

# Pony Gear Solid

By The Posh Mothershuckler



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# Chapter 1

Some of you reading this are probably asking yourselves why I'm bothering to write it in the first place. Truth is, I'd love nothing more than to live out my retirement in the relative comfort that suburban America provides, and to forget all about my past.

But I can't do that. My war may be over, but I still have a job to do. To see this age off; to leave behind my story so that future generations will remember me. The real me, free of the hyperbolic legends that have sprung up about me; free of the pariah caricature that the Patriots and their proxies drew of me. The true story of my life needs to be told; the whole truth, and nothing but.

To have come to this point in my memoir, you've no doubt read a lot of unbelievable claptrap. You've read unbelievable stories, the stuff of fantasy and science fiction. Stories with people like Psycho Mantis, Vulcan Raven or Vamp, whose supernatural abilities defied the laws of reality. Heroes like Gray Fox, Raiden or Olga, whose bodies and souls were the playthings of an ancient conspiracy with no regard for personal freedom or self-determination. Through it all, there's one common thread: It all sounds unbelievable as sin.

I wouldn't blame you for discounting the words in this memoir. It'd be easy enough to dismiss everything I say as the demented ramblings of a senile coot. My doctor tells me that I'm pushing eighty, after all. For all I know, I really am nothing more than a gibbering old fool who long ago lost his grip on reality. But if you've kept reading through everything I've written so far, then you must see some sense in what it is I'm saying. That, or your suspension of disbelief is the stuff of legends. So I want to thank you, first of all, for sticking with me so long. And I beg your pardon in advance for taxing that trust to the utmost with what it is I'm about to tell you.

Because while my exploits may be almost common knowledge by now, thanks to the internet finally living up to the ideal of free information exchange, there's one story that I've always kept close to my chest. One mission I've never shared with anybody, at least outside of those who took part in it. It's almost embarrassing to write about, given the subject matter,

which is why I've been hemming and hawing over it for this long. But it's got to come out sooner or later. And I'm not getting any younger.

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It was in the wake of the Manhattan Incident that the book of my life began to draw to a close. Events that came to a head in 2014, when the Patriots were deposed from their centuries-long reign over the world, had their foundations laid in 2009, on a chilly April morning, the day before the 220th anniversary of George Washington's inauguration as the first President of the United States. What began as an act of kidnapping by a terrorist faction became one of the greatest tragedies in history. By the next morning, the President and his predecessor were both dead, along with thousands of innocents, and Manhattan Island looked like God had driven his snowplow through it.

What happened that day had long-reaching consequences; a sort of domino effect upon the rest of the world, and the United Nations had its hands full playing damage control. Entire countries fell into chaos as America withdrew within its borders to lick its wounds. Nations that relied upon an American military presence to act as deterrence suddenly found themselves high defenseless. The global situation grew increasingly unstable—all according to plan, of course, as the Patriots steered events their way, shaped the world in their own image.

And as war closed in around those nations who lost their American military backing, they began to realize the futility and the costliness of maintaining their own standing armies. It's here that the War Economy of the 2010s has its roots. Private military contractors grew in demand; private armies, without loyalty or ideology, began fighting broad-scale proxy wars on behalf of entire nations, driving their economic development and lining their own pockets with blood money. By the end of the year 2009, what would evolve into the War Economy had started to take hold of the entire world—all because of what transpired on that fateful April day.

It's important that you understand the framework of the War Economy that was responsible for the rise of the PMCs, because the story I'm about to tell concerns one PMC in particular. You probably had never heard of Pegasus Wings before now, and that's okay; they were nothing special.

Numbered no larger than three hundred and fifty men at their peak, most of which were culled from the ranks of deserters, war criminals and the dishonorably discharged. Though considerably less professional than the PMCs that ran in the final days of the War Economy, they nevertheless raked in a fair amount of income from their deployments. Never made the kind of waves that the companies under Liquid's banner did though. At least, nowhere on Earth.

What you DID probably hear about was that report released in early 2010 that warned of the rising availability of black market nuclear materials. That was probably one of the last instances of information being freely distributed among the masses, before the Patriots seized total control of the digital flow of information. Well, Pegasus Wings was responsible for that, at least in part. Around Christmas of 2009, you see, they were able to secure for themselves a decommissioned Soviet nuclear missile.

Now, by this point, the SOP system didn't yet have complete control over every single gun in the world—that was a far more gradual process than the growth of the War Economy—but the Patriots did have a death grip over the world's stock of WMDs, and they were rushing, in a blind panic, to take control of what they didn't already own. That Soviet missile was one of the only ones of its kind left—a naked nuke, unfettered by nanocontrol—and the Patriots completely overlooked it. Just goes to show you that even computers are fallible, huh?

You should also know by now that the specs for Metal Gear REX—the walking, nuclear-equipped death mobile that I destroyed on Shadow Moses Island in 2005—had been on the black market for years by the time of the Manhattan Incident. And while years of anti-Metal Gear weapons development had, by that point, reduced the strategic importance of Metal Gear considerably, having one in your arsenal pretty much ensured that nobody but the ballsiest of nations would ever give you grief. Even if you didn't actually have a nuclear stockpile, owning a Metal Gear acted as an effective bluff and countermeasure, as long as you had a good enough poker face to convince the rest of the world that you had something for it to fire.

So it came to pass that a nuclear weapon fell into the hands—or, more fittingly, for reasons that will become apparent later, the hooves—of Pegasus Wings. And, to make an already bad situation that much worse,

so too did a black market cookie-cutter copy of the Metal Gear that I had fought in Alaska all those years before.

I you've read this far, then you should be pretty familiar with my stance on nuclear proliferation, and on Metal Gear in general. But to reiterate both succinctly, I've dedicated my life to making sure they both go the way of the dodo. So when our contact in the Navy, a young Lieutenant Commander whose name I've conveniently forgotten in my old age, passed word to our group, Philanthropy, about Pegasus Wings' exciting new toy, there wasn't much else that Otacon and I could do but lock and load.

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Pegasus Wings had its base of operations in a remote part of the Pacific Ocean, at coordinates 50° S 100° W. Our connections secured for us a landing spot at an old World War II-era airstrip that wasn't far from their island. Parachuting onto the island directly wasn't an option; forgetting for now that dropping down onto a strip of land that small from the height that we'd need to be at to avoid detection was like throwing a dart at a bull's-eye the size of a barnacle, I'd probably be shot to death hours before I even hit the ground. Flying in via helicopter wasn't an option either, for similar reasons. What self-respecting mercenary army wouldn't have a handy stockpile of anti-air missiles on hand? No, I had to keep a low profile, and that meant aquatic insertion, my least favorite, yet most frequent, method of infiltration.

Slapping on a pair of fins and some scuba gear, I made for the island. It wasn't so far out from the airstrip—we could see it from our landing site, even—so it didn't take me long to reach it. An hour and some change, if I remember right. I emerged from the ocean to find a dock that featured an industrial sized crane, dangling a long steel wire tipped with a hook the size of a sedan over a tanker lying berthed in the harbor. On the side of the tanker was emblazoned an emblem of two blue, feathered wings, spread wide with their tips arcing upward like a grin. Between them was the face of a midnight blue warhorse, a helmet gird about its head, vacant black eyes boring a hole through my skull.

You're not stupid, I hope, so you probably gathered that it was the emblem of Pegasus Wings.

Searching the ship seemed as reasonable a starting place as any, so I boarded and had myself a look around. It was easy enough to find my way about the place; the ship was the same class as the *U.S.S. Discovery*, the tanker that I'd infiltrated almost three years prior, and the layout was close to identical. It was markedly better furnished, however, stocked from bow to stern with high-tech electronic equipment and weaponry. The bridge looked like something out of *Star Trek*; very much unlike the spartan, computer-operated bridge of the *Discovery*. Plush chairs sitting in front of complex, glowing consoles, a gentle, humming pulse running through the room. Lining the upper decks were gun emplacements, point-defense batteries, missile racks; the ship was a floating fortress, armed to the teeth and fully capable of doling out as well as soaking up punishment. But more to the point, and most importantly, the ship was completely deserted. I searched that ship from one end to the other, and didn't encounter a single soul.

I contacted Otacon to inform him of my findings. "Do you think that the ship itself might be the Pegasus Wings HQ?" he postulated. "Speaking from experience, a mobile command base would definitely have its advantages."

I thought about the cargo plane that I'd spent so much of the last few years aboard, the safe haven that had protected Otacon and I as we became wanted men, and couldn't help but agree. "But then, what about the island base?" I asked. "Some kind of supply depot, maybe? Even then, that still wouldn't explain the crew's whereabouts. You'd think that, even with most of the crew on dry land, they'd spare a handful of people to guard the ship."

Otacon didn't have an answer for me, so I signed off and continued my exploration. I made my way down into the hold, following the familiar path through the mess hall—somewhat more lavishly furnished than the one aboard the tanker that lay dead in New York harbor—down to the engine room, and wove through the criss-crossing, dimly lit corridors that took me into the deep recesses of the ship.

The first few areas of the hold were completely empty, save for some empty wooden crates that lay tipped over, spilling packing peanuts, Styrofoam, and not much else. Whatever was being stored there had been moved some time ago. A film of dust coated most surfaces, and much of

the remaining metal equipment—scattered crowbars here and there, a forlorn forklift in a distant corner—had begun to rust from disuse. Blame the salty air.

The last section of the hold was the same kind of cavernous room where I had discovered Metal Gear RAY in the bowels of the *Discovery*. But, to my mild disappointment, there was nothing there this time, save the same service walks and gantries that lined the walls of the *Discovery's* hold.

Again, I contacted Otacon. “There was definitely a Metal Gear aboard this ship,” I told him, “but it looks like it's been moved out already. That explains the heavy lifting equipment out on the dock.”

“The only place it could possibly be now is the island,” Otacon told me. “This must be the assembly point and staging area for Metal Gear. And if they've evacuated the ship completely, then it could be that they're planning to dig into and fortify the island.”

I felt my stomach churn unpleasantly at the idea of another mercenary nation being founded on a remote island. This whole “Outer Heaven” business had been in vogue for far too long. Closing the link with Otacon, I made my way back out of the hold and off of the ship. I sped down the dock, determined to put an end to this new mercenary rebellion before it could get started in earnest.

The gate that led into the island proper was left cracked open. I found that more than a little perplexing. The only weapon I had on me was my modified M9 Beretta, and tranquilizers wouldn't be much use in a firefight, but I held it like a lifeline as I stole into the base, keeping it level and ready to fire at a moment's notice.

But the island base, too, was empty, and more to the point, a massive contrast to the well-maintained and modern ship that sat vacant and forlorn in the harbor. This place reeked of obsolescence. There weren't any obvious indicators as to its age, but from the level of decay and the look of its equipment, it had to predate the second World War at the latest. Otacon suggested that it and the airstrip that we had landed on used to be parts of the same facility.



The base's layout was simple: A barracks on the far left side; in the middle of the base, a rectangular hangar, and a larger, circular, domed structure. Inside the barracks, there wasn't much else besides rusted bunks standing row on row and a mess hall that stank of long-expired food. I did find a rusted Springfield bolt-action rifle laying on a moldy old mattress. The relic caught my eye immediately, and I tried opening the chamber on the slim chance that there was still a round loaded. I wasn't altogether surprised to find that the action was rusted solid, but I was a little disappointed.

Leaving the barracks, I checked out the smaller, rectangular hangar. Not much in there; some old trucks with moth-eaten furniture inside the cabins. I didn't recognize the model off the top of my head, but they were at least as old as the facility itself, and each of them was stamped on the doors and hoods with a faded white star, a symbol that I recognized as the old American Army logo. That struck me as particularly unusual; there wasn't enough space on the island to justify the presence of one truck, let alone several.

I left the hangar and took one last look around the place, but there wasn't much to see that I hadn't already seen. Steeling my nerves and once again gripping my Beretta, I made for the domed structure. There was a wide gate, like the entrance to a garage, and beside it a door. I gripped the door's handle, took a deep breath, and tentatively nudged it open.

The door to the hangar had groaned something awful when I had opened it. Those hinges were rusted tight, and hadn't been oiled in who knows how long. But this one opened smoothly, with nary a sound. I noted the difference and stepped into the room, my gun held at the ready. Yet even in the darkness of this hangar, I could tell that it, too, was devoid of human life. There were no sounds besides my footsteps as I edged into the building; no telltale smells of sweat or cologne—even flatulence, if you'll believe it—that always gave away human presence. I was quite alone.

I was well past exasperated by this point. It isn't that I minded the lack of enemy soldiers to shoot and sneak past, but I was hoping to find something besides a worthless gun, Styrofoam and rancid odor on this mission. Pegasus Wings had a presence here; the ship was evidence enough of that, but what that presence was, I couldn't determine. Three hundred and fifty soldiers had vanished, taking with them a Metal Gear and

a nuclear missile. Part of me felt like giving up, going back to the Nomad and getting some goddamn dinner, but I couldn't very easily ignore the mission that I had been given, so I resolved to keep searching.

My hand groped along the near wall, searching for a switch to provide the hangar with some illumination. I found it at least, taking it in my hand and pulling it down. It resisted, only slightly, but complied in the end. There was a spark from the switch, the sound of electric equipment stirring and coming to life, and suddenly, the hangar was bathed in fluorescent white light.

I don't find myself at a loss for words often—in fact, it's been said that I talk too much, for too long—so try and understand just how flabbergasting the sight before me was. I'll try to convey it with words, but whether it's my memory dulling with time, or that room being too wondrous for words to do justice by, I don't think I'll be able to do it right.

For starters, it was huge. I don't think the exterior of the building really captured just how big it was going to be on the inside. The place was enormous and shaped like a sports stadium. It was a single room, circular in shape. And every surface in the room was chrome. Everything, every panel, every instrument, the very walls themselves, reflected the fluorescent light from the ceiling. It was like being inside a lightbulb

The instruments themselves—how to put this? I hate to bring up Star Trek again, but those are the best terms I can describe it by. You know the way that forward-thinking sci-fi tries to cast a certain futuristic look and feel onto everything? Trouble is, they're always trying to envision that future in present-day terms. It's hard to capture the look and feel of the far-flung future when you're constrained by the limitations of contemporary times, so everything winds up having this weird, sort of archaic feel to it. It's meant to look futuristic, but you can tell that it isn't.

Well, that's the way that the equipment in that room looked. Like World War II-era equipment dressed up to look futuristic. Like a room in an old Flash Gordon serial. The interior layout winded and spiraled downward. The whole thing reminded me of the seating in a football stadium, the way the consoles were arranged in the circular pattern, tapering down to a pit that had to be at least half a kilometer in size. I was standing close to a ramp that led from the entrance I'd come through to the bottom. It was

wide, wide enough to comfortably accommodate one of those trucks that I'd found in the hangar. I guess they were used to run supplies up from the bottom of this room to the outside world. Or the other way around. Whichever.

As much as the scale of the place hit me, the quality of its maintenance was what really made it stand out from the rusted-out carcass that was the base. This place was so unlike that; it had a life to it, a beat, a pulse. I couldn't help but wonder what it could possibly have been built for.

Well, actually, it was three things that stuck out. The scale. The quality of its maintenance. And the big honking arch in the center of the pit at the bottom of the room.

Otacon rang me, said that he'd been keeping up on the visual data transmitted from my nanomachines. To say he was excited would be a gross understatement. I couldn't recall him ever being so animated, especially in the wake of his sister's death in Manhattan not so long ago. "Can you believe it?" he asked me, almost giddy. "It's like the Guardian of Forever, almost! Think it'll take you back in time if you walk through it?"

I didn't have the slightest idea as to what he was talking about. I've had a lot of time on my hands during my retirement, and this place gets SyFy, so I've since been able to educate myself on classic Star Trek. Actually, it's a funny story. Hearing "Guardian of Forever" brought me back to the memory of that day, reminded me of that mission I'd gone on. It's what convinced me to write this chapter, incidentally.

Where was I? Oh, right. Otacon. He wanted to know everything about that room, demanded that I bring back some sort of sensitive equipment for him to study. "Scientific curiosity," he called it.

"Otacon," I said to him tentatively, not wanting to burst his bubble too maliciously, "is that the same scientific curiosity that pushed you to develop REX?"

He got quiet, responding a few moments later with a mollified "touché," and signed off before I could apologize. I sighed to myself, pressing a palm to my forehead and squeezing my thumb and index fingers against my temples. I felt bad for hurting him like that—who wouldn't kick themselves after inventing a world-ending machine like REX?--but that man

needed a spine in the worst way. Figured I'd bring him a shiny piece of metal and call it an apology gift.

Putting aside Otacon's oversensitivity for another time, I walked down the ramp, setting my Beretta back in its holster, no longer seeing a point in keeping it out. This place was as lifeless as the rest of the island. Empty, and eerily sterile. Every step I took echoed loudly, reverberating off of the chrome walls; my every footfall came back to me as the stomping feet of a colossus.

I looked down as I walked, noting silently the black, rubbery tire tracks running down the length of the ramp. "There's one hypothesis confirmed," I said to the empty room. When I came at last to the pit at the bottom—it felt like hours, honestly, the time it took to get down there—I stared up at the arch, which now towered above me.

This entire island was one of contradictions—the modern wonders of the tanker berthed outside, the hollow, derelict military barracks, the zeerust of this...whatever the hell this room was, and even the arch itself. So completely unlike anything else on the island. The military base may have been old; this thing was ancient. I didn't know how long it had been there, but it looked old. Like something out of a National Geographic article about ancient Egypt., or Rome, or some other dead civilization.

It was bigger up close than it had looked from the top of the room, more than tall and wide enough to accommodate the trucks in the hangar next door. It's funny; I could tell just by looking at it that it was old, but age didn't cause the thing to lose any luster. It was beautiful, exquisitely and ornately carved with inlaid patterns that I didn't recognize or understand, at least at the time. But even without comprehending, I couldn't stop staring.

At the pinnacle of the arch was the bust of a unicorn, resplendently white in the room's fluorescence. It stared down at me with shimmering eyes, an expression of serenity adorning its long face. I didn't realize that a horse's face could express something as abstract as serenity, but I guess that shows what an ignorant bastard I am.

It was the centerpiece of the room. Possibly of the base itself. I got the distinct impression that this building was built around the arch, that the arch was the sole reason for this base's existence. There was a

sacredness about the place that was just now starting to creep onto me. And believe it or not—I never told anybody this part, not even Otacon—I was so touched, so overwhelmed by that feeling of sacredness, that I very nearly genuflected.

