# Chapter 12

Stratus trudged back through the main hall. The rest of the mansion seemed to be catching fire now. It was of no concern to him. Watching the spotless furniture, pretty pictures, and beautiful rooms all go up in smoke gave him a sense of satisfaction. It was the first time in recent years that he truly felt he had completed something. All that remained was killing Spitfire.

Stratus's stomach turned at the thought. Did she really deserve to die? After all these years, is it really worth it to kill her?

He pushed these thoughts out of his mind as he exited the inferno that was the front of the mansion. Even beyond the wreckage of the initial explosion, it was clear that a battle had taken place. Trails of blue fire streaked the courtyard. Chunks of stone were blackened from the heat of a lightning strike. Places in the grass were smeared with blood. Stratus looked around. No sign of Blitz. He began to walk further from the mansion.

As he reached the base of the hill, he saw two shapes off in the distance. One he immediately recognized as the sky blue filly Blitz had attacked back in Ponyville.

"She flew all the way out here just to kill Blitz? All by herself?"

Stratus squinted, peering into the night. The second shape seemed to be not one pony, but two. The first pony he did not recognize. She was a blue pegasus of average height; her long black mane obscured the rest of her features. The second pony was Blitz. The youngest Shadowbolt hung limply across the other pony's back. Her mane was not crackling with electricity.

"Blitz... Damn it..."

Stratus felt a brief pang of sadness. While he had grown accustomed to seeing comrades die, the death of somepony so young was something he could not adjust to. He was briefly reminded of Spacey. He shut his eyes



tight, pressing the images from his mind. The old pegasus sighed deeply, turning back towards the mansion.

Meanwhile, Charger was entering the living commons. The entire room was ablaze. He felt his stomach drop; the shapes of many pony bodies were visible on the floor. None of them were moving. Some were burnt beyond recognition.

Frantically, he darted about the room. None of the burnt bodies seemed lean enough to be Starry Skies. The more recognizable ones he instantly dismissed as Wonderbolts. He flew out the side of the mansion. The charred remains of the building covered the lush grass. In the middle of all the debris was a pegasus with a distinctly feminine figure. Charger rushed to her side. "Star!"

The pink pegasus remained immobile.

Charger shook her by the shoulders. "Star! Come on, wake up!"

Finally, the fallen Shadowbolt gave a weak cough. As she gasped for air, her coughs grew in strength. Clearing her lungs of smoke, she inhaled deeply, sitting up.

"Charger... You came back for me."

Charger laughed, indicating Starry Skies's wing. "If you didn't wanna fly down to Mexicolt with me, you coulda just told me. You didn't have to go and break a wing to get your point across."

Starry Skies chuckled softly. Flexing her good wing, she asked, "Where are the others?"

"Nightshade's waiting for us to attend her little execution ceremony." Charger looked back towards the burning house. "I'm not sure I wanna go. We'll just wait out back." Putting his head under Star's chin, he helped her rise to her hooves. She leaned against him for support as they walked around the rear of the mansion to the cliff's edge.

Stratus had made his way back inside the house. The fire was spreading with surprising quickness. The hallway to the main ballroom was already filling with smoke. Stratus entered the room, coughing slightly. Nightshade turned towards him, a cold smile painted on her face.

"I'm so glad you're back, I was considering starting without you." She looked behind him. Seeing nopony, she inquired, "Where are Star and Charger?"

Stratus grunted. "Not sure. Guess they didn't wanna come."

Nightshade shrugged. "And Blitz?"

Stratus shook his head. The tacit signal told Nightshade that Blitz was no more.

Nightshade's eyes drifted downward briefly. "I see. How disappointing. I know she would have thoroughly enjoyed this." Nightshade turned to Spitfire. "Shall we begin?"

Spitfire stood firmly. Despite her tears, she refused to back down. "You're insane. You're a complete monster!", the orange pegasus growled.

Nightshade exploded. "SHUT UP, BITCH!"