But the buzzing of the Codec interrupted me before I could do something as stupid as that, and I shook off the feeling. Otacon's voice still sounded droopy, but he was definitely intrigued by what it was we were seeing. "This room is important," he told me, "though how, I don't exactly know. But we know that Pegasus Wings came here, and we know that they brought a Metal Gear. It's a small island. There aren't many places for them to have stashed it."

I looked at the ground on a whim, and noticed something peculiar. The tire tracks ran from the end of the ramp, down the center of the arch. But they didn't come out of the other side.

Well. That was telling. After all, even I had seen Stargate. "This arch is some sort of portal, Otacon," I said, pressing a hand against its frame. To my surprise, it felt warm, almost hot, to the touch. "There're tire tracks that run right to its opening, that don't run out the other side. Whatever goes through here comes out someplace else."

"Snake..." Otacon's voice was hesitant. I could predict what it was he was about to say, and I could guess why he held it back. "Do you think that they took Metal Gear through that portal?"

"At this juncture," I said, running my hand down the arch's frame, "I can't think of anything else that would even remotely make sense."

Otacon hesitated to speak again. So I went ahead and supplied the words that he was so afraid of saying. "I have to follow them, Otacon. I need to see where they've taken Metal Gear."

He tried to protest, but his heart wasn't exactly in it. He had to have come to the same conclusion that I did. We couldn't very easily let a Metal Gear remain in the hands of potential terrorists. No way we could justify that, after spending four years breaching the sovereignty of recognized nations to destroy their Metal Gears. I knew damn well that whatever damage that Metal Gear caused, whatever blood it spilled, would be as

much on my hands for my inaction as it would be on Otacon's for inventing it, if I walked away.

Otacon finally agreed with my assessment. There was more equipment arranged around the arch, control panels that glowed dimly, padded, rotating chairs that faced around and away from their stations. He directed me to one of them, talked me through the process of starting the machine up. I'm not sure how he knew what to do to get the machine to work. Sure, he was always good with computers, but these were archaic machines from another era, hooked up to an ancient portal that would take me God knows where. Figured he'd have a little bit of trouble with them, but he talked me through the process like it was nothing. Maybe it was my nanomachines again, relaying information to him, or some other damn thing. I don't know; my job's to kill people and blow shit up, not mull CPU design.

But he got that computer to work, and as it hummed to life, the glow on the monitor readout intensified. The fluorescent light dimmed, and in the dead center of the arch, floating in midair, the tiniest ball of yellow light appeared. I watched it, mesmerized, as it grew in size, very quickly filling the massive frame of the arch. The fluorescent light winked out altogether as the light shone radiantly from every inch of the portal's maw.

It's funny. That unicorn bust that I was looking at before, the one that looked so white and beautiful and inviting—it was the one thing in the room that didn't reflect the yellow light from the portal. If anything, it darkened, shriveled, and turned a sinister ebony. The look of serenity twisted into a grim scowl, and finally extended into a mocking sneer.

And I? I stared back defiantly, refusing to be cowed by a shaped piece of rock.

"Snake," said Otacon timidly as I stared into the sea of gold. "Did you ever read *Hyperion*, by Dan Simmons?"

"It's in your collection, isn't it?" I asked. I stared deep into the portal, trying to discern something—a recognizable shape, some hint of what lay in store for me beyond—to no avail. "Never got around to reading it though. Why? What is it about?"

“...I'll lend it to you when you get back,” said Otacon, forcing some cheer into his voice. “Just, suffice to say, it's more than a little relevant right now.”

I didn't quite know what to make of that. “I could be out of contact for a while,” I said, pushing on through. “If I'm not back in seventy-two hours, I'm not coming back at all. Take off and find help. Find Jack. Come in after me, and finish whatever I've started. We can't let this one get away, Otacon.”

“I'll come for you, Snake,” said Otacon. There was a hardness in his voice, a resoluteness that I wish he'd carry himself with more often. It was, and still is, very becoming. “But you make sure that I don't have to. Don't make me lose you the way I lost Emma.”

I couldn't help but smile sadly at the company he was putting me in. “Hold the fort, Hal,” I said quietly.

Filling my lungs with what could have turned out to be my final breath of Earth air—or my last breath of air, period—I stepped into the brightness, letting it swallow me, engulf me in its shining heat.

And then I felt no more. The light pulled back and faded. Darkness took me, and I was gone.

# Chapter 2

“...and so then Pinkie Pie said 'oatmeal? Are you crazy?!’”

Raucous laughter erupted from the table in the Sweet Apple Acres farmhouse's dining room as Fluttershy finished her anecdote. “Dangit, Fluttershy,” Applejack panted, fighting against the giggles as she wiped a tear from her eye with a shaking hoof, “I can't believe I weren't there for that one. That story's a right classic.”

“Well,” said Fluttershy, pausing to take another sip of cider, “Ms. Cheerilee didn't find it all that funny at the time. The last time I paid her a visit, she *still* hadn't gotten the cheese smell out of her basement.”

“She'll come 'round,” said Applejack. “Time has a funny way of puttin' these things inna perspective.” She slid the nearest bottle of cider down the table into Fluttershy's waiting hoof. “Top yerself off there, iffing you like. We got plenty in the cellar.” She spared a worrying glance to Big Mac. “We do still got plenty, don't we?”

“Eeyup.” Big Mac smirked at Applejack, glancing rapidly at the half-empty cider bottle beside Fluttershy and arching his eyebrows.

“Like I said!” She turned back to Fluttershy with a broad smile. “It's been a pur-ticularly fruitful harvest, after all, an' we got plenty to spare.”

“Oh, you're too kind,” said Fluttershy, pushing the bottle back down the table. “But I think I may have had just a bit too much already. I think it's startling to—starting to afflict—start—” Fluttershy took a deep breath, exhaled, closed her eyes and concentrated. “Starting to affect the way I chalk—*talk!* Oh goodness, I can't even speak properly anymore.” Her voice had a fluttering, buoyant quality to it, despite her angst, and she maintained a dopey, happy grin on her face, so very unlike her usual shy, quiet smile. “This is so embarrassing. Maybe it would be bitter—batter—*better*—if just stopped for the night.”

“Aw, don't be s'darn self-conscious. You ain't the first pony to get a li'l bit tipsy after imbibin' in Sweet Apple Cider.” said Applejack, relieved to no



end that Fluttershy was calling an end to her bender (modest by most standards, but noteworthy for Fluttershy, who hardly touched the stuff if she could help it). She'd invited the bashful pegasus for dinner with the hope that a social occasion would bring her out of her shell the slightest bit, and in that, the plan had succeeded, though she had to ply Fluttershy with considerably more cider than she'd thought. The anecdotes, however, were certainly worth the effort; Fluttershy was spilling stories that she doubtlessly would never have thought about sharing if she were sober. "The stuff has a funny way of muckin' up words. Loosenin' lips. Lowerin' inhibitions."

"Applejack says that cider's why I'm alive right now!" Applebloom chimed in cheerfully as she trotted into the dining room from the kitchen, precariously balancing a tray of apple fritters on her nose. She set the tray on the table, oblivious to the gobsmacked, open-jawed expression of her big sister, the blushing face and subdued giggling of Fluttershy, or the bemusement of Big Macintosh.

Applejack steeled herself, flushing visibly beneath her orange coat. "Applebloom," she said, gritting her teeth tightly together, "do we need to have 'nother talk about what is and is not appropriate conversation when company's over?"

"Shucks, sis!" said Applebloom, nuzzling Fluttershy's side affectionately. "It's just Fluttershy! She's practic'lly family!" She turned to her sister with bright, shining eyes. "An' if I can't talk that way around family, who *can* I talk that way around?"

"Preferably," growled Applejack, "no pony. Yer too young t'be talking like that." She paused. "Or to know what I meant when I said that."

"Oh, cool yer wings," said Applebloom, jerking her head in Fluttershy's direction. "Not like what I said's any worse than some o'the stories she's been telling."

Fluttershy smiled, genuinely touched by Applebloom's kind words. "You're so sweet, Applebloom," she said, ruffling her mane, eliciting a grin and a giggle from the yellow filly. "But m-maybe you should listen to your sister."

"Maybe," Applejack huffed under her breath. Big Mac chuckled from across the table.

"After all," Fluttershy continued, picking an apple fritter from the tray. "As my mother always said, 'always keep your audience in mind,' I happen to know one or two stories about *you* that you wouldn't want to come out at a time like this." She chewed her fritter somewhat more sloppily than she would have had she been sober, and set it down upon her plate.

"Is that right?" Applejack said, turning on Applebloom with a sinister grin on her face. "Now now, Fluttershy, don't y'all hold back on Applebloom's account. Let's hear some o'them tales."

Applebloom's heart skipped a beat. She wasn't certain what, exactly, Fluttershy had in mind, but she was almost positive that, whatever it was, she'd either never live it down, or be grounded long enough to ensure that she'd be a blank-flank forever. *Shoot*, she thought, *AJ'd probably skip my over my bedroom and send me straight up to the moon, Celestia-style.* "Th-that's okay Fluttershy," she said hastily. "No need to say nothin' you might regret later."

"Well," said Fluttershy, leaning forward and resting her chin on her folded front legs. Her voice was faintly distorted and her words just noticeably slurred from a night of moderate cider consumption, evidently oblivious to Applebloom's protest. "There was that one time with the Cockatrice..."

Applejack's expression of sinister glee winked out of existence. She stared blankly ahead, her eyes going out of focus. She was no longer looking at Applebloom at all. Rather, she seemed to be looking beyond her, at something not visible to anypony else. The filly, suddenly very nervous, edged uncomfortably away from her sister's unfocused gaze.

"Cockawhatnow?" asked Applejack expressionlessly, turning back to the table and staring blankly at Fluttershy.

"Oh, you haven't heard of them before?" asked Fluttershy, evidently too sloshed to notice Applejack's change in demeanor.

"I do believe I have," said Applejack in a slow, measured deadpan. "But why don'tcha remind me, jus' in case my memory's a tad foggy."

"You know. A Cockatrice. Head of a chicken, body of a snake. They can turn you to stone just by making eye contact, you know. Very

dangerous creatures.” She nodded at her own statement, leaning down to sip from her cider glass, forgetting momentarily that she had cut herself off for the night. Also, more importantly, that her glass was empty.

“Yes. S'what I thought it was.” Applejack's voice was still eerily calm.

Applebloom gazed cautiously at her sister. *Now, now*, she told herself. *Maybe she's not so mad. It's not like her eyelid's twitchy or nothin'. Boy, wouldn't I be in for it if it were.*

Applejack's eyelid spasmed subtly. *Horseapples*, thought Applebloom sourly, wilting. She tiphooved towards the kitchen door, hoping to escape before the torrent of Applejack's fury hit.

“And what, pray tell, were the circumstances of Applebloom's meetin' with that bird-lizard?” asked Applejack in her worryingly passive voice.

*Please, Fluttershy*, Applebloom thought, willing her thoughts to beam into the drunk pegasus' mind. *Please, please say that your lips ain't that loose.*

“She and her friends ran into the Everfree Forest during their sleepover,” Fluttershy explained, her eyelids drooping sleepily. “And they almost got turned to stone too. Luckily I—” She yawned a graceful, gentle yawn, her closed eyelids preventing her from seeing the throbbing vein in Applejack's forehead. “—woke up and noticed they were out of bed,” she continued as the yawn drew to an end. “Otherwise, you'd have a rock for a sister.” Fluttershy giggled. “Rocklebloom.’ Oh, the fillies at school would tease her so...” She smacked her lips softly, snuggled her head into her forelegs and began to snore.

“Applebloom.” Applejack's sharp call froze the escaping filly in her tracks. Fluttershy jolted awake, startled by the sudden change in Applejack's tone. Sobriety hit her like a ton of bricks as she saw the joyless face of her friend and the fear that radiated off of Applebloom.

A cold chill crept up Applebloom's back as she nervously turned back to her sister. “Is what Fluttershy's sayin' true?” asked Applejack, her voice reverberating with barely restrained anger.

Big Mac's eyes darted from Fluttershy, to Applejack, to Applebloom and back.

Applebloom shuffled her hooves nervously, eyes riveted to the ground. "Well...there's a li'l bit more to it than that..."

"I didn't ask for no hemmin' and a-hawin'," snapped Applejack. Applebloom jumped at the harshness in her voice. *I'm right bucked, ain't I?* she thought desperately, looking vainly to Fluttershy for help.

"You tell the truth now," said Big Mac sternly, leaning forward onto the table as he gazed at Applebloom. "Is what Fluttershy said true, or not? Yes or no'll do."

Applebloom decided to stake her future on the chance that her family would treat her mercifully if she were simply honest. Planting her hooves and meeting Big Mac's gaze, she gave a firm, if timid, "yes."

"Applejack," said Fluttershy hastily, "if I could just explain--"

"I'm thinkin' I've heard all the explanations I need," Applejack interrupted, pushing away from the table. "Applebloom, you go to yer room and you stay there 'til I come talk to you. I'm going to see our guest out." She trotted to the front door, keeping her eyes locked steadily forward. "Fluttershy, you'll come with me now."

"Applejack—"

Applejack stamped her hoof against the floor so hard that the wooden boards splintered and cracked beneath her. At that moment, the open, sociable, funny drunk Fluttershy evaporated. Drooping her wings and her ears in tandem, she slid off of her chair and sullenly fell in step behind Applejack. She glanced behind her back, hoping to catch a glimpse of Applebloom, but the yellow filly was gone from sight already. All she saw was Big Macintosh, whose stony gaze followed her to the door.

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"AJ, please don't be harsh with Applebloom—" Fluttershy began as they stepped outside together, but Applejack met her almost nose-to-nose

and locked their gazes together, performing a near perfect simulacrum of the pegasus' legendary stare.

"I don't know what them fillies was doin' in yer house when they was s'posed to be with Rarity that night," hissed Applejack, "and I don't rightly care right now, though I s'pose I will when I swing by her place tomorrow mornin' to give her a piece o' my mind." She jabbed a hoof accusingly at Fluttershy, who recoiled. "But for whatever reason, they was in your care, an' truth be told, that wouldn't-a bothered me none, iffin I'd known. I woulda figgered I could trust you with somethin' as little as *my baby sister's life*. Guess I know better now, on account-a you lettin' 'em sneak out n' get jumped by a buckin' *chicken-snake!*"

"I-I didn't..." Fluttershy stammered. Abashed, she turned her head away from Applejack. "I-I wasn't...I wouldn't have—"

"Wouldn't a-what?" asked Applejack, advancing on Fluttershy, even as the latter backpedaled. "Wouldn't-a let 'em get stoned? Or et?! I know what Cockatrices do to their prey, Fluttershy, oh do I ever know all too well what they do t'their prey! Yer dang right you 'wouldn't-a,' 'cuz if I lost my sister on account o' yer negligence—let's just say there'd be a whole lot less talkin' right now." Her eyes narrowed and her face darkened considerably. "An' a whole lot more whoopin'."

Fluttershy's breath hitched and her chest heaved. She shut her eyes tightly, stifling the tears that Applejack's words had drawn out of her. But Applejack was unmoved, her anger providing a powerful shield against her friend's pathos. Still, unwilling to castigate the sobbing pegasus any longer—she had a sister who needed scolding, after all—she sighed and looked away. "'Git. We'll talk more 'bout this later, Fluttershy."

"Applejack...I'm s-so—"

"Don't. Make me. Repeat myself," said Applejack in a dangerously low voice.

Fluttershy nodded with a sniffle. Turning her back to Sweet Apple Acres, she trotted miserably down the road home, leaving Applejack to sweep the tattered shreds of what had been, up until moments ago, a pleasant night in.

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Applebloom sobbed into her pillow, her muffled cries audible only to her. *I'm such a loudmouth*, she thought. *Should'a just kept my big mouth shut. Fluttershy wouldn'a got kicked out, I wouldn't be in no trouble, and we'd all be enjoyin' apple fritters right now.* A fresh wave of tears spilled into her damp pillow as she flagellated herself. *Or maybe if AJ weren't such a sourpuss sometimes...she didn't hafta be so mean to Fluttershy...coulda let her explain...don't even understand what she's so rumphurt 'bout...*

There was a harsh rapping at her door. Applebloom stiffened, swallowing her sobs as the door swung open, the silhouette of a pony in a Stetson hat obscuring the light that now washed into her room. She remained still, her back turned to the door, as her sister trotted in, her telltale heavy hooffalls giving the filly a glimpse at her older sister's anger. "You wanna tell me jus' what you were thinkin', chargin' into the Everfree Forest like it were some kinda game?" she demanded as she came to Applebloom's bedside.

No answer came. "Silly me, Applebloom," said Applejack, "I phrased that like a request. It ain't one. Talk."

At length, Applebloom gave a sullen reply. "Why bother? Not like you'd listen to me anyways."

"Now don't go givin' me that bunk," snapped Applejack. "Dangit, Applebloom, you're lucky I'm even givin' you a chance to explain! S'more than Fluttershy got, an' it's more'n you deserve!"

Applebloom pulled her pillow tightly against her chest, curling around it. "How many times do I hafta tell you, Applebloom?" Applejack pressed. "How many times're you gonna put'cher self in this kinda danger 'fore it finally sinks in? You got jumped by a *Cockatrice*, Applebloom. You coulda died! Is that what it'll take to get you t'finally listen to me? Getting turned to rock? Or getting' torn 'part by wild animals?! Will you start listenin' then?!"

As if responding to a challenge, Applebloom whirled about, jumping to all fours atop her bed. "But I didn't, AJ!" she shouted furiously, tears clinging to her eyelashes. "Why are you even mad about this?! It was months ago! An' Fluttershy saved us 'fore anything could happen to—"

"If it weren't for Fluttershy," growled Applejack, "you wouldn't-a been there in the first place! If she'da kept an eye on you like a responsible mare—"

"Responsible mare?!" Applebloom laughed a harsh, guttural, very un-fillylike laugh. "You mean like you? How many bits didja bring home from the Grand Galloping Gala, huh big sis? Didja fix the leaky roof yet, you responsible gal you? Can Granny Smith walk more'n two steps without fallin' over herself yet?!"

Applejack planted both hoofs onto her sister's bed and rose to stand on both her back legs. Beneath her Stetson, her eyes narrowed to slits, and her flared nostrils gave her the appearance of a bull about to charge. Applebloom wasn't quite sure what had gotten into her, that she was talking back to her big sister this way—they got on fine at the best of times, granted—but she rather liked being able to stick up for herself. Maybe the events of the night had brought a simmering undercurrent of sibling rivalry to the surface. Maybe the fumes from the cider had given her the extra nip of courage she needed to push back against her overbearing, overprotective guardian. Or, more likely, she'd gone insane from misery and didn't realize the danger she was putting herself in.

"You're the one in trouble there, li'l filly, not me," said Applejack in that low, dangerous tone that she reserved for her most wrathful moments. "An' for your own sake, you better keep that in mind! I'm the one what puts food in your ungrateful belly, an' a leaky roof over yer head's miles better than no roof 't all! So I don't wanna hear that kinda backtalk from you, 'specially when I ain't done nothin' t'deserve it!"

"You're dang right I'm ungrateful!" Applebloom met her sister's stare, met it and returned it in full force. "An' who wouldn't be with you lookin' after them?! I didn't ask for you t'raise me. I wish ma 'n pa were still alive! Then I wouldn't hafta to be raised by some no-good *buzzard*!"

Those words were the first to penetrate the armor of Applejack's anger, and she faltered slightly before regaining her composure. "Applebloom, you don't know what you're sayin'!"

"I know dang well what I'm sayin'!" said Applebloom. The momentum had swung her way, and now she moved in for the kill. "I'm sayin' that I wish you was dead 'n not them!"

It was like being kicked full-tilt in the stomach. Applejack's eyes widened, the wind drained from her's lungs, and her hooves slipped from Applebloom's bed, clopping against the floor. Applebloom knew she'd hurt her sister, though she couldn't have begun to guess just how deeply. And she didn't care. The fight now over, she lay back onto her bed and rolled around, once again treating Applejack to a view of her back.

She heard the soft tapping of her hooves against the floor as Applejack made to exit the room, then the click of her door as it shut securely. And, as she strained her ears to listen for signs of life outside, she swore she heard a quiet sob.

Applebloom didn't give a good gosh-dangit-to-Pony-Heck how Applejack felt at that moment. She glanced at her window, still open a crack from that afternoon, when Applejack had told her to nudge it open a little bit to let the smell of their frying fritters waft out over Ponyville. "What better way t'drum up bizniss for the Apple Family," Applejack had said, "then by remindin' them what they're missin' out on?"

The memory wasn't a pleasant one anymore, and Applebloom repressed it. She needed to focus on the task at hoof, after all. She took her blanket in her mouth and, with a bit of finagling, began to knot it into a rope.

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I don't know how long I was out for.

Couldn't have been much longer than a few hours; I could tell because I didn't feel any older. And maybe that doesn't sound so significant, but after Shadow Moses, I'd wake up after a full night's sleep, and somehow, I'd feel older. As if I could sense that I had aged, physically, substantially, overnight. It was years before the physical signs of my aging began to show, and when they did, I can't say I was surprised that it was happening. Part of me could tell all along.



So it was important when I woke up from my nap, and I didn't feel any older. Meant that I hadn't been there too long, though that didn't help me in any event.

The first thing I felt, as I was regaining consciousness, was something wet and cold being pressed against my face. I brushed at it, still mired in that no-man's-land between sleep and waking, and it went away, only to be replaced by something warm and wet dragging across my cheek.

"Cut it out, Meryl," I muttered sleepily, rolling over to escape. But it persisted and intensified, even after I batted at my cheek to knock it away. My eyes opened slowly; I was expecting to still be surrounded by the brilliant light that had knocked me out in the first place. But to my surprise, it was dark. Not pitch-dark; I could make out what was hovering over me, but dark enough that I had to strain a little bit to see it.

Beady black eyes stared into my own. They were the first things that I saw when I came to. Quite a rude awakening. My eyes flew open, and I immediately scrambled into a sitting position, my hand shooting toward my hip and fumbling for my Beretta.

The face that had been staring at me in my sleep cocked its head quizzically, and my mind began to register it as a familiar, recognizable shape. It was a dog, probably a collie, given its coat and general look. Friendly enough, too. But then, I'd always been good with dogs.

...It seems that I actually said that last part out loud, and now Otacon is telling Sunny about the wolf-dogs that attacked me on Shadow Moses. If I weren't so busy writing, I'd give my side of the story. But then, I guess that's what this is for, isn't it?

Anyway. I relaxed immediately after discerning that what had woken me up was a harmless dog. There was that a collar wound around its neck, from which a gold tag dangled, meaning that the animal was domesticated, that it belonged to somebody. So wherever the portal had taken me, it had been someplace at least somewhat civilized. That, or this animal was a total pushover.

The first thing I thought to do was to call Otacon on the Codec. No answer but static on his frequency, nor on the emergency frequency that we'd set aside for rainy days. I'd been afraid of that, but I'd left him with

instructions in case it happened. All I could do was hope that he wouldn't have to follow them.

After the feeling of crushing loneliness subsided—I wasn't used to being totally alone on my missions; I'd had Otacon looking over my shoulder for so long, giving me intel, advice, technical knowledge whenever I needed it or asked for it—I took in my surroundings. There was a wooden crate sitting just behind me, lidless and propped upside down, the open end stuck into the ground. Had to wonder what the point of that was, but it was me-sized and conveniently located, so who was I to complain? Figured whoever it belonged to wouldn't mind so much if I borrowed it without asking. If it was just dumped here haphazardly, then what right did he have to complain?

My muscles were a little cramped from laying and sitting for who knows how long, so I decided to stand. I climbed to my feet, shaking off the cobwebs and stretching as I rose. Felt good to move again.

The dog darted between my ankles, looking up at me with a lopsided, tongue-wagging grin. Whoever owned this dog evidently did not train it to be a guard dog. What's the point of owning a dog, then, if it's not willing to fight and kill for you? It may be that I'd grown deeply jaded by that point in my life, but if I'm wrong about that, then dammit, I don't want to be right. It was a nice dog, though, so I reached down and scratched behind its ears. It liked that. I figured it would. I used to race dogs, you know.

I was in a barn, I realized, as I wandered around the place. On an apple farm, no less. There were dozens of barrels all over the damn place, each one stuffed like a turkey with apples in all the various hues and shapes that apples come in. A wheelbarrow full of hay, too.

My stomach growled. That was the second indicator for how long I'd been asleep; not long enough to have aged, but long enough to have an empty stomach. Well, I thought, I'm on an apple farm, surrounded by barrels of apples.

But then, I reasoned, I'd be devouring someone's livelihood. Wouldn't any farmer worth their salt-lick notice that someone had pilfered an apple or two from their harvest? It could raise an alarm. Could get me into trouble.

Could get me noticed. Could make carrying out my mission that much more difficult to do.

Then again, I was damn hungry. And there were so many that, honestly, who would have noticed if one was missing? I guess I had started assuming, in my delirious, hungry state, that these farmers were not worth their salt-licks.

I reached into a barrel and selected an apple—a nice, round golden delicious. I breathed on its skin, rubbed it off on the front of my suit (probably a bad call, given the amount of grime that's accumulated on that old thing over the years) and raised it to my lips.

The dog didn't like that. It had started growling as soon as I plucked the apple, but just before I could take a bite, it started barking this high-pitched, piercing yelp. Got annoying fast, let me tell you.

“There are plenty of other apples,” I said to it. “Who cares if I take one? Nobody'll notice.”

The dog didn't like common sense almost as much as it didn't like apple thievery. Its barks and growls rose in both volume and pitch. Got annoying even faster.

I wasn't so hungry that I'd lost all reason; I knew that I was on a farm, and I knew that the dog, even if not an attack dog, could still raise an alarm, call in its owner and get me spotted. So I undid the holster on my hip and drew out my Beretta. I didn't like killing animals, Raven's ravens notwithstanding (bastards startled me, alright?!), but tranqing them seldom, if ever, had any long-lasting side effects. So I was guilt-free.

But apparently, I was too late on the draw, because I heard a voice calling “Winona? Winona, whassamatter?”

The voice was male, deep and rich, with a Southern lilt to it. The farmer, no doubt. That damn dog—Winona? Really?—had drawn some unwanted attention to my activities, something that, in my line of work, is generally considered a bad thing.

The upshot was that farmers generally carried guns with them to chase out rustlers, so if nothing else, I'd get some genuine armament out of

this. I made for the upturned crate and raised the lip, sliding underneath into utter darkness. I could still hear the dog barking outside, giving away my location. Not that I forgot to tranq it in my hurry; It was a tactical decision to leave the dog awake and to let it narc on my hiding spot. I settled into a kneeling position, holding my Beretta tightly with both hands.

I heard hooves. Hooves. What kind of farmer rides a horse into a barn at whatever hour of the night it was to catch a rustler? The kind that doesn't need both hands to use his gun, that's what kind of farmer. So I'd get a handgun, not, as I was hoping, a shotgun. Not that it really mattered, I guess.

My stomach growled again. I wished I hadn't dropped that apple.

"What is it, Winona?" said the farmer's voice. He was right outside now, close enough that I could hear him clearly, even through the crate. "Somethin' under the box?"

How many unwary sentries had inadvertently made those words their last? Not that I was going to kill him. He was an innocent bystander in all of this. Probably.

"This hasn't been a good night," said the farmer. "An' I don't have much patience left. I'mma count to three, and you better be out in the open before I get to the end. No tricks. One."

I had this trick, back in my youth. Whenever some poor dumb soul noticed me slipping from here to there in my box, I'd sit still and turtle up while he examined my hiding place, and just when he started to lift the box to see what was underneath, I'd throw it aside, startling whoever had found me, grab him in a chokehold, and snap his neck. Or I'd just shoot him. Or tranq him. It was a flexible maneuver, one of my favorites for that reason. I planned to do just that when the farmer inevitably finished counting down.

"Two."

I thumbed off the safety of my gun.

"Three. Now, I warned y'all—"

I exploded from beneath the box, tossing it rather higher into the air than I'd meant to, and raised my gun to what I had assumed would be eye level, ready to take the shot. I was, of course, stymied by the fact that my discoverer was not at eye level with me. He was several feet lower than that. Also, no less importantly, he wasn't a farmer with an antiquated gun, but a small red horse with freckles. And he was staring at me with the same incredulity that I was staring at him with.

The surprise made me hesitate for a heartbeat before I regained my wits, adjusted my aim and fired. The gun emitted a pop, its report suppressed by its silencer, as the tranquilizer dart stung him in his throat before he could say a word. He hit the ground at the same instant that the box did, out cold.

The dog didn't like that either. It reared onto its hind legs and pounced on me, driven to attack by what it probably assumed was the death of its master. It only got up to hip level, and its teeth weren't so sharp, but it startled me, got the drop on me before I could ready my gun for another shot. I kicked my leg to dislodge it, sending it skittering across the barn's floor, but it wasn't done with me yet. It got its footing back and charged at me, barking madly.

I raised my gun and casually fired a second shot. The dog's momentum carried it a few feet more as it skidded along the ground, knocked unconscious, just like its master.

Its master who was a small red horse. With freckles.

I've seen some crazy shit in my time. My father being roasted alive. My best friend being ground underfoot beneath a giant robot. Big Mama's cleavage. But as far as sheer shock value is concerned, nothing quite beats the revelation that, wherever I had wound up, it was populated by sentient, talking ponies who practiced agriculture. Not a turn that I could have predicted.

The pony would be out for a while—those tranquilizers could take down an elephant—but there was always the odd chance that someone would come across him (or the dog) and rouse him. That wasn't a chance that I wanted to take.

I stooped beside the body and placed my hands beneath it, straining to lift it into the air. For something that was half my size, the bastard was heavy, as heavy as a grown man in full battle dress. His body was thick, powerful, bulging with muscles beneath his red hide. This was a workhorse, one that could probably have done some serious damage to me, had my trigger finger not been so quick.

After a bit of effort, I got him into the air and slung him over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Carrying him to the wheelbarrow of hay, I lowered him into it, then carefully arranged the hay over his body, leaving him room to breathe while still concealing him from prying eyes. I had meant to put the dog in there with him, but the pony was so big that there wasn't enough room for two lodgers. So I took the crate that I had hidden under and placed it over the sleeping collie. The thing needed air holes though, so I picked up a pitchfork that rested beside the wheelbarrow and jabbed it through the top of the box. Instant air holes. I returned the pitchfork where I had found it and stepped outside.

On a hill, not far from the barn, sat an orange farmhouse, two stories, kind of narrow. I didn't think much of it at the time, but one of the second story windows of the farmhouse was open, and a blanket, knotted into a rope, dangled from it to the ground. I figured that some debutante farmer's daughter had snuck out for a rendezvous, and briefly wondered how a horse would have been able to tie a knot with its hooves in the first place.

The night sky was beautiful, a rich purple blanket, studded with stars. The moon was waxing, but even with a portion of it obscured, it was a good size bigger than the one I was used to seeing; at least four times as large. Gorgeous as it was to look at, that really got to me. It wasn't my moon. The craters scarring its surface weren't my craters. This wasn't my world.

I drew a pack of cigarettes—a new brand that I was trying, The Boss—and lit one up. I missed Otacon's presence like hell, but if anything good came from being separated from him, it was that I could smoke in peace, without hearing the Surgeon General spiel. And I needed a smoke, right then and there.

I inhaled a breath of rich tobacco. The nicotine filtered into my system, and my nerves steadied. I held the smoke in my lungs for a few moments, then exhaled slowly, watching it curl and dissipate in the cold

night air. I wanted to savor the few moments that I had to myself, outside of that big red barn, beside that big orange farmhouse, because I knew, deep down, that I wouldn't be having too many like it for a while. So I stood there, alone in the nighttime chill, smoking my cigarette and reflecting on the turn that my day had taken.

There was a distant crack, a rapid sound, faint, but unmistakable as gunfire. I whirled in its direction, drawing my Beretta again. The sound had come from a ways away, I could tell, and there wasn't much else down the way it came from but a forest. I drew my scope and held it to my eyes, zooming in as far as it'd go, but I didn't have much luck. I couldn't penetrate that dense wall of foliage.

I heard the sound again—three-round burst fire, terminating as quickly as it had started—and asked myself what the odds were that a race of animals who didn't have the digits necessary to operate firearms could have made that sound. I didn't have an answer for myself.

Pegasus Wings had gone through the same portal that I did. Obviously, they didn't wind up in the exact same location that I wound up, or else there wouldn't have been a farm left to wake up in. I found that curious. In any event, it meant that they were here, somewhere. I didn't have any back-up, nor any intel to guide me, and nothing at all by way of clues to go on besides the distant sound of gunfire. But something to go on was better than nothing at all.

I drew out my portable ashtray—a birthday gift from Otacon—and dropped my cigarette into it, hoping that I'd get another opportunity to smoke before too long. Taking one last look around the serene farmland, I stalked away, down the path that would lead me into the forest.

# Chapter 3

Something about walking through a jungle always gets me nostalgic. Not, oddly enough, for any of my past missions where I've had to go through a jungle, but for something else, something that's just on the edge of my memory. Something I can't quite recall. I hear there's such a thing as "genetic memory," and maybe it's that, but I'll be damned if I can be bothered to look it up. I've heard enough gobbledegook about genes for one lifetime.

Judging by the position of the moon when I'd woken up, I put the time somewhere between twenty-two-thirty and twenty-three-hundred hours (sorry, that's an old habit; ten thirty and eleven). It took me at least thirty minutes to get from the farm to the forest where the gunshots had come from, partly because I needed to navigate through an unfamiliar town with a decently active nightlife. The streets were surprisingly well lit for such a rustic town, so I kept mostly to alleys, darting from one to the other whenever traffic cleared up enough to reduce the risk of being spotted. Shooting out the streetlights was an option, but not an ideal one, due to the risk of drawing attention to myself. Glass shattering tends to make a racket, never mind the sudden darkness. So I stuck to my pattern of hiding and evasion. It was slow work, but little by little, I made my way to the outskirts of town, where a faded, beaten path led into an unpleasant looking forest, the kind of repulsive looking place you'd find in a Disney cartoon. The path continued past the entrance, but it was faded and overgrown from disuse. Obviously, the residents of the adjacent town avoided that forest, and judging by the look of it, they probably had good reason to.

Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained. I swallowed hard, kept a hand on my holster and followed that ancient path into the forest's darkly grinning maw.

It was a while before anything happened; the first leg of my journey was entirely uneventful. I spent most of that time trying to mentally come to grips with just how strange a turn this mission had taken since I discovered that archway in the island base. Throughout my career, I've always been able to recover very quickly in the face of the bizarre, but there is a great difference between a floating psychic in a gas mask reading my PlayStation



save data and waking up in a barn apparently owned and operated by a red horse with an apple tattoo on its ass. And after passing through the town, watching diminutive horses talk and smile and laugh and do decidedly non horse-like things, my mind was working in overtime preserving my sanity in the face of increasingly insane developments, just the latest of which was this overgrown forest where the air hung stale and heavy and damn near palpable.

Never before had I felt so uneasy about a place as I did in that forest. I felt like an intruder, like I was trespassing someplace that I had no business being in. That's the case whenever I'm on a mission, but this was the first time I actually *felt* like I didn't belong. It was even a different feeling from the domed structure where I'd found the gateway. That place had felt sacred; this place felt the exact opposite. It felt and looked like a perversion of the natural order. It felt evil.

But hey, I'd heard gunshots come from this place, and ponies don't have the necessary digits to operate firearms, so evil be damned; I was going to pass through the place whether it wanted me to or not. And I don't think it did, not one bit.

The path, already faded and worn, disappeared after a while, leaving me with nothing to indicate where I was going, if indeed I was going anywhere worth going to, or if I was simply getting more and more lost in a forest that looked at times like it wanted to grind my bones to make its bread. What kind of PMC would set up shop in such a place, I wondered? The kind that wanted to avoid detection, keep its activities strictly clandestine. What better place to hide an army than in the one place you know that nobody will bother looking for one? I had to give Pegasus Wings' commander some credit on that one. Tactically, it was a good decision to choose the scariest damn place in the world to hide a Metal Gear. The atmosphere alone acted as a deterrent, never mind whatever may have been lurking within.

Those thoughts were swimming in my mind when I heard a shrill, piercing scream. I drew my gun and held it steady, checking my immediate surroundings for danger. Nothing met me but a second scream, shriller and more frightened sounding than the first. This time, it lasted about a second before it was drowned out by a deep, bellowing roar. The screaming voice picked up again. "Help me! Somepony, please help me!"

The first sign of any life in that forest, besides myself, was a terrified scream. That didn't bode well for me. Still, it seemed worth following up on, so I raced off in the direction that the screams were issuing from, dashing quickly through underbrush and leapfrogging rocks and fallen logs until I came to a wide, oval-shaped clearing. I ducked, staying out of the open as I peered through the shadows at the scene unfolding before me.