Spitfire took a step back, still staring Nightshade down. Nightshade continued. "Surely you know why I'm here?"

"Because you lost that ra-"

"Because you screwed me out of my dreams, my only aspirations, my whole LIFE!" Nightshade began to pace, her fury manifesting itself like an itch spreading over her whole body. She stopped in front of Spitfire, her eyes wild with fury. "Screw waiting. This is it. Any last words?"

"Stop."

Nightshade stood frozen. Spitfire had her eyes pressed shut, quaking in fear and anticipating death. She hadn't spoken. Slowly, Nightshade turned to Stratus.

"Would you like to do the honors, Stratus?"

Stratus stepped forward, looking from Nighshade to Spitfire. "No." He stepped between the two fillies, slightly off to the side. "And you shouldn't, either. Just let it go, Nightshade."

Nightshade recoiled in shock. "WHAT?! Have you lost your mind? Damn it, Stratus, this is NOT the time to be sentimental! She needs to die!"

Stratus slammed a front hoof into the ground. "Nightshade, killing her won't change anything! The past is dead, it doesn't need to take parts of the present with it!"

"She's the whole reason we're here, Stratus!"

Stratus sighed. "I know, and I'm sorry I led you to believe this was the right way. It's not, Nightshade. I refuse to have her blood on my hooves."

Nightshade looked away. "I see your point. You don't have to do this." She began to turn away. "But I do!" In a flash, Nightshade leapt at Spitfire.

"NIGHTSHADE, NO!"

All three ponies collided, sliding across the marble floor.

Slowly, one by one, they all began to move. The first to rise was Spitfire. She slowly got to her hooves. Her front left leg quaked. Looking down, she saw it had been slashed. Blood ran from the wound. It was in no way fatal, but the pain brought her to her knees.

Stratus began to rise next. Blood smeared his neck. Spitfire gasped. Stratus turned his head, craning his neck to see. This action revealed that there was no tear in his flight suit. The blood was not his own. He and Spitfire looked to Nightshade. Spitfire gasped again. Stratus shut his eyes tight, turning his head away.

Nightshade lay on the cold marble floor, bleeding profusely. Along her neck was a long and deep gash. By a twist of cruel fate, her neck had been sliced open along the scar she received the day she and Stratus had met.

Fear filled her clouding eyes. She looked up to Stratus. A gurgling noise came from her throat. With visible effort she began to force out words.

"Strat..."

Stratus forced himself to look down. For the first time in many years tears came to his eyes as he gazed upon Nightshade's face. "Yeah kid?"

Nightshade weakly gurgled out, "I'm sorry."

Stratus could not respond. He poured the full extent of his will power into fighting back tears. He reached down and closed Nightshade's eyes.

Stratus stood immobile and silent for a moment. Exhaling deeply, he turned to Spitfire, indicating Soarin. "Take him outside. This place will be engulfed in flames pretty soon. Put pressure on his wound. He should be alright. The responders will be here soon enough." With this, Stratus kicked out the massive stained-glass window, letting the first glint of dawn shine into the ballroom. He turned to Nightshade, intending to pick her body up and bring her with him. He found he could not; approaching the body made him feel fragile, as though the mangled form may shatter him like glass. Feeling hollow, he walked out the back of the building to meet Charger and Starry Skies.

The other two Shadowbolts had shed their uniforms and were watching the sun rise. Stratus stood along side them. Charger inquired without looking up, "How'd it go?"

Stratus said flatly, "Spitfire and Soarin are alive. Nightshade's dead."

Charger scoffed. "After all this..."

The three stood in silence for a moment. Starry Skies finally asked, "Where's Blitz?"

Stratus added, "She's dead too."

More silence. Stratus turned to Charger. "So you finally killed Rain. Feel better?"

Charger responded darkly, "I feel empty. My past is what filled me up for all these years. Now that it's dead and gone, I feel hollow. When Sharkey died, I felt like I got some closure, but all it did was redirect all of that hate, that pain, towards Rain. And now he's dead, and I feel like nothing changed. It's like everything just left me."