A lion stood towering over a tiny yellow pony, pinning it to the ground with a ham-sized paw. Its face was pressed very close to the pony's; droplets of drool splattered onto its face and ran down its cheeks. I didn't see any gore, and more to the point, the pony was still thrashing and inarticulately begging for its life beneath the weight of the lion, so as far as I could tell, I'd shown up just in the nick of time. The lion pulled its lips back over its teeth and grinned as the pony begged for mercy.

I've seen animals kill and eat to survive. It's a part of nature; there's no more evil to it than if I were to eat a hamburger. But this was different. Fear was written on every feature of that pony's face, the kind of fear that a mere animal is incapable of experiencing. This pony—this *child*—was fully aware of what was happening to it, fully cognizant that its short life was coming to a brutal end. It wasn't my problem, and it wasn't a part of my mission, but nevertheless, I couldn't let that stand.

I rose from my place in the shadows and fired a tranquilizer round into the lion's flank. It yelped at the unexpected pain and stumbled off of the pony, whipping its great head back and forth in search of the source of the shot. The pony, perplexed, stared at the lion, perhaps trying to understand why it hadn't been eaten yet.

The lion caught sight of me—great night vision, those lions—and emitted a low growl. Otacon had told me once that the tranquilizers in my gun could bring down an elephant. Now here it was, being tested against actual African wildlife, and it was working damn slowly, if it was even working at all. The lion was wobbly on its feet, sure, but it didn't seem to be feeling the full effects of the tranquilizer. But I did manage to get it away from the pony, which was a small victory, I guess. Of course, I also managed to make it angry at me. And I gave it an outlet for that anger, once again, in the form of me.

Whatever. I figured I could handle a big kitty cat, so I stepped out of the trees, into the clearing, and returned the lion's steely gaze. The pony, laying on her back between the two of us, rolled onto her belly, saw me standing there and gasped. I've always wondered what she must have been thinking right at that moment. Pity I never asked.

I cocked my gun. The downside to this modded Beretta was that I needed to manually load the next round whenever I fired a shot. Sure, it further reduced the gun's noise, which made it invaluable on sneaking missions, but it made the weapon unwieldy in a fight, and at that point, it was the only thing I had on me. Of course, cocking a gun looks and sounds cool, and secretly, I've always gotten a little thrill from doing it, so it was worth the trade-off. "You don't look so tough," I said to the lion.

The lion rebutted my taunt by unfurling a pair of leathery red wings and raising a multi-segmented, scorpion-esque tail of the same color. And by roaring. Loudly. I may not be as familiar with mythological creatures as some of my more educated acquaintances. But I knew what a Manticore was. And that, my good reader, was a Manticore.

I was just asking myself how I could have ever missed seeing those wings and that tail when the Manticore lunged at me. I fired again, but the shot went wide right, and the beast crashed into me before I could load another round, knocking my gun from my hand. It flew out of sight behind me as the Manticore pinned me by the shoulders, snout pressed against my face, its hot, stinking breath searing my skin. Try pressing your face against a radiator covered in rancid meat and taking a big whiff sometime; you'll get an idea of what it was like to have that thing's breath in my face. Just as it had with the pony, it bared its fangs to me, opened its mouth and dove for my head. I caught it with both hands, straining hard to keep it away from me as it snapped its jaws and shook wildly to dislodge my grip.

My offensive arsenal being dangerously limited by that point, I took the only avenue available to me: I drove my forehead into the Manticore's nose with as much force as I could muster. The blow landed dead-on, although one of its teeth caught me by the temple, below my bandana, giving me a shallow, but painful, cut. I ignored the pain and butted it again, eliciting a snarl from the Manticore. It redoubled its efforts, bringing its jaws perilously close to my throat and snapping, millimeters away from tearing

my jugular out. Realizing that I needed to get out from under that thing, I coiled my legs, pressed my feet against its belly and heaved.

Your average lion weighs somewhere on the order of six hundred pounds. My max leg press at the time was three fifty. Do the math. There's a disparity there. I strained hard against that monster's bulk, gritting my teeth as I pushed as hard as I could, but to no avail. It was simply too heavy, impossible to lift.

Fortunately, I'm a man who built an entire career upon doing the impossible.

The lion roared into my face; I opened my mouth and roared right back at it as I drew my legs back and slammed my feet into its muscular stomach. The Manticore wheezed and recoiled, stumbling backwards off of me. It recovered swiftly, but the momentary distraction was all the time I needed to recover. It shook its head and scowled at me as I leaped back to my feet and into a fighting stance, hands balled, shoulders squared, legs spread evenly apart. My gun was behind me, and even with the drugs pumping through its blood the Manticore was quick enough that it could have intercepted me before I could even come close to snatching it back up. Fleeing was out of the question too, for the same reason. It was a mismatch, even with the Manticore handicapped, but hand-to-paw combat was the order of the night.

The pony, like an idiot, had stuck around to watch the fight, standing well behind me and just to my left, staring, transfixed, at our battle. The Manticore's eyes flicked in her direction, then back to me. It dove at me again, but the glance it had spared at the pony had prepared me for a feint. Sure enough, as it came within striking distance of me, it quickly adjusted its course and rushed at the pony, who yelped in fear and cowered. I tackled the Manticore in midair and we rolled through the dirt together; I wrestled it to the ground, pinned it on its back and bashed my fists against it, again and again, raining heavy blows onto its face, punctuating each punch with a grunt as I battered it into submission.

Something sharp dug into my right shoulder, just beside my neck, and a searing liquid heat suddenly spread into my body. I cried out in equal parts shock and pain, and the Manticore, taking advantage of my lapse, threw me off of its body. I rose to my feet again, shakily this time. The heat

in my shoulder had spread rapidly, to my arms first, then to my legs. My limbs felt like they weighed a ton each, and I struggled to hold my balance.

The Manticore dangled its tail over its head, and I swore it smirked smarmily at me. Through my blurring vision, I could see a droplet of blood—my blood—dripping from its stinger, staining the grass crimson where it fell. My train of thought was beginning to slow, mirroring my physical deterioration. The effects of the venom it had injected into me were becoming harder to resist; simply standing on two feet now required a Herculean effort. I'd gotten careless, let an unfamiliar monster get the drop on me, and I'd been poisoned for my trouble. I knew I wasn't going to last much longer.

I thought about Otacon, and wondered if he'd be able to follow my instructions. I trusted him, trusted that he and Jack could get the job done without me. I was about to die, but at least the mission would be in good hands. And at least I'd make sure my last act had some meaning to it, if it meant keeping that idiot child alive. Not to mention that it would be ridiculously hardcore.

My Beretta lay in the grass beside the filly, who, defying all conventional wisdom, still held her ground like a moron. The Manticore was between the two of us, digging its paw into the dirt and preparing to charge again. I needed to be quick and decisive. With the venom coursing through my veins, that wouldn't be at all easy.

The Manticore came for me, sailing through the air, wings spread wide, claws out, fangs bared. And I dove. I rolled beneath it as it hung in midair, coming to a halt a finger's length away from my gun. I scrabbled vainly for it, my increasingly heavy and inarticulate hand grasping nothing but wispy green grass. Behind me the Manticore landed on all fours, turned around to face me where I lay and roared again. My fingertip brushed against the grip of the Beretta, inadvertently pushing it away a half-inch more, ensuring that it was completely out of reach.

The filly—I could barely make it out by this point, even with it standing less than a foot away—looked at the gun, then at my hand, and without further hesitation kicked it closer to me, right into my palm. I made an expression which I hoped turned out to be a smile, wrapped my fingers

around the grip, rolled onto my back, cocked the gun, raised it into the air, pointed it at the Manticore and fired.

I make it sound easy, but take my word for it, it wasn't. I was sluggish, slow as molasses, and I suspect that the only reason the Manticore didn't snatch me up and shred me apart right then and there, why I'd survived for as long as I had, was because it, too, was sluggish from the first tranquilizer I'd fired into its body. The strength was nearly gone from my limbs too; the gun felt as though it were carved from lead. Raising it from the ground was difficult enough, but my numb fingers could barely grasp it well enough to work the slide and chamber the next round, and by the time that was all done, the Manticore was nearly on top of me. My vision had deteriorated to the point where I couldn't even see the laser painting the target, never mind the iron sights. It was all I could do to point at where I thought the Manticore was, shoot, and pray to whatever god this pony-infested deathtrap had that the shot was on the mark.

I honestly don't know what happened after that. My last memory of that battle was firing that last round. For the second time that day, I slipped away into unconsciousness, knowing as I did that my number had finally, definitively, come up.

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Each pound to the door was like a hammer driving a nail into Fluttershy's skull. Moaning with head-splitting pain, she trudged through her darkened house to her front door on unsteady hooves. She nudged it open, blinking bleary red eyes and wincing as warm sunlight streamed onto her face. The light compounded her splitting headache, super-heating the nail in her skull to a glistening, white-hot spike, and she shut her eyelids tightly, trying to block out the offending luminescence. "C-can I help you?" she mumbled to her early morning visitor.

The response was terse. "Is she here?"

Fluttershy's eyes snapped open at the sound of Applejack's voice. The sunlight fried her retinas and renewed her headache, and she squeezed her eyes shut again in the same instant that she opened them. "Appleja—n-no, I—is who here?" she asked cogently.

Fluttershy heard Applejack sigh heavily, then felt her flank brush against her wing as she trotted, unbidden, into the house. "Shoulda warned you about the consequences of late-night imbibin'. Guess that's another reason for you not ta drink."

Fluttershy groped for the opened door with a trembling hoof, found it and shut it behind Applejack. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves. The memory of their argument from the night before was still powerfully fresh in her mind.

"I'm gonna ask again," said Applejack slowly. "Is Applebloom here?"

"Applebloom?" Fluttershy shook her head incrementally. It irritated her hangover too much to move her head any more than the barest amount. "No, she's not. Why would she be?"

Applejack sighed again, though this time, Fluttershy swore she heard a trace of a stutter in her breathing, like a half-choked sob. She turned away from the door and opened her eyes halfway. The drawn curtains and dim lighting in her house muted the pain of sight somewhat, just enough to make looking at Applejack bearable. Physically, anyway. Fluttershy avoided staring directly into her eyes, not certain it she'd ever be able to look at her with openness after the incident at Sweet Apple Acres. Applejack, too, was taking great care not to meet Fluttershy's bloodshot gaze. Her expression was kept carefully neutral, betraying no emotion, but her posture sagged and the brim of her hat was drawn farther down over her face than usual. A saddle was slung onto her back, from which a worn saddlebag hung.

"...She's missin'," said Applejack at length. "I woke up this mornin' to check on her, and she was gone. Her window was open and there was a blanket tied into a rope leadin' to the ground. She ran away."

Fluttershy gasped sharply, her eyes flying open again, though she ignored the pain that it brought this time. "Ran away?" she parroted "Why?"

"We had a fight," said Applejack evenly. "'Things were said. Leave it at that. I ran for Big Macintosh the second I noticed, but I couldn't find him anyplace. Figger he started early out in the orchard, took Winona with him. I didn't want to waste time findin' him that coulda been spent findin'

Applebloom. He can take care of himself. She..." Applejack's voice hitched again. She coughed and cleared her throat. "Anyway."

"But why would she be here?" asked Fluttershy, trotting closer to Applejack.

Applejack shrugged. "It seemed a good place t'start lookin', after the way she stuck up fer y'all last night. Truth is, maybe I wanted to find her here." She flashed a scathing glare at Fluttershy. "Woulda given me an excuse, if you catch my drift."

The anger in her scowl startled Fluttershy, who froze in shock at her friend's dark tone. Tears once again brimmed in her eyes, and she whimpered pitifully. Applejack's hardened expression faded and she sighed a third time, lowering her gaze to the floor. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy," she said, her voice even again. "I know you don't deserve that. Prob'ly didn't deserve half o'what I said last night neither."

Fluttershy sniffled, dabbing at her eyes with her hoof. "I could blame it on the cider messin' with my head," continued Applejack, "but that'd be the easy way out, an' my ma 'n pa always told me to take responsibility for my actions. Truth is, I was mad, dang mad. An' I let it get the better of me. I got the right to be sore with you, and I ain't yieldin' that. But I shouldn'ta flew off the handle like I did. So I apologize for actin' like such a...well..." Applejack laughed mirthlessly. "A buzzard."

"...I...appreciate that." Fluttershy's tears kept coming, despite her earnest efforts. "And I want you to know how...how sorry I am for what happened the night of the sleepover."

"I know yer sorry," said Applejack with a nod. "I'm not ready t'forgive you just yet though."

Fluttershy hiccuped.

"But I need you on my side right now," added Applejack hastily. "I got a sister runnin' loose in a big ol' world chock fulla all manner o'nasty things that'd look to hurt her. A filly's a filly; to hay with what she says." She stepped closer to Fluttershy, smiling guardedly at the pegasus. "I need to find my sister, an' I could use an extra couple'a eyes. Thinkin' you can spare yours?"



"You don't even need to ask." Through her tears, Fluttershy returned the smile, glancing sidelong at Applejack. Whether it was a trick of the light, or her own sleepy vision playing tricks on her, she swore that she saw tears of her own welling up in those effervescent green eyes. But it was a passing thing, and any traces of mushiness on Applejack's part were gone as quickly as they'd appeared.

"Much obliged, Fluttershy," said Applejack warmly. "I reckon we oughta start by roundin' up the others, six pairs of eyes bein' better'n two. First thing's first though." She dug into her saddlebag, fished around for a moment and retrieved a slender thermos with the Apple family crest stamped upon it. Applejack offered the thermos to Fluttershy, who hesitantly retrieved it and unscrewed the lid. Fluttershy held her nose over the thermos' opening and inhaled, her shy smile growing wider, less hesitant and more content. The rich scent of freshly brewed coffee danced in her nostrils.

"Yer prob'ly tired of bein' hung over, right?" asked Applejack as Fluttershy took a lengthy, savoring drink from the thermos. "This ol' family brew oughta fix you up right an' proper. Nothin' bucks a hangover like hot coffee, Apple family-style. That'd be with cinnamon, iffin' yer curious. Don't tell nopony. Family secret." She winked.

Fluttershy giggled into the thermos and smiled gratefully as the caffeine entered her system, her headache dulling to a low throb, as opposed to the stab of hot iron from before. "I do feel better," she said, "thank you."

Applejack shook her head. "Thank me by helpin' me find my sister. That drink don't come free, y'know." She strode past Fluttershy, opened the door and stood aside. "After you."

Fluttershy trotted out of her front door, nodding her thanks at Applejack, who shut the door and followed briskly behind her. Though Applebloom's disappearance had fostered anxiety in her heart, she couldn't help but feel a small tinge of relief as she stepped into the brilliant sunlight of a newborn summer day. A friendship she'd feared irreparable was on the mend.

But Applejack said herself that she hadn't forgiven her yet. And as the two of them cantered resolutely down the road to Ponyville proper, Fluttershy swore to herself that she would earn that forgiveness.

# Chapter 4

I stood in a dark enclosure, the ground soft and cold beneath (and around) my feet. Before me was a narrow path, flanked on either side by concrete walls that jutted high, vanishing in the blackness of the night sky. Behind me was a mechanical door with the number “4” stamped onto it, built into a rock face. When I looked down, I saw that the ground was coated in a blanket of stark white snow. A wet, cold pinprick needled my face, followed by a second, then a third and fourth. It was snowing.

I wasn't sure how I'd come to be here; the last thing I remembered was pulling the trigger on my Beretta as the world went dark around me. But the place felt familiar, and as the cogs in my head, still moving sluggishly from the Manticore's venom, started to grind back into working order, I suddenly realized why. This was the path leading to the Comm Tower on Shadow Moses Island. The door behind me led to the underground path, where the wolf-dogs made their dens. The ground beneath me, I remembered grimly, was heavily mined, and I dared not move for fear of setting off a Claymore. The snowy road in front of me led to Tower A. And on the gantry outside of the tower, Sniper Wolf had laid a trap for me that had sprung on the wrong person. The snow at the tip of the path was fresh and white, as though blood had never stained it, as though Meryl had never laid in agony while Wolf toyed with her life. The memory of watching, powerless to save her, as she bled out into the snow replayed in my mind. I swallowed hard and tried to force it out, but it danced at the edges of my subconscious, mocking my failure.

I tried the door behind me; it wouldn't open. Obvious, of course, since I didn't have the PAN card key, and hadn't for years. The only option available was to walk the path, and see where it led. Watching carefully for any trace of a laser sight, following the steps that Meryl had taken around the Claymore mines so long ago, I found my way onto the path. With nowhere to go but forward, I set off.

It wasn't a long march from the door to the Comm Tower, and it shouldn't have taken much time to reach the end. The snow was picking up in intensity. Without my notice, it had turned from a light dusting that tickled

my cheeks into a flurry that battered against me, stinging my nose and ears and obscuring my vision as the winds buffeted me. My feet sank deeper and deeper into the snow with each step. It wasn't long before I was sunk up to my ankles, trudging through an ever-thickening blanket until I found myself too snowed in to move. I was contemplating digging into the snow and forming a temporary igloo to wait out the blizzard when I heard a ragged, raspy, whispering voice that made the chill of the frost seem like molten lava by contrast.

**“You've returned,”** it said to me.

Through the whipping wind of the blizzard, a shape had begun to materialize, black and billowing. My mind conjured images of the Grim Reaper, swaddled in a black cloak and brandishing a scythe. I thought, *is that what's going on? Am I dead?*

Assuming that it was Death, I decided that I wasn't going to let it take me without a fight. I still had a job to do, after all. My hand reached for my holster and drew the Beretta, falling into as steady a shooting stance as I could fashion while up to my thighs in snow. “Who are you?” I demanded. “Show yourself!”

And it did. Or, rather, he did. He came into the open, and even through the blinding snowstorm, I could make him out as clear as day. He was cloaked and hooded in black, and though his face was hidden in the shadow cast by his hood, a pair of eyes, burning red like coals, peered out at me. His legs were clad in camouflage pants, of a pattern and color that I had never seen on the field before.

So that was one request fulfilled; he'd come out into the open. But he still hadn't told me who he was. I asked again, more forcefully this time, but he remained passive, floating (yes, *floating*) in the middle of the blizzard.

Rather than answer my question, he posed one of his own. **“Why are you here again?”** His soft voice somehow carried over the din of the storm. **“You passed through here before, but I sent you back. It wasn't your time. It still isn't.”**

True, I'd been to this island before, but I didn't recall ever encountering him. Figured I'd remember something like that happening. Up

to my ass in freezing snow and with no understanding of how the hell I'd come to be there, I decided to press him for more detail. "What are you talking about? Tell me who you are, now!"

The ghost complied, raised a dangling arm to his head and pulled down his hood, baring a pale, bespectacled face and a head of gray hair, combed back and hanging stiffly behind his neck. **"I am The Sorrow,"** he whispered, as if that was supposed to explain everything. **"And you are your father's son."**

I tightened my grip on my pistol.

**"I will not test you, as I did he,"** said The Sorrow. **"You still have much to do before that time may come. I will instead guide you back, as I did for you before."**

The snow picked up once again, obscuring The Sorrow in a shroud of white. I could feel it gathering, rising to my stomach and climbing at a worryingly rapid pace. I was going to be buried alive. "Wait!" I called. "What the hell are you even talking about?! Come back here!"

But he was gone. The snow climbed to my neck, edging past my jaw. I couldn't move any of my limbs; I was helpless, frozen, watching snow gather over my body. I heard The Sorrow again, just before my head was covered completely.

**"You look just like him."**

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My first reaction upon waking was to bolt upright and gasp, but I had only risen a centimeter before pain shot through every inch of my body, and I fell back onto the bed with an agonized growl.

Wait. A bed? I was on a bed? That struck me as unusual; I had been in a forest, then I'd been in the snow, and now I was on a bed. Something didn't add up. I decided to test my vision. It was still blurry, but beginning to clear, with shapes growing more defined and depth perception returning slowly, but steadily and noticeably.

I decided to take stock of my surroundings. First, I gingerly prodded whatever it was I was lying on. Definitely on a bed, not the softest or most comfortable I'd ever rested on, but a clear step above the floor of that barn from earlier. It was small, though, and I only fit on it from my head to my knees. Everything from my calves down dangled over the bed's edge. I was in a smallish, circular room whose walls were adorned with tribal masks that scowled at me from all sides. Tiny windows gave me vague peeks into the outside world. The wall of dark green that pressed against the them told me that I was still in the forest. I couldn't see any occupant, but then, I couldn't turn my head enough to look around the room completely.

My thoughts went to The Sorrow, and our encounter in the underground passage at Shadow Moses. I wanted to call it a dream, but it seemed too real, too tangible. The bitterness of the cold, the wet snow melting against my skin; a dream is a fleeting thing, whose memory fades into nothingness almost immediately upon waking. But what I had experienced was fresh in my head. It was so *real*, and yet it couldn't possibly have been.

"You've returned," The Sorrow had said. Did he mean to Shadow Moses? I hadn't physically gone back there; that would have been quite impossible. To the memory of Shadow Moses? Deep down, I don't think I ever left that place. Was he speaking figuratively? Or was there something deeper to what he said, some meaning that was too far from the reality I confined myself to? My first impression was that I had died, that he was the Grim Reaper, but now that I was awake and removed from the situation, rationality cast a negative light on that assumption. Besides, I've never *been* dead, death being one of those things that's sort of hard to come back from, much less *to*, so saying "You've returned" wouldn't have made sense in that context.

A fresh wave of pain hit me and I groaned. Trying to puzzle out the meaning of that fever dream clearly wasn't doing anything good for me. I was restless and I wanted to crawl out of bed, but I could barely move. Whatever the Manticore had injected me with, it was potent stuff. I lay there, letting the steady ache pulse through me.

I heard the sound of hooves clopping against the floor and turned my head in its direction, wincing as my stiff, sore neck protested. One of the tails of my bandana dropped over my eyes as my head turned, however,

and so all I could see was a screen of dark teal. The clopping sound came closer; I heard a throaty chuckle, and felt something wet and a little fuzzy brush against my face for an instant. The bandana was lifted over my eyes, but the shape in front of me was too blurry to discern distinctly. All I could see was a mass of black and white, and what appeared to be yellow here and there. I tried to talk, to ask who it was and what I was doing here, but my tongue was thick and numb in my mouth, and the only sound I could make was incoherent mumbling.

The black and white shape stepped back, enough that I could see it clearly. If there was any congruity between this world and mine, it was a zebra (the hell? First the lion-shaped Manticore, and now a zebra? Was this supposed to be Africa?), albeit the most unusual looking zebra I'd ever beheld. Gilded jewelry ringed its neck and dangled from its ears, and its mane was done up in a Mohawk.

The first impression I got was that of Mr. T in a zebra's body. The mental image drew a wet chuckle from me that built, despite the pain it caused me to laugh. As my fit was dying down, I silently wondered if it would talk like him too, call me a fool and tell me it pitied me, and I began to laugh again, even harder. The pain grew with each exhale of breath; the ebbing ache rearing again to fill my entire body.

"You're laughing as much as your body will allow," the zebra observed in a deep, yet distinctly feminine, voice. "Does that mean you're feeling better now?"

Oh no, it didn't talk like Mr. T at all. It rhymed. *She* rhymed. A rhyming zebra. This was too much. Too much. A talking horse with an apple tattoo on its rump—I'll see that and raise you Psycho Mantis. A Manticore injecting me with a deadly venom—I'll raise you Fortune scattering missiles with her hocus-pocus. But this? This was one step too far. Too damn far. I don't even know why, but it was like a dam had burst. Every ridiculous, insane happening from that past night, from the mystic portal with the unicorn bust, to the city full of talking diminutive anthropomorphic horses, to this goddamn *zebra*, who had put me up for the night in its *house*, who wore *jewelry* like an African tribal—I couldn't stop laughing. The pain built with every guffaw, almost unendurable, yet still I laughed.

My host tilted her head quizzically. “Your boisterous laughter is troubling me. Is there something here that you find funny?” asked the rhyming, talking zebra with the Mohawk and the jewelry. I rolled over, howling now with laughter. Every nerve in my body was alight; every synapse in my brain blazed. It was like being strapped to Ocelot's torture machine all over again, except without the hope that it'd shut off after a while and I'd be free to gather my strength. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but laugh myself to death. I slumped over the edge of the bed, reflexively propping myself against the floor with an open palm. There was no strength in my arms; my elbow bent and I collapsed against the floor, half of my body still hanging from the bed. Laughter gave way to wet, heavy coughing. Flecks of red spattered against the dirt floor.

“Zecora? Zecora! Is he alright?!” A girlish voice, squealing. Sounded so familiar.

*The zebra has a name.* I started to laugh again; it transformed into a cough midway through. My shoulders heaved and my chest pounded. Black spots danced at the edges of my vision. Red spots mingled and grew on the floor in the center of my vision.

The zebra moved swiftly, nabbing a nearby bottle, yanking out a cork with its mouth and shoving it into my mouth. She pushed her neck beneath me and, with a strained grunt, rolled my upper body onto the bed and rested me on my back, where I coughed, choked and sputtered on the bitter tasting yellow fluid. Most of it geysered out of my mouth, but I guess that enough of it went where it was supposed to go, because a warm feeling grew in my chest and then, gradually, began to spread outward. It was unlike the searing pain of the Manticore's venom; it was a different feeling entirely. Like cough syrup. You know that feeling you get when it gets in your gullet? That warm, settling feeling in your chest? Like that, but spreading to my entire body, to my arms and legs, even to my digits. My psychotic fit of laughter was gone. I still coughed, but only to eject the fluid that had gone down my trachea. I growled, clearing my throat, swallowed hard—it didn't hurt so bad anymore—and gestured to the zebra for more.

Looking profoundly relieved, she set the bottle in my outstretched hand. My fingers found some of their strength as I grasped the clay drinking vessel, and I raised it to my lips (not without some effort, mind you; the bottle felt like it weighed every ounce as much as the Manticore) and



took a long swig. It tasted like crap, but I relished the way it washed comfortingly through my body. She watched me patiently, concernedly, as I digested the potion she'd fed me.

The pain had faded again, replaced with a gentle numbness. I dropped the bottle onto the ground, heard it impact but not shatter, and sighed, letting out a final, sputtering cough. I turned my head to the zebra to thank her, saw the Mohawk and the jewelry again, and couldn't help but let out a quiet laugh. The zebra—Zecora, that was her name—smiled back at me and offered a chuckle of her own, not understanding the joke, but wanting in on the laughter nevertheless.

My eye caught sight of a yellow-coated, red-maned figure peeking shyly from behind her legs. It was the filly I'd rescued earlier. She glanced at me, our eyes meeting for an instant before she averted them, hiding again behind Zecora.

I'm no good with kids.

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Spike rubbed at his eyes fitfully as he opened the door to greet the fervent caller at the Ponyville town library, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. "Whuzzat?" he mumbled.

"Mornin' Spike," said Applejack. "Is Twi in?"

Spike mumbled something affirmative through a yawn and stepped aside to allow Applejack into the building. "Twilight!" he called sleepily. "Got a visitor!"

"Is it Ditzzy Doo?" Twilight Sparkle called back from the loft. "Ditzzy, did you make sure to bring the actual order form? Because last time, you had me sign a receipt for muffins, and—"

"Unless Ditzzy turned orange and sold her wings to buy a hat," said Spike, "I'm gonna say that it's Applejack." He stumbled in the direction of the loft, passing Twilight as she descended the stairs to meet her visitor.

Applejack watched Spike retreat, then glanced at Twilight, her head cocked at a slight angle. "Expectin' a package?"

Twilight nodded. The motion shook loose a hairbrush that was half stuck in her bedmane. It bounced off of her back and fell to the ground. She smiled sheepishly. "Sorry about my mess. I'm afraid you've kinda caught me in an off moment."

"Well, y'know I wouldn't trouble y'all this early if it weren't over somethin' important," said Applejack with a sigh. "It's Applebloom."

Applejack recounted what happened the night before, from the festiveness of the dinner, to Fluttershy's drunken admission, to the pitched argument with Applebloom. "And when I checked on her a li'l while ago, she was gone. Window was open, blankets were knotted up and hangin' to th'bottom." She shook her head despondently. "If I weren't scared completely outta my wits, I'd be impressed with that girl. She's one o'the Apple Family alright, stubborn n'resourceful."

Twilight listened to the whole of Applejack's story with a sympathetic facade, but her blood ran cold when the topic of the Crusaders' transgression came up. Applejack wasn't specific about what kind of trouble they'd run into, or where they had disappeared to that night, saying only that they'd sneaked out on Fluttershy's watch and nearly gotten themselves killed. She had no way of knowing, but Twilight didn't need to be told what happened, having been an actual victim of the Cockatrice. Afraid that Applejack would hold her partially responsible for knowing the truth and saying nothing, she elected to feign ignorance.

"Sssssoooo," Twilight drawled, struggling to maintain a nonchalant attitude. "Where's Fluttershy now?" Her voice fluctuated on every other syllable, spiking noticeably in pitch. Applejack raised an eyebrow at her friend, and Twilight offered a shaky, nervous grin. "Sorry, um. My throat's always a little cloggy in the morning." She forced a cough and grinned again.

Applejack's eyes narrowed. "Uh...huh." With a shake of her head and a roll of her eyes, she continued talking. "T'answer yer question, I asked her to round up the others, said I'd get you myself. I told her it was 'cuz we'd get through it quicker that way, an' that's plenny true. But deep down, I

think it was 'cuz I can't look at her without feelin'...what's a better word for 'angry'?"

"Livid?" Twilight suggested. "Outraged?" Scrunching her nose and tilting her head worriedly, she added "Equicidal?"

"Kinda all o'the above," said Applejack. "Cept that last one. Don't know what it means."

*That isn't much of a relief,* thought Twilight.

"Dangit though, Twi, I don't know who I'm madder at right now, her or me. I can't rightly blame Fluttershy f'r nearly getting' her killed without bein' mad at m'self for lettin' her slip out on my own watch. An' o'course I'm mad at m'sister too, but more the scared kinda mad, less the 'I'mma buck you to th' moon an' let'cha play among th'stars' kinda mad."

Twilight glowered at Applejack. This was not the first reference she'd heard about ponies being sent "to the moon" as a punishment, and they'd only gotten more colorful and frequent since Princess Luna's return. Applejack being one of the six who had facilitated that return, Twilight would have guessed that she'd be above such humor. Evidently, she was wrong. "And do you want to 'buck Fluttershy to the moon?" she asked in a less neutral voice.

"Maybe. I dunno." Applejack lay on the floor, folding her hind legs beneath her and her forelegs in front of her, resting her chin on the latter. Twilight had always regarded Applejack as one of the strongest ponies she'd ever known, as tough emotionally as she was powerful physically. Seeing her here, baring her soul in so vulnerable a position, was difficult to watch. She suddenly felt guilty for having the slightest amount of annoyance with her troubled friend.

"I mean, I've known the gal a long while," Applejack continued. "We've always been sorta close, 'specially now, after everything we've all gone through t'gether. I figger sumpin' like this ain't enough t'wreck years an' years of friendship, right? So I can't really bring myself t'hate 'er. But then I think about Applebloom, all alone an' scared wherever she is, an' I can't bring myself to forgive her neither."

Applejack brushed an idle hoof against the wooden floor of the library. "Brought 'er a thermos of Apple Family-style coffee this mornin', told 'er I needed all the help I could get. Put on my very best face, smiled at 'er, treated the gal like my bestest friend in all th'world. An' you know what?" Applejack thumped her hoof lightly against the floorboards. "It felt all wrong. Unnatural. 'Cuz it weren't all true. I wanna forgive 'er, Twi, but I can't. An' at the same time, I wanna hate Fluttershy as if she killed Applebloom with her own hooves, an' I can't do that neither." She buried her face in her hooves and groaned. "Dang, but I'm messed up in the noggin right now."

"What about yourself?" Twilight asked softly. "Can you forgive yourself?"

Applejack said nothing to that.

"Do you hate yourself?" Twilight pressed.

The bearer of honesty made no reply to that either. Twilight trotted beside her and rested a comforting hoof upon her shoulder. "If it were yer flesh n'blood, Twi," said Applejack at length, "or, shoot, not even. If it were Spike, not Applebloom, in this situation right now, wouldn't you lay it on yerself? Wouldn't you have trouble f'rgivin' yerself over it?" She looked into Twilight's face, blinking rapidly over red eyes. "Wouldn't you hate yerself too?"

Twilight thought about Spike's close encounter with the hungry dragon. It hadn't been so long ago that she'd been in a blind panic over someone she loved dearly. "If it were me..." She didn't see any reason to talk about Spike's personal business ("Losing a friend's trust is the fastest way to lose a friend! *Forever!*" Pinkie Pie warned her in her head), but she felt that she could convey her sympathies while remaining comfortably vague. "If it were Spike who were attacked by a Cockatrice, then—"

"Hold on now." Applejack's features hardened the moment Twilight said "Cockatrice." She brushed her friend's hoof off of her shoulder and stood. "Now, I don't recall tellin' you *what* Applebloom got attacked by."

Twilight's bloodstream entered an ice age and her heart froze into a glacier. "Um...I..." Her mind reeled. The little librarian in her head dug through every cliché, excuse and iota of knowledge she had, struggling to

drudge up something that would satisfy Applejack. "I was doing some reading earlier about fauna in the Everfree Forest—"

"Don't recall sayin' *where* she went neither!" snapped Applejack accusingly.

"*Celestia buck me to the moon and let me play among the stars!*" screamed Twilight's little librarian.

"Lee's ghost, Twilight!" Applejack shoved her snarling face uncomfortably far into Twilight's personal space. "You *knew* about this!"

"Applejack," said Twilight hastily, "if I could just have a moment to explain--"

"Yer gonna have to forgive me Twilight—Element of Honesty and all," said Applejack sarcastically, wearing a false smile, "but it's a li'l hard f'r me to accept that so many of my friends would keep secrets from me, 'specially *important* secrets about my *family* that I got a right to know!" She whirled away from Twilight, who recoiled briefly, afraid that Applejack, in her anger, might kick her. Thankfully, the pony was sane enough to not confuse Twilight's head with an apple tree in the heat of the moment (a defense which she'd learned, from a study of Appleoosian frontier law, could hold up in court), and she merely paced irritably to and fro.

"Everypony and their granny knows 'bout this *but* me! Of all the—I expected more from my—you and everypony else who—" She whirled back to Twilight, stamping her hooves against the floor. "Dangit, Twi, she's my only sister! Does Rarity know too, or didja decide to leave us *both* in the dark f'r fun?! 'Hey, I got a doozy of an idea! Let's not tell Rarity or Applejack that their sisters nearly became *lunch meat* f'r a motherbucking *Cockatrice!*"

Amid Applejack's shouting, Twilight achieved a serenity that she didn't know she had. Her voice held a steady, even cadence, despite the furor in the Earth Pony's voice. She half-jokingly wondered if she was subconsciously certain that she was about to die, and if she'd simply accepted the inevitability. "I don't know if Rarity knows. But I imagine if she did, then she and Fluttershy wouldn't still be taking their weekly trips to the

spa. It's not a grand conspiracy, Applejack; the only reason I know is because I was *there!*"

That caught Applejack's interest. She regarded Twilight with suspicion, but not with equicidal rage, to Twilight's relief. "Wanna tell me what'cha mean, sugarcube?" she asked, heaping acid onto the last word.

Twilight did tell her what she meant. She recounted her afternoon trot to Zecora's hut. She explained how she'd stopped to gather a particularly interesting specimen of clover off the beaten path. She expounded upon how she'd been attacked by the Cockatrice, and how the next thing she knew, she was facing a very relieved Fluttershy and three quivering fillies.

"She saved my life," Twilight finished. Her friend still looked at her suspiciously, but her relaxed muscles and even posture told the unicorn that the fire had mostly gone out. Twilight decided not to relax, figuring that adrenaline was the only thing still keeping her going. "I decided that I wouldn't tell anypony what happened before Fluttershy did, because I didn't think it'd be right to go behind her back when she'd done that for me. I don't blame you for being mad at me, Applejack, but at least try and understand my side of it. And hers. Look at yourself right now, and think about Fluttershy. Can't you think of a reason why she'd want to keep what happened to herself?"

"You sayin' she didn't tell me 'cuz she was afraid of me?" Applejack scrunched her nose in confusion.

"Not afraid of you," Twilight corrected. "But maybe of how you'd react. Looking at everything that's happened since last night, I'd say she had good reason to be."

Applejack's eyes trailed away from Twilight's and down to the floor. She chewed her lip thoughtfully, her expression shifting from suspicion, to depression, to resignation. Twilight felt a weight in her stomach. Worry for Applebloom blended with empathy for Applejack. She feared for her friend and for the little yellow filly with the ribbon in her hair, but part of her—and she couldn't tell if it was a selfish or a noble part of her—feared, above all, for the future of their friendship. If something happened to Applebloom, would things ever be the same between Fluttershy and Applejack? Or between Applejack and herself? Something like this could forever drive a

wedge between the six of them, ruin the friendship that she'd grown so reliant upon. It could do to them what the banishment of Luna did to Princess Celestia. The loss of their friendship could rob the Elements of Harmony of their power once again.