"Death tends to take more with it than the pony who died", Stratus noted.

Silence descended upon them again. Charger broke it by looking up to Stratus. "Did you kill Nightshade?"

Stratus finally let a tear fall. "Yeah..."

Charger added, "Feel better?"

Stratus gave a bitter, hollow laugh. To nopony in particular he said, "I think I'll go visit my cousin's family."

"Where do they live?", Starry Skies inquired.

"Well, they're mostly dead, Star. Buried not too far from here. My cousin Spacey, he's been dead a little over thirty years now. His father died of cancer about ten years later. His mother's still kicking from what I hear."

Stratus lapsed into spoken thought, adding, "I heard she had a filly a couple years after Spacey's death. I never got to meet her, I had gotten shipped off on Royal Guard duty by then. She never sent me any pictures, either." The old pegasus gave a laugh. "That's just like Cloudy Night, too. Always working too hard to remember family." He sighed, taking a seat.

Charger looked from Starry Skies to Stratus. He stood, helping Starry Skies up with him. "Well Strat, I guess this is good bye. I'm headed south, and I'm dragging Star with me."

Stratus cocked an eyebrow at Charger. "Are you two...?"

Starry Skies interjected, "Oh, heavens no." Smiling, she added, "But I do need a good drinking buddy."

Charger gave a short laugh of approval. "You're also gonna need help

getting around without that wing. Come on, blue-eyes, it's a long walk to Mexicolt." With this, the two set off, leaving Stratus gazing into the rising sun.

Many miles away, Blueshift Blaze and Rainbow Dash were digging up the last few shovels of dirt for a grave. Blaze dropped her shovel and wiped her face. "That's about as good as it's gonna get." She turned to Blitz and began to tug her purple and black flight suit off of her.

Blaze looked up, traces of sorrow in her eyes. "This isn't my sister. This suit, this life, this is somepony taking advantage of her mental state. I refuse to let her remain this way for all of eternity. Help me take it off."

Reluctantly, Rainbow gingerly tugged at a leg of Blitz's suit, leaving the indigo filly bare.

Blaze smiled sadly. "That's my sister." Gently, she laid the dead filly in the grave. She began to shovel dirt on top of her. When the hole was filled, Blaze took a large stone and pressed it into the soft earth. It was lightly smeared with mud, spelling out the word "Blitz".

Dash put a wing over Blaze. "I'll have Twilight come mark it properly when we get back to Ponyville."

Blaze laid her head on Rainbow's neck. "Thanks kid."

The two arrived in Ponyville just after noon. A few ponies who were meandering about town square began to cheer upon Rainbow Dash's arrival but were quickly reduced to frightened muttering by the newcomer. The small crowd that had gathered was soon parted by Rainbow Dash's best friends. The group trotted forward happily but stopped a few yards away. The only pony to come forward was Applejack. Without a word, she planted a swift and friendly kiss on Rainbow's lips. Upon seeing the wound on her face and the choppy remnant of her tail, Applejack inquired, "Dash, sugarcube, you okay?"

Smiling feebly, Dash responded, "I'll be alright."

Applejack nervously looked to Blaze. "Who's yer friend?"

Dash responded brightly, addressing the entire crowd. "Everypony, this is Blueshift Blaze. She'll be staying with me here in Ponyville. Everypony make her feel at home." Blaze smiled shyly at the introduction, unused to being spoken so highly of.

Applejack and Rainbow Dash went off by themselves. Applejack gently prodded, "So how did everything go? Are all the Shadowbolts, ya know... dead?"

"Dunno. After we killed Blaze's sister, Blitz, we left."

Applejack did her best to smile. "Well, at least things look a little brighter."

Rainbow Dash looked Applejack in the eye and for the first time Applejack noticed that Rainbow's eyes looked completely hollow. Empty.

Rainbow Dash responded flatly, "No they don't."

~~THE END~~