"I'm sorry about Applebloom," said Twilight with sincerity. "But if we're going to find her, then we can't be so preoccupied with whose fault it is and why. You gotta forgive Fluttershy, Applejack. But more than that, you need to forgive yourself."

Applejack shut her eyes slowly, chewing her lip. Tears pooled between her eyelids and slid down her cheeks. "My sister told me she wished I was dead, Twi," she said with a quiet sob. "That I was dead an' our parents weren't. An' if I don't find her, then those'll be the last words she ever said t'me."

Unsure of how to react, whether pity would be welcome or met with more anger, Twilight stood silently as a witness to her grief.

"HellOOOOOOOOOO!" sang a sing-songy voice. "Anypony hoooooome?" Pinkie Pie poked her head through the still-open front door and smiled widely at Applejack and Twilight Sparkle. The former sniffed, exhaled and drew her hat's brim as far down over her eyes as she could. Then she craned her head around and smiled weakly.

"Pinkie?" asked Twilight. "Where are the others?"

"Waiting in the town square for you two!" Pinkie Pie hopped in place lightly on the tips of her hooves. "Rainbow Dash got bored with that fast, though, so she went looking in the air. I don't know what she's gonna find there though." Pinkie shrugged. "Comin'?"

Applejack looked back at Twilight, her expression uncertain. "I don't know, Twi. Are we?"

"We are," said Twilight with a smile and a gentle nod. "We always will, no matter what."

Applejack shut her eyes again and exhaled. When she opened them, they were still red and puffy, but her genuine smile belied her change in

attitude. "I'm sorry," she said, in a hushed voice that only she and Twilight would hear. "Guess I'mma be sayin' that a lot today."

Twilight looped her hoof around Applejack's neck and pulled her in for a quick hug. Then the hug grew tighter as a third participant wrapped around the two of them, squeezing them against her chest tightly. "Oh, what the heck?" Pinkie giggled. "Everypony loves a good group hug!" She squeezed them together one last time before releasing them, and bounced out the door.

Applejack smiled gratefully at Twilight one last time before following Pinkie. Twilight started to follow...

"Hey, Twi? You got a second?"

...and slowed to a stop immediately after. Spike peeked at the retreating ponies from the loft. "Go on ahead," said Twilight to Applejack. "I'll follow in a minute."

Once they were alone, Twilight turned her attention to Spike. "Couldn't sleep?" she asked as he climbed down the stairs toward her.

"You kidding?" Spike said. "The way Applejack was yelling? No way anypony could sleep through that." He sighed, held his tail in his hands and twiddled it nervously. "Poor Applebloom, huh? Wonder where she is."

The unicorn shook her head. "Yeah, no kidding. All the more reason to find her quickly, right?" Her gaze drifted to where Applejack had knocked her hoof against the floor, and at the scuff marks she'd created. "Yeesh. Anyway, what was it that you wanted to say?"

"I wanted to thank you," said Spike. He kept his eyes on the tip of his tail. "For not telling Applejack about what happened before. With me and that dragon." He shuddered. "It wasn't my finest moment."

"Hey," said Twilight, nudging his shoulder with a playful hoof. "I wouldn't blab about your personal life for all the books in Equestria." She glanced about the library shelves and winced. "Hey, speaking of, could you reorganize the books while I'm gone? Cheerilee brought her class in the other day, and they always make a mess of the stacks—"



“Actually,” Spike interrupted. He wrung his tail a little tighter. “Actually, I was hoping to go with you.”

Twilight's jaw dropped. She shook her head and shut it again. “Really?” she asked. “Any reason why? Or are you just looking to get out of your chores?”

“Hey, what are you implying? I got reasons,” Spike said defensively. “I wasn't much help the last time Applebloom went missing, and I wanna make up for it. Besides...” He looked past Twilight, at where Applejack had stood mere minutes ago. “I've never seen her like that, Twi. I'd do anything to get the old AJ back.”

Twilight thought about the red-eyed, broken mare, who'd scuffed up her floorboards and snarled in her face. The mare who'd cried aloud where nopony but she could see, who was so unlike the bright eyed and easy laughing Applejack as to be almost frightening. “You and me both, Spike.” She sighed and lowered her head to the ground. “Climb aboard. Maybe you'll spot something the rest of us won't.”

His spirits brightened, Spike crawled up Twilight's neck, settling on her back. “Hey Twilight?” Spike asked as the door swung open in front of them, encased in a translucent purple aura.

“Yeah Spike?”

“You never got to answer Applejack's question,” he said. “What if it were me out there, and not Applebloom?”

When Spike ran away, she and Owlowski had found him just in time to save him from being devoured by a dragon. Had they been a few moments later, or had they not been able to pick up his trail at all... Twilight pushed the thought from her mind.

“That won't ever be a problem, Spike,” she said.

“Really? You promise?”

“Of course, Spike.” She blinked, and in the moment of darkness, saw Spike's scattered bones amid a dragon's hoard. “I promise.”

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My host was gracious enough to answer my every question, in exchange for the story behind my being there in the first place. So I offered her a very condensed version of the events surrounding the Pegasus Wings incident. Concepts like nuclear deterrence and military privatization would no doubt have flown over her head, so I gave her the gist of it and braced myself for questions. She had none, thankfully, so I took point instead. First and foremost, I asked where I was; she told me I was in the Everfree Forest, located on the fringes of the kingdom of Equestria. Appropriate name for the country to have.

The forest was some taboo location that few dared to venture into. I thought about the Manticore and decided that these ponies had the right idea steering clear of the place. “To a pony, there is nothing more deadly than a Manticore's sting,” said Zecora thoughtfully while gathering ingredients from the shelves in the hut. “Yet to you, it seems a trifling thing,”

I eyed the darkening red stains on her floor and wondered what her definition of “trifling” was. Guess I got off easy. How bad would it have been for a pony, though? “I'm of hardy stock,” I said. Immediately after, I coughed, and my mouth filled with the metallic taste of blood. I swallowed it and chased it down with another swig of Zecora's antivenom. The taste made me cringe on every swig; couldn't she just have injected it into me? Still, complaining out loud about the substance that saved my life would be a little classless, so I bit my tongue and held my nose whenever she wasn't looking. Didn't want to offend her, after all.

Zecora noticed anyway. She just smiled.

So what was she doing living in the forest, if it was such a deathtrap? Apparently, she liked her space. I got the feeling that there was more to it than that—what kind of insane loner would isolate herself in a forest filled with deadly supernatural beasts?—but she was evasive whenever I pressed her for more information.

"Alright, fine," I grumbled after my third try. I sipped from the jar again. The stuff tasted like shit, but I was feeling much better. Not perfect, but not quite gagging on my own blood, like before. That was a step up. Zecora clearly knew her craft. "So what about her then?" I nodded at the yellow filly, Applebloom, who sat at the far side of the circular room, watching me and pretending that she wasn't. "Don't tell me she lives here too."

"She lives in town, down the road away," said Zecora. "Why she is here, she will not say." Applebloom flushed and shuffled her hooves, staring silently at them. Was secret-keeping the national sport of Equestria? These things were damn good at it.

I asked her how she found Applebloom and I. "I was taking a late night stroll, you see, gathering herbs for herbal tea."

Who takes a stroll that late at night? Either she was lying, or an insomniac. Or both. "During my walk, I heard a roar, and ran to find Applebloom at the mercy of the Manticore."

Her rhymes lacked consistent rhythm. I don't know why, but that just bothered me.

"By my honor, I would have intervened," she swore, "but you had things under control, it seemed. When at last you bested the beast in the fight, I dared to see if you were alright." She paused. "You were not."

"Guess the tranquilizers did their job after all," I muttered to myself. "Knocked it out before it had a chance to eat me." The hand not clutching the jar of anti-venom reached for my hip holster to pat the Beretta appreciatively. It wasn't there. My breath hitched, and I quickly patted myself down in search of my one and only weapon, until Zecora cleared her throat to get my attention and gestured with her nose to where it lay on the nightstand.

"You have no idea how important it is that you saved that thing," I told her. "So maybe you hadn't noticed, but I'm a lot bigger than you. Heavy, too. How'd you manage to get me from that clearing all the way back here?"

Zecora and Applebloom sighed the same tremendously exhausted sigh. The zebra's body sagged beneath her legs, and she smiled tiredly at me. That was all the explanation I needed.

I asked her if she'd seen anybody else like me, any other humans. Ponies being the dominant race here, and all, the likelihood of humans being indigenous to Equestria seemed slim. Unless this was some weird Planet of the Apes scenario. But that, too, seemed unlikely.

To my relief and mild concern, she had. "They appeared about a month or so past. Their forest forays grew bold, too fast. I would have gone to town and raised the alarm, but I feared that they could have done me much harm."

I didn't know what to make of the zebra who'd saved my life. She was virtuous enough to nurse me back to health, but cowardly enough to not risk life or limb under serious circumstances. And she wasn't keen on telling me everything. I could almost respect that, let it go, but she was endangering countless lives through silence and inaction. From that point on, a lot of things happened at once, and to this day I wonder how much of the blame Zecora shoulders for what befell Equestria. I withhold complete judgment, though. Something tells me I won't ever have a full picture of who she was.

"You're right to be afraid," I said as she busied herself over a bubbling cauldron in the center of the room. "But those patrols are far from the scariest things they're capable of unleashing. The army hiding in this forest possesses what could be considered the deadliest weapon ever devised."

"And you are here to stop them, yes? Before they can turn this world to a mess?"

I shrugged. Most of my muscles were still sore, and the ones that weren't were numb, but I was regaining feeling fairly quickly. Reclaiming my ability to shrug properly was a small victory to me. "It's my duty."

"But you said so yourself, my bedridden friend. That weapon could bring you to a nasty end." Zecora fished out a ladle and dipped it into the cauldron, then carefully poured a scoop into a bowl that she offered to Applebloom.

“Someone has to do it. It may as well be me.” Zecora offered me a bowl of the same soup. It smelled decent—better than the anti-venom, at any rate, and the rankness of the drug's aftertaste was the stuff of legends—so I accepted it gratefully, sitting up on the bed and crossing my legs. “Besides, I'm the only one around here with a history in this sort of thing. I think.” I sipped at the soup. It tasted like boiled weeds with a hint of onion, which made it about twenty percent more palatable than the anti-venom. “I am, aren't I?”

“To my knowledge, yes you are,” said Zecora with a smirk. “But alone, without help, you won't get far.”

“I don't need help.” That was a lie. If no one else, I needed Otacon. “Fighting nuclear-equipped terrorists is just another day at the office for me.”

“That wasn't what I meant to say. I mean that you do not know the way.” She poured herself some soup and lay beside the cauldron to sip from it carefully. “Nor do I, before you ask; I cannot help you with your task. I can tell you where they're striking from, but not how to get there, by what way to come.”

The most impressive thing about Zecora, besides her life-saving apothecary skill, was her commitment to her rhyme scheme. “You're saying that I need a guide.”

Zecora took a drink from her soup and nodded. Her eyes were closed as she relished the bitter taste of the broth. I took another sip myself and wondered how she could drink the stuff day in and day out and not be driven to suicide just to escape from the monotony. Applebloom's nose was scrunched as she held her face over her bowl. The steam curling around her head dampened her coat and mane. As far as I could tell, she hadn't touched it yet. Kids are picky eaters.

“In a castle in this forest, far from here. A legend surrounds it, fostering great fear. The outsiders camp within its wall, hidden by the fable's pall. Few ponies know how to reach that cursed place, but there are six in Ponyville who can take you to the outsider's base.”

“Ponyville, huh?” Saying the name out loud nearly had me giggling like a madman again. “I passed through a town on my way here. Was that it?” Zecora nodded at me with a mouthful of soup. “Great. Backtracking. My number one passtime.” I drained my soup in one gulp and instantly regretted it, shuddering as the bitter mixture slid down my throat, burning all the way to my stomach. “How do I convince them to help me?” I asked. My scorched throat made my voice a little rougher than usual.

Zecora glanced at Applebloom and wiggled her eyebrows. “This one wandered away from the fold. Return her to them, and they'll be sold.”

“What?” Applebloom looked up from the soup that she was carefully contemplating and stared at Zecora. “Whus' goin' on now?”

“Bring them back their little lost filly? Sounds doable.” I brushed my gloved hand over the rough stubble of my chin, stroking it thoughtfully.

“Hey!” Applebloom jumped to her hooves. “Hey, don't I get a say in this?”

“No,” I said. “Eat your soup.”

“I don't gotta listen t'you!” said Applebloom defensively. “N besides...s'gone cold.”

“What were you expecting?” I asked. “You've done nothing but stare at it.”

Applebloom glared at me like she wanted to dump her soup out on my head, but made no further argument.

I'm no good with kids.

Zecora sighed and smiled tiredly at me again. She trotted to Applebloom's side and bumped the filly's forehead with her nose. “You are dear to me, my Applebloom, which is why you should be far from this doom. Return to your home with our friend Snake, before this forest your life does take.”

She could butcher syntax for the sake of a rhyme, but she couldn't bother showing me the way to the fucking castle in the middle of the evil forest. Zecora was a creature of contradictions.

Applebloom sank back to her belly and buried her face in her folded arms (legs? Hooves?), mumbling inaudibly to herself. Zecora nuzzled her again, then looked at me expectantly.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, I was flying blind. I was a lone operative in an unknown land populated by the least probable civilization that anybody could imagine, cut off from all support, completely at a loss as to where I was or what direction I was going. My only lead was a phantom gunshot that I was starting to think I'd imagined, and my most meaningful conversation was with a phantom that may well have been a fever dream. Now I found myself pleasantly strategizing with a talking zebra and sipping soup that made me pine for the richness and flavor of a battlefield MRE.

This was a weird, weird mission. But someone had to get it done. And it wasn't like I had any better ideas. "Fine," I said. "I'll play babysitter for a little while. Just, uh, just answer me one last question."

"Anything and everything, my newest friend." said Zecora. "Tell me, how can I bring your curiosity to an end?"

*Friend.* That was the second time she'd used that word to describe me. Were we friends now? I owed her my life. Experience taught me that that was a solid enough foundation for a friendship. "Just wondering...what's with the rhyming?"

"Rhyming?" Zecora tilted her head at me, perplexed.

"You speak in rhyme," I said. "C'mon, don't pretend not to notice."

"I...do not understand your question," said Zecora. "You are suggesting that I rhyme in succession?"

She was messing with me. Had to be. There was no way she could be doing this unconsciously. We stared at each other silently for a little while, neither comprehending the other.

Finally, Applebloom broke the silence with laughter. She giggled softly at first, into her hooves, so gently and muffled that I thought she was crying. But then she lifted her face, and I saw her grinning. She looked at Zecora, Zecora looked back, and soon they were both laughing, either at some unspoken joke, or at me.

I just groaned, lay back on the bed and turned away from them. "Everyone in this world is insane but me," I muttered to myself. Somehow, they heard me over their own laughter, and that, of course, only made them laugh even harder.

Zecora mentioned six ponies who could act as guides. I hoped to high heaven that they were saner than she was. As I would later find out, that would be just one of the many disappointments I had in store over the next couple of days.

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"My goodness gracious, it's finally happened!" groaned Rarity as Twilight, Spike, Pinkie Pie and Applejack approached. Fluttershy hovered beside Rarity, her wings beating gently and her face pensive. "You've cooped yourself up in that library for so long that you've utterly forgotten basic personal grooming!"

The unkempt Twilight looked sidelong at Applejack, who offered her a narrow-eyed smirk and a wink. Spike nudged Pinkie Pie with his elbow, and the pony giggled quietly. "Actually, Rarity—" began Twilight, but Rarity would have none of it, zooming to the unicorn's side.

"Oh, but if we only had more time," fussed Rarity as she inspected Twilight's unkempt bedmane. "Poor Applebloom must take precedence, I suppose. Still, this is at least a close second. Here." Her horn glowed a pale blue and an aura surrounded Twilight's mane, smoothing it into a presentable approximation of her usual hairstyle. "Now, I haven't checked," continued Rarity, "but I assume that you've neglected your shampoo cycle as well? Lather, rinse, repeat until it shimmers?"

"I don't—"



“Ah! I feared as much. Well, no matter, my dearest friend.” She cheerfully wrapped an arm around Twilight, waving the other in an arc for dramatic effect. “Once this is all over and dealt with, you and I shall enjoy an afternoon at the spa!” She looked excitedly to the unfocused and contemplative Fluttershy. “We have room for one more, do we not?”

“What?” Fluttershy started a bit, glancing quickly between Twilight and Rarity. “Oh! Um, of course! You're always more than welcome Twilight. I-in fact, you all are!” She forced a broad smile, but the strain in her cheeks was evident.

“But they never accept, do they, Fluttershy? Tsk tsk tsk.” Rarity shook her head, sighed, and sauntered ahead of the group. “Well, we'll just put that on our little 'to-do-list,' won't we?”

Twilight scowled. “Go one morning without brushing your hair, and suddenly it's time for an intervention.”

“I don't know Twi,” said Spike. He plucked a hair from Twilight's mane, drawing a startled “ouch” from the unicorn, and made a show of examining it closely. “I think Rarity's on to something. Have you seen these split ends?”

Twilight bucked him off of her back and turned her scowl on him. Spike gulped and let the hair fall. “Just sayin' she's got a point, that's all,” he said, standing up and dusting himself off.

“Of course she does,” said Twilight. “And the fact that it was *Rarity* who said so has nothing at all to do with the matter, does it?” She smiled slyly at him.

Spike blushed. “D-don't go changing the subject now!” he stammered. “Hey, c'mon Twi; Applebloom's not getting any founded-er with us standing around like this. Get with the program!” His face now an interesting combination of purple and pink, Spike hurried ahead, a chuckling Twilight Sparkle in tow. Fluttershy looked to Applejack and Pinkie Pie, shrugged, and flapped tiredly after them.

In spite of her dour mood, Applejack couldn't help but smile and shake her head. “Tell you what, Pinkie,” she said, “I'm ever in a sour spot

again, jus' remind me to look up Spike 'n Twi. Those two oughta go on tour."

"I'd pay hoof over fist to see them on stage!" agreed Pinkie. "Not that I can make a fist anyway. Not that I'd even want to. Fists hurt, Applejack." She nodded soberly.

"I reckon they do, Pinkie," murmured Applejack.

"Aww. Don't be so glum, chum!" sang Pinkie, nuzzling Applejack's neck affectionately. "We'll find Applebloom before you can say 'Aeiou!' You'll see." And off she went, whistling "Giggle at the Ghostly," keeping her hoofsteps in time with the song.

*How's that song go again?* Applejack found herself wondering. *Somethin' like..."You gotta face your fears, learn to stand up tall...just laugh an' make 'em disappear."* She frowned. "Think I might be forgettin' somethin'."

Well ahead, Applejack saw Pinkie catching up to the others, who came to a halt as a rainbow-tipped blur swooped gracefully in for a landing. Applejack frantically ran to catch up with her friends as Rainbow Dash completed her descent, setting down upon all fours. She came within earshot just in time to hear Fluttershy ask "Did you find anything?"

Eyes closed, Rainbow Dash shook her head. "I scouted the entire town from the sky, even did a flyover of the surrounding area." She looked apologetically at Applejack. "I wish I could have done more."

"Ain't nothin' to be sorry for, Rainbow," said Applejack. "Y'all did yer part, an' I trust your eyes more'n anypony else's. You say she ain't in Ponyville, she ain't in Ponyville."

"Wherever she is, she didn't seek out her friends," said Rarity. "I've thoroughly interrogated Sweetie Belle as to her whereabouts, and she swears up and down that she hasn't seen Applebloom at all."

"Scootaloo too," said Fluttershy. "I visited her

just before I picked up Rarity.” She fluttered to the ground and folded her wings. “How strange. Why wouldn't she want her friends to know where she was going?”

“Didn't want them to talk her out of it, maybe?” Rainbow Dash suggested. “What if she had some crazy idea up her sleeve?”

“More like 'didn't want them to follow her,’” corrected Spike. “Crazy ideas are the Cutie Mark Crusaders' forté. And those three stick together like glue.”

“So you think she had an idea and wanted to do it alone, without help,” said Applejack. “But why?”

“To prove a point,” said Rainbow Dash, as if it were obvious. “I mean, that's usually the reason whenever I do something crazy. Somepony says 'Rainbow Dash, you can't break the sound barrier,' I say...” She inhaled deeply, then shouted at the top of her lungs, “*Sorry, can't hear you! This Sonic Rainboom's really loud!*”

Rainbow Dash glanced at each of her wide-eyed, ruffled friends. “Too much volume?” she asked sheepishly.

An uncomfortably silent moment passed.

“Think she was tryin' to stick it to somepony, huh?” asked Applejack at last. She chewed her lip and cast her eyes to the ground, fighting an uphill battle to keep her tears from welling. “Can't imagine who coulda done somethin' t'deserve it.”

Twilight saw the look on Applejack's face and quickly intervened. “Who says she's trying to prove something to somepony? She could be trying to prove something to herself.”

Applejack smiled at Twilight in a grateful, melancholy look. “Guess that could be the case. Don't much matter why she's doin' it though, jus' that she is. If her crazy stunt gets her killed, ain't no pony gonna care why.” *Cept me*, she added silently.

The group moved in unison, trotting as one body to the outskirts of town. “Whatever she's put her mind to, she's not doing it in Ponyville,” said

Twilight. "That's obvious enough. So think, girls; where could she be right now?"

"Lessee," said Rainbow Dash, tapping a hoof against her skull as she thought. "Well, she can't be in Cloudsdale."

"Very astute," Rarity complimented, shooting Dash a playful smirk.

Rainbow Dash frowned at her. "Lemme finish. What I'm trying to say is that she can't fly."

"I know," said Rarity. "And I think that's very, very astute of you."

Rainbow Dash flushed beneath her cyan coat, her chagrin exacerbated by the giggling of Twilight, Spike and Pinkie Pie. Rarity batted her eyelashes at the flier.

"She's on hoof, okay?" sighed Rainbow Dash. "So her range isn't exactly very broad."

"And she's only had a few hours to take advantage of," added Fluttershy. "And a growing filly has to sleep, so she couldn't have used all of this time to walk."

"Then she can't have gotten far," said Rarity. "Off the tops of our heads, girls—"

Spike cleared his throat.

"Oh, Spike," said Rarity sweetly, "you're one of the girls and you know it." Spike fumed and crossed his arms. "Where in the immediate area could she have gotten to by now?" she finished.

"Nowhere around here, I hope," said Pinkie Pie. "There's nothing but spooky, scary places. Froggy Bottom Bog, the Everfree Forest." She frowned pensively. "Ponyville sure does have a lot of deathtraps surrounding it. I can't believe we've never noticed that before! We really need to put up a sign or something. 'Welcome to Ponyville; Expect Death at Every Turn!'"

“We're trying to increase tourism, Pinkie,” Twilight said gently, “not drive it away. So, pick a compass direction, any one, and odds are you'll find a place that's infested with flesh-eating monsters. Any one of them would be a perfect spot for a stroll by a filly with a chip on her shoulder.”

“The question is, which one?” asked Rainbow Dash. “It's a lot of ground for us to cover. We need a place to start looking.”

“The Everfree Forest,” said Pinkie confidently. “If there's a spookier, scarier death trap in Equestria, I've never heard of it.”

“And it would make sense,” said Fluttershy. “If she were looking for something to prove, that is.” Applejack glanced over her shoulder at the shuffling Pegasus, but she looked away pointedly. “I-I mean...the last time she went in there...”

“That is how this whole mess got itself started, innit?” asked Applejack, malice absent from her voice. Ahead of her, Rarity pursed her lips tightly. “But don't that mean she'd be less likely to go in there? Keepin' in mind what happened last time. Jus' seems to me like she'd wanna avoid it even more. Even if she's crazy in the coconut.”

“Well,” said Pinkie Pie. She trotted ahead of the group, holding her nose high in an astute manner. “If you eliminate the impossible, and we have—she isn't in Ponyville, she couldn't have gotten very far, and she's definitely not in Cloudsdale because she can't fly,” Here she turned and winked at Rainbow Dash. “Thanks for pointing that out, Dashie.” On she went. “Anyway, 'whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth!’” She kept trotting ahead of the group a moment longer, before the hoofbeats behind her became conspicuous in their absence. Pinkie turned to see her friends standing stock still, their mouths agape. “What? Do I have something on my face?” She gasped. “It isn't bats, is it?!”

“No, not at all,” said Twilight, the first to close her mouth. “Just that...did you just quote Sherlock Pones?”

Pinkie Pie giggled a snorty giggle. “Oh Twilight. You think I never do any reading in that library of yours?”

“Very astute,” said Rarity. Her voice wasn't sarcastic this time. “So the Everfree Forest it is, then? My, with how often we venture in there, it's a wonder that anypony still considers it taboo.”

“Manticores, Cockatrices, dragons, Ursas both Major and Minor—all of them call that forest home,” said Twilight. “Forgetting that could be a death sentence.”

“Doubt she forgot. Applebloom knows dang well what's in Everfree.” Applejack's teeth set. “Supposin' she went in, then that's prob'ly why.”

Rarity cleared her throat loudly. It was a crass gesture that she was somehow able to make sound graceful. “Not to be a broken record, but...the Everfree Forest it is, then?”

Seven heads and six ponies turned their attention to the forest's foreboding maw; by unlikely coincidence, they had arrived at its entrance without realizing. “If she isn't in there, I'll eat Applejack's hat,” said Pinkie confidently. “Uh, if it's okay with her, of course.”

“If she *is* in there,” growled Applejack, “I may jus' stuff it down her throat m'self for puttin' us through this.”

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My legs were stiff and my feet achy, and I felt about as limber as a cadaver, but I could stand and walk without falling over myself, so I marked it as time to hit the road. Applebloom chewed her lip nervously as I broke the news to her. Zecora seemed almost relieved.

She saw Applebloom and I to the door, offering some parting wisdom. “The path is worn and faded to the eye, but follow it carefully and you will soon see the sky.”

“I think I can keep my bearings well enough,” I said. “And I've got a decent enough guide, I figure.” I nudged Applebloom with my toe, and she glared at me. “How often do you navigate this thing, kid?”

“Hmph.” She turned her nose up at me and refused to look back, trotting ahead of me on the path.

“Something I said?” I asked, turning to Zecora. She clucked her tongue and gave me a sympathetic look. “I’m no good with kids,” I sighed, running a hand through my hair.

“An acquired skill, my friend. One you will gain before your end.”

“You say that with an awful amount of certainty,” I grumbled. “But you saved my life. I guess you deserve the benefit of the doubt for that.” I paused, unsure of how to properly express my gratitude. “I’m not very good at this, Zecora. Typically, people thank me for rescuing them, not the other way around.”

“A friend in need is a friend indeed,” said Zecora, dismissing my gratitude with a wave of her hoof. “Keep that in mind, and consider it well. You’ll need to remember it, I’m sure that time will tell.”

“I’ve worked on my own for most of my life,” I said to the zebra. “I’m grateful, don’t get me wrong. But I know how to watch my own back on the battlefield.”

“From time to time, we, all of us, need a helping hoof,” Zecora insisted. “As a snake not created by nature, your existence is proof.”

*A snake not created by nature.* I heard the echoing caws of ravens as I remembered the last man who used those words to describe me. It wasn’t a pleasant memory. I took a step toward Zecora, my eyes narrowing. “How the hell do you...?”

“Hey! Slowpoke!” Applebloom shouted from down the road. “You waitin’ f’r me t’get gobbled up again or somethin’?!”

I stared intensely at Zecora, willing the zebra hermit to explain herself. All she did was smile blandly, keeping her another secret to herself. She nudged me forward with her nose and backed into her open door, shutting it in my face.

I admit, I was a little too shocked to move from that spot. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to break down Zecora’s door and demand an explanation.

“Snaaaaaake!” called Applebloom in a sing-song voice. “I’m startin’ to grow moss here!”

But, damn the luck, I had a world to save and a baby to sit. Zecora and her mysteries would have to wait for another time. Giving her door one last, lingering look, I turned my back on it and met with Applebloom on the path. If I were a paranoid man, I would have sworn that I could feel Zecora’s eyes on me every step of the way.

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At night, the Everfree Forest was a grim and depressing place, where every step was met with trepidation and every moment that passed weighed tensely on my shoulders. I’d hoped that it’d be more cheerful during the daytime. It wasn’t; if anything, somehow, it seemed darker. No idea how that would even work. Equestrian physics. Go figure.

Applebloom was quiet for most of the way. Her attention seemed elsewhere the entire time that we walked, her focus on some thought that lingered in her mind. Zecora was right about the path being faded and illegible. With that to worry about, along with my guide’s lack of focus, I began to wonder if we were going nowhere in a hurry. So I voiced my concern. “You sure you know where we’re going?”

“Whussa matter?” asked Applebloom. “Think I’m getting’ us lost?”

“I didn’t say that.” I totally did. “You just seem distracted, that’s all. Should I be concerned?”

“That’s no business of yours,” Applebloom said shortly. “I know where I’m goin’. Jus’ trust me for once.”

“‘For once?’ You sure you don’t have me confused with someone else?” I asked.

“No business of yours,” repeated Applebloom, her voice noticeably more acidic. And just like that, the discussion was over for the time being. We walked without a word passing between the two of us for a time. Only the constant pitter-patter of footsteps (with what sounded like more beats



than Applebloom and I could make by ourselves) and the distant chirping of birds disturbed the silence.

After a little bit of time had passed, I decided to engage her again. “Zecora said you wouldn't tell her why you were out here. Any chance you'll tell me?”

“That's—”

“No business of mine,' right?” I supplied. “The thing is, it became my business the moment I saved your hide from that beast. You gonna tell me why I had to stick my neck out for you in the first place?”

“Why?” asked Applebloom. She came to a stop to glare at me, her brow furrowed and her face pulled into a frown. I had never thought that a pony's face could convey the kind of malice she was beaming at me. “You havin' regrets?”

“Not what I meant,” I reassured the filly, craning my neck down to meet her testy glare. “Just curious, is all. I'd like to know what I got pumped full of venom over.” I gestured to the foliage on either side and nodded at the dense, green canopy overhead. “Besides, you can't fault me for curiosity. If you don't mind my saying so, you look a little out of place in this forest.”

“What, like you don't?” she retorted. Had to admit, the girl had a point. I was as much a fish out of water in Equestria as she'd have been in a radioactive wasteland.

“The difference is that I've explained why I'm here,” I said calmly. Years of living on the battlefield has given me a deep reserve of patience, the kind that pays off when you're playing predator, or when a little girl keeps shoving overcooked eggs in your face and you're not allowed to hurt her feelings. I had to draw from that particular well to weather Applebloom's irritability. Of course, when it comes to pissy children, there's only so much I can take before I get testy. A little less calmly than before, I said to her “If you weren't listening when I told Zecora about it, then I'm not going to explain again. Your loss.”

I probably should have seen her reaction coming. She beat her hoof against the dirt and stuck her neck out in my direction, as far as it'd go. I could tell that she was trying to convey anger and frustration, but on a little talking filly, the effect was altogether disarming. I maintained a stern poker face though.

"Why you gotta talk t'me like that?" Applebloom demanded. "Like I'm some dumb little filly, can't follow nothin' worth a hill o'horseapples? I ran away so that I wouldn't hafta deal with this kinda thing no more, an' you're takin' me home so that I can get it *again*, and worst of all, I gotta deal with it *from you while* you're takin' me home!" Groaning tiredly, she resumed her march, and I, a little shocked by the contempt in her impressive run-on sentence, followed along after a spell.

"So you're a runaway, huh?" I asked, once the initial surprise wore off. "What, things at home not going your way?"

"I got this sister," said Applebloom. She spoke quickly; her rant was rushed, but impassioned. "This back-talkin' buzzard of a mare, thinks she's better'n me. Like she knows best a'cuz she's bigger 'n older. But she don't."

*More feuding siblings, I thought. This is the very best mission ever.*

"You wanna know how I met Zecora?" asked Applebloom. "Everypony thought she was some creepy ol' witch, an' ran an' hid anytime she came to town, 'cept f'r me. Applejack got all high and mighty 'bout it, but in the end, I was right, an' she was wrong. Figger she'da learn somethin' from that, but she didn't! Still treats me like a little filly!"

"You *are* a little filly," I pointed out.

Applebloom fixed me in a death glare. "I *know* that. What I mean is, she still treats me like I'm weak an' helpless."

I raised an eyebrow. "You were almost eaten alive."

"Ugh! You asked, okay?! Jus' forget it!" Applebloom hung her head and squared her shoulders, turning her back to me again. I just grumbled and looked into the forest, staring at nothing in particular.

I'm no good with kids.

The numerous beats that I'd heard earlier came into sharper focus as the conversation between Applebloom and I died again. She had twice my number of legs, and thus made twice the noise I did while walking. I heard the pattern in her steps, the four-beat repetition with every step she took, and could differentiate it from my own. Behind us—fainter, barely audible, but unmistakably there—were more patterns. I couldn't tell how many; they were too faint for that. Nor could I tell what it was that was following us.

I momentarily wondered if I should break the news to Applebloom, but quickly decided against it. My awareness was the one advantage that we had over our stalkers. Any change in our behavior could squander that advantage and tip our hand to the attacker. I could easily feign ignorance, but I doubted that she could. She telegraphed her thoughts with her body language and demeanor. Kids do that; they can't help it. So I chose to keep that knowledge to myself for the time being while I worked out a plan in my head.

Applebloom ruined any chance at my being able to concentrate by breaking the silence again. "You got any sisters?"

I was mildly annoyed at the disturbance, but figured that more conversation would play to my advantage and make us look more vulnerable. "No," I replied. "No sisters. But I did have a brother. A twin."

"Had?" Applebloom echoed. "What happened to 'im?"

"Have," I corrected. Figured I'd have to get used to referring to Liquid in the present tense, after what happened atop Arsenal Gear the previous Spring.

"Don't sound like you're very close, iff'n' you're talkin' 'bout yer brother like he ain't even alive," Applebloom observed. I eyed her curiously. Awfully perceptive thing for a kid to say. Of course, I was grading on a steep curve. "He ain't nice to you?"

*"You see?!" crowed Liquid as he ground my best friend's corpse underfoot. "You can't protect anyone, not even yourself! Die!"*

"Not especially, no," I said, and Applebloom murmured knowingly. "But you should understand, kid, that he and I, we were sort of a special case. An extreme." I noted my use of the past tense, and quickly amended. "Are a special case."

"What," said Applebloom, turning her head to face me as we walked. "Like you're the only one with a siblin' who treats you like dirt? Don't even look at you like yer yer own pony?"

I cleared my throat and looked at her out of the corner of my eye. She rolled hers. "Or whatever." From behind us, I heard what sounded like a muffled chuckle, followed by a distinct "shush"ing sound. Applebloom's eyes widened and she began to crane her neck to look behind us, but I stopped her by clearing my throat again, catching her attention. She looked at me and I shook my head infinitesimally. Applebloom caught my cue and kept her mouth shut. She turned her head back to the road, an expression of worry edging toward outright fear on her face.

"Nothing like that at all," I continued, as though the interruption had never happened. I hadn't counted on the girl becoming aware that we were being followed, and didn't count on her being able to disguise it effectively, not with it at the front of her mind. I decided that keeping her distracted would help to disguise that fact. Only way that I could figure to do that (without knocking her unconscious and carrying her, which was admittedly not outside of my ability) was to continue pursuing the conversation. "Actually, he tried to kill me a whole bunch of times."

Applebloom shot me a skeptical look that suited her better than her worried expression. She was distracted and I had her attention, so I kept talking. "Really, he did. Almost went through with it each time, too."

"But he didn't," said Applebloom matter-of-factly, and I started to rethink my praise for her perceptiveness. "How'd you get away?"

I shrugged. "I'm a little tougher than he is, kid." *But not by much*, I thought. "So then, maybe I'm no expert in healthy sibling relationships. But in light of that circumstance, can you really tell me that the way your sister treats you is all that bad?"

She didn't answer me, looking back to the ground instead. "Why'd you really run away?" I pressed.

"...AJ found out I nearly got killed in the Everfree Forest an' yelled at me," she mumbled at length.

Again, I raised an eyebrow. "And to show her up, you decided to get killed in the Everfree Forest?" For such a perceptive girl, she lacked forward thinking in the worst way.

"It made more sense last night," Applebloom admitted. "Had a whole plan f'r what I was goin' t'do. I forgot it the second I ran into the Manticore though. Still can't quite 'member what it was," she added with a quiet chuckle. The passion and defensiveness from before was gone from her voice.

"Let me make a suggestion." The beats were becoming individually discernible; two-step beats, several pairs of them. Something bipedal. Humans? Either they were drawing closer, or just not bothering to mask their presence effectively anymore. Whatever the case, it was clear that they were planning to spring their trap soon. "I'm no expert in healthy sibling relationships, and I never had a nagging big sister treating me like a child when I was your age. Maybe I can't relate so well." I strained to maintain nonchalance as my body shifted into combat mode. The lingering aches from the Manticore's venom faded, adrenaline suppressing the pain. "But an older sibling keeping a tight leash on a younger sibling? Telling her to keep out of the creepy, monster-filled forest? Sounds to me like she was just trying to keep you from getting yourself killed. Considering what happened last night, with the Manticore, I'd call that good advice, and I'd even go so far as to say you overreacted to it."

I could see the tears gathering in her amber eyes as I imparted the most sagely wisdom that I could drum up under the circumstances. "I told my sister I wished she was dead," Applebloom whispered with a sniffle. She said it to herself, not to me.

I really, *really* did not want to discuss this matter any further than I absolutely had to. Working out sibling feuds (without resorting to violence), as I'd learned not so long before, was, is and will forever be well outside my area of expertise. Fortunately, I had an excuse to cut the conversation

short. "We all say things we don't mean sometimes, kid." Applebloom began to reply, but I immediately cut her off in a hushed voice. "This isn't one of them: When I say so, make a break for the trees on our right and stay there 'til I say to come out."

Applebloom's eyes widened again as the imminence of the danger took center stage. She sucked in a quick, quavering breath and nodded shakily.

"Now!" I snapped. Applebloom was off, sprinting off the path as quick as her tiny legs would carry her. Immediately, I spun around, and in a single fluid motion, drew my M9, raised it to eye level and found a target, sizing him up in the instant before I pulled the trigger.

Human. Male. Clad in navy blue camo below the waist and black fatigues above. Midnight blue combat vest. Black helmet. The letters "PW" were stamped in the center of the vest. And there were three others, two flanking him on one side, a third on his other. All of them carried Kalashnikov assault rifles.

*Pegasus Wings troops*, I thought grimly. Zecora was telling the truth.

I fired. The dart struck the soldier dead-on in his Adam's Apple. As soon as the round left the barrel I hit the dirt, rolling for some tall grass off of the path, on the side opposite the one that Applebloom had gone to. Automatic fire tore up the ground around me, but I reached my cover unscathed and lay perfectly still, flattening myself against the ground.

"Kirshner?!" one of the soldiers said frantically. "Get up, you Kraut bastard! That's an order!"

"No good," sighed another, his deep voice embellished by a rich Caribbean accent. "He's out cold."

"Hell, that's two of our number gone" said the third soldier. His voice, underscored with a subtle Canadian accent, was shaky, high and cracked just slightly. He sounded younger than the other two. "Where the hell did Trenton run off to?!"

"Cut it," snapped the first. He tried to keep his voice firm, but his nervousness bled through nevertheless. I guessed that he was the squad leader, and thus wanted to exert authority over his troops, but if his voice was any great indicator, he was too easily shaken by the loss of one of his number. This man was not cut out for leadership. I wondered if the rest of Pegasus Wings was so poorly organized. "Split up. Baker, cover the left side. Keep an eye out for that guy. Ethelbert, the right; find that fucking horse. I'll cover the road."

He was verbalizing his orders. Squads like this are supposed to operate via nonverbal signals, speaking sparingly (and quietly, if at all), and here he was proclaiming commands for the entire forest to hear. I reminded myself that a good portion of Pegasus Wings' ranks were wash-outs. Well, what idiot unit did this fool wash out from? Bad organization, poor leadership; these were the least likely conquerors in history. Equestria would have to be utterly demilitarized and helpless to be taken over by this pack of morons.

*With my luck, though, these'll just turn out to be the bad apples, and the rest of the army will be competent.* That was a happy thought to have while playing predator.

The three soldiers dispersed. I thought that I was concealed pretty well in the tall grass (or at least as well as I could be without any camouflage), so I stayed still, breathing shallowly, waiting to see if Baker would catch sight of me.

He didn't. His breaths were uneven and punctuated by nervous teeth chattering, and his footsteps dragged through the dirt loudly. I knew exactly where he was, could probably have guessed where he was looking too, just by the way he was carrying himself. Once again, I marveled at the discipline and rigorous standards of the Pegasus Wings PMC.

I spared a glance upward and saw Baker coming toward me through the grass, his back hunched, his knees trembling and his gun held entirely wrong. He was inexplicably resting the barrel on his left arm, holding a knife in his left hand and the gun's grip in his right. His AK was pointed nowhere near me. He hadn't noticed me yet, but he was practically right on top of me. Be pretty damn hard for him not to notice if he stepped right on me, and I doubted that anybody could be that incompetent. There was

something else about the way he was walking though. His stance, the way he carried himself, was familiar, if only distantly. It was almost like a Rorschach test, like I was being presented with an inkblot that was supposed to inspire a certain shape in my mind. I turned it over mentally, trying to match his pose with something recognizable.

Then it hit me. I knew where I'd seen his pose before. The stance was sloppy (his nervousness did nothing to help that fact) and he was holding his gun entirely wrong, but I was looking at what was supposed to be a standard CQC pose.

What happened next was instinctive, requiring very little conscious thought on my part. I sprang, rising suddenly from the grass and catching the AK's barrel in my hands. And I swear, even through the tinted visor, I could see his eyes. They were as wide as saucers.

Immediately, I twisted my body out of his line of fire, and cracked him in the chin with the back of my fist, throwing his head backward. Using his weight for leverage, I swung the rifle up and over, catapulting him into the air and wrenching the gun out of his arms. He hit the ground hard, expelling the air in his lungs. I leveled the gun at him, daring him to rise, but he remained still, out cold from the force of his landing. Two down. I swiftly stripped the gun, removing the magazine, ejecting the round in the chamber and separating the barrel, tossing the disparate pieces to the ground beside Baker. I doubted that he could put it back together again.

I hadn't used Big Boss' style of Close-Quarters Combat since my days in FOXHOUND. Those techniques were taught to me by a man who turned his back on his unit and his gun on me, and I swore never to use them after that betrayal. But seeing Baker in his shallow parody of a CQC stance awakened something in me, a part that I'd buried for the last decade and a half of my life up to that point. Despite my self-imposed ban on the fighting style, it came to me as naturally as breathing. It was half instinct, half muscle memory, and as I experimentally fell into the basic stance, drawing my M9 and cupping my free hand as though gripping a knife, I felt myself wondering how I'd ever done without it. It was like seeing the world in color for the first time. The other techniques and fighting styles that I'd mastered over the years felt like sticks and stones unto a tank. With CQC, I felt unstoppable. With CQC, I felt invincible.



Unbidden, the memory of a grayed man with an eyepatch blazing machine gun fire at me darkened my spirits. Mocking laughter, taunts, threats from a man I'd considered my mentor and father figure echoed faintly in my mind. My free hand curled into a fist, and I returned my M9 to its holster.

CQC was the legacy of a traitor, an art I'd sworn never to use again. But these bumbling idiots brought it back out of me. I'd use it once, this last time, and never again. Until the next time some idiot mimicked Big Boss and came at me with that sick, cookie-cutter imitation, anyway. *But really*, I told myself reassuringly, *what are the odds of that ever happening again?*

More on that later.

I knew the moves, owned a gun. Now, to complete the set, all I needed was a knife. I liberated Baker's Ka-Bar, raising it to eye level to inspect the blade. It was rusty, dull and the point looked blunt, but it would serve my purpose for the time being. I looked at the unconscious soldier, and at the field-stripped firearm beside him.

Deconstructing the rifle let me get a good look at it, and what I saw astounded me. It was an AK-47. Mind you, that in itself isn't astounding; the AK-47 is ubiquitous on the battlefield, being popular among revolutionaries, terrorists and militias all the world over. But this was a professional mercenary army. I'd seen their ship. I'd seen the cavernous installation surrounding the portal that brought me here. They had to have the money to afford better. Yet here I was holding an AK-47. Not an AN-94. Not an AK-102. Not even an AK-74, but an AK-47. The grandfather of all assault rifles. Light, reliable, dirt-cheap and obsolete.

Were Pegasus Wings' soldiers mercenaries on a budget? Was that why they were hiring unseasoned soldiers and arming them with outmoded weaponry? Nothing about this situation added up. Once again, I wondered if they were all like this, or if I'd simply drawn the most inept squad in the unit.

I heard the terse muttering of the soldier watching the path and filed my thought away for another time. Still had a job to do, after all. Turning my attention to him, I stalked, slowly and silently, through the tall grass and back onto the path. He stood in the center of the dirt road, darting his head

from one side to the next, occasionally swearing under his breath. He kept asking the air what was going on, except he used more expletives than I'd care to type to make his inquiry. I guessed that he hadn't heard what happened to Baker. It's my experience that the soldiers I encounter on missions aren't very perceptive. Not that I'm complaining.

I stole behind him, coming close enough that he could probably have felt my breath on his neck. Fortunately, I'm not that careless. Before he could notice my presence, I wrapped my left arm around his shoulders, pressing the rusty blade of the Ka-Bar against the flesh of his neck and followed that by kicking the back of his right leg, causing his body to buckle. I used my right arm to draw his own behind him at an incredibly uncomfortable angle and felt around his hip for a holster. Finding it, I drew his sidearm and thrust my arm across his right shoulder, staring down the sights of the pistol.

If this gun was ID locked, then my improvised plan wasn't going to work, and I'd need to improvise a whole new one. "Call him," I ordered. He obliged me.

"Ethelbert!" he yelled in a voice tinged noticeably with pain. Quite a number I was doing on his arm. The last soldier appeared from behind a tree, AK raised. I pulled my handgun's trigger twice the second his head came into view; my hostage jumped with each report. Ethelbert's helmet deflected the first bullet, but failed to stop the second, and he toppled onto his back with a hole in his headgear. I noted with interest that the gun was not, in fact, ID locked.

The last soldier whimpered at the sight of his dead comrade. "Please," he sniveled, "please don't--" I cut him off with a hard shove forward. As he staggered and fell to the ground, I dropped his sidearm, drew my M9, cocked it and fired, hitting him in the groin with a tranquilizer dart. The commander briefly tried to rise, but his strength abandoned him before he could lift himself an inch and he collapsed with a quiet groan.

One soldier dead and three unconscious via the magic of CQC. Not bad for someone who hadn't used it in a decade. If the very use of the thing didn't fill me with such powerful self-hate, I might have decided to re-work it into my everyday arsenal. Still wasn't there something that I was missing?

*"Hell, that's two of our number gone. Where the hell's Trenton?!"*

Right after I'd taken out the first soldier, too. There was still one more out there. I cocked the M9 and held it ready, scanning the perimeter for any sign of movement.

A cry from above drew my attention: "Snake, look out!"

I turned my head upward, where Applebloom's panicked cry had come from. A black shape, vaguely blue tinted, was descending fast, holding something that gleamed faintly in a downward position. A blade. A sword, more specifically, and there's only one type of sword that you'll find on a battlefield in this day and age: a High-Frequency Blade. A weapon utilizing ultrasonic vibrations to cut through objects on a molecular level. I'd seen them before, knew the damage they could do in the right hands. I dove, the sword missing by mere millimeters, and rolled headfirst, coming to a stop and rising to a kneel, then whirling to face my attacker as he recovered from his failed strike.

An almost featureless face with a single blazing blue eye stared back at me. He wore the same combat vest as the troops, but not the same uniform. His body was two shades of blue: The torso and everything down to the knees were a deep, midnight blue, and the shoulders, knees, thighs and ankles were sky blue. In his right hand was the sword that had nearly impaled me. Slung under his left arm, a hand clamped tightly over her mouth, was Applebloom, who was clearly not happy with this turn of events. Her eyes stared fearfully at me as she struggled to escape the vise grip of her kidnapper.

This was no run-of-the-mill soldier. No incompetent buffoon who didn't know what end of his gun the bullets came out of. This was a Cyborg Ninja that I was dealing with, one of the deadliest things I have ever gone toe-to-toe with in my life. I've seen one shred a platoon of soldiers apart single-handedly; I fought him on equal footing and barely walked away. But this one? My body was still weak from the Manticore's sting. I could take down a foursome of buffoonery, sure, but any halfway competent idiot could do that. A superhuman abomination of science was a whole different ballpark.

I needed time. Needed to stall. That meant it was time to do what I did best: Talk.

“Trenton, I presume,” I said. My eyes flicked between Applebloom and her attacker, trying to determine if I could get a shot in at the latter without harming the former. “Are those suits standard issue now?”

Trenton responded by reversing the sword in his hand and leaping toward me, crossing the distance between the two of us in a single bound. Not the talkative sort, apparently. I had just enough time to roll again and evade a decapitating strike. Clambering to my feet and aligning my sights on the side of Trenton's head, I fired. Without looking, Trenton deflected the round, his arm moving in an imperceptibly fast motion.

Should have seen that coming. He wouldn't be a Cyborg Ninja if he weren't faster than a speeding bullet. Trenton came at me again, returning the sword to a standard grip. He delivered a series of shallow slashes, executed with slight, simple flicks of his wrist, reminiscent more of European fencing techniques than Japanese sword-fighting. I wove, evading his every strike, but only just barely; the ninja was keeping me very much on my toes. An opportunity finally presented itself when Trenton thrust the blade angled slightly upward. I side-stepped the lunge, caught him by the wrist in my left hand and pulled him toward me, simultaneously throwing a haymaker with my right. His head met my fist, resulting in a resounding metallic clang upon collision. Ignoring the throbbing pain in my hand, I quickly followed with a kick, pivoting on my back foot to drive it deep into his chest. The combat vest must have absorbed some of it, but there was still enough force in the kick to make him stagger backward, curling his body into itself. Yet Applebloom, somehow, remained tightly in his grasp, totally secure.

I couldn't go all-out against him with Applebloom being held hostage like that, not unless I didn't mind hurting the filly too. “Maybe you should put her down,” I suggested, trying the dialogue tactic again. “Unless you don't mind an uneven fight.”

“Unacceptable,” said Trenton flatly.

As surprised as I was to get an answer out of him, what really got me was his voice. It had the same mechanical filter as the past ninja's voices,

but his was unique somehow. His low pitch was an obvious computerized disguise; it was clear to me that his real voice was significantly higher. I wondered what the point of that was. Were they seriously trying to mask an effete voice by altering it to sound lower? For what, intimidation's sake? More than that, though less unusually, Trenton had an accent, one that I couldn't put my finger on, thanks to the mechanical distortion effect.

"Does that mean you want me to wipe the floor with you?" I taunted. It was equal parts stalling for time and trying to goad him into letting Applebloom go. With luck, she'd take off to safety while I distracted Trenton. Sure, she was an annoying little runt, but I was interested enough in her well being to take on horrific monsters that were trying to harm her. I'd saved her ass from the Manticore; I didn't want to let her down against a ninja.

"Unacceptable," repeated Trenton. "Your suggestion contradicts my directives."

"Directives?" I asked. "Were you ordered to kidnap her?"

Trenton surprised me again by returning his HF Blade to his sheath. Far less surprisingly, he leaped toward me, arcing through the air with his right fist drawn back and descending almost right on top of me, driving that fist forward. I backpedaled, evading the strike, and his fist sank deep into the dirt. Trenton ripped his hand out of the ground, flinging clumps of dirt and roots into the air, and rose back to his feet. I jabbed with my left hand. He deflected it easily. Undeterred, I swung a right hook; he ducked under it. I spun, jumping off the ground to deliver a roundhouse kick, but Trenton reacted by putting Applebloom directly in my line of fire. She shut her eyes tightly and squeaked, but at the last second before impact I withdrew the kick. Gravity yanked me to the ground, and I landed painfully hard on my side. My wits returned in time for me to notice Trenton's fist barreling toward me. I rolled aside, scrambled to my feet and fell back into my combat stance.

Using Applebloom as a shield. I took that to mean that he had to fight dirty in order to match me. If I weren't still sluggish from my fight with the Manticore, I might have been able to outfight him. Still, it was a cowardly move. This ninja had no scruples.

"I have been directed to maintain the secrecy of our operations at any cost," Trenton informed me. His computerized voice was calm and even, as though the previous exchange of blows hadn't taken place at all. "However, I have also been directed to not take the lives of any...ponies..." He spat the word with clear disgust, as though the absurdity of sentient, talking horses made it that much more difficult to say. I'd be lying if I said that I didn't sympathize. "I cannot kill the child without violating my second directive, but the first must be obeyed at any cost. Thus, I have decided to capture her, in lieu of taking her life. It seemed a fitting compromise."

My back and right flank ached where I had fallen. It was forming an interesting bond with my lingering Manticore venom soreness. "Yeah? So you and the Incompetence Brigade were sent out to silence her, specifically? Kind of funny that one little filly is such a top tier threat for a crack mercenary army."

Trenton emitted a low, mechanical sound that I interpreted as a chuckle and squeezed his arm tighter around Applebloom. The filly let out a quiet puff of breath and stared helplessly at me. I set my teeth and growled at Trenton's casual invocation of a child as an instrument of war.

"We discovered your presence quite by accident," Trenton explained. "A Manticore entered our camp last night and devoured two of our sentries before we were able to drive it away. The cowardly lion ran away at the sound of gunfire."

That explained the rounds I'd heard the night before. Good to know I hadn't imagined them.

"Rather than risk letting the beast live, I and this assortment of buffoons," and here he gestured to the unconscious (and dead) soldiers, "were sent to track it down and eliminate it."

"The beast was found and dealt with swiftly. Examining the carcass revealed a curiosity: It was stuck with a dart containing a rather potent elephant tranquilizer. Close inspection of the immediate area revealed the presence of three .22 caliber shell casings and a trail composed of hoofprints and a sizable skid mark that led deeper into the forest, terminating at a cottage built into a tree."

*They found Zecora.* My throat tightened as concern for the cryptic zebra washed over me.

“I left a group behind to deal with the occupant. The rest of the soldiers followed me in pursuit of the filly and her companion. You see, we noted a set of human-shaped footprints beside a set of hoofprints. Under the circumstances, it struck me as odd. Wouldn't it strike you as odd?”

I couldn't resist a bemused smirk. “The week I'm having, I don't think I could ever consider anything odd again. So what about me? Planning to take me into custody too?”

“You are not a pony,” said Trenton with an out-of-place-looking shrug. “I can kill you without violating the first directive.”

Well. Look who had everything all figured out. “That assumes that you can kill me, Trenton,” I said. I began to pace, walking in a counter-clockwise circle, with Trenton as my locus. Trenton mirrored my action, his burning blue eye focused entirely on me. “The last two of your kind I faced couldn't. What makes you think that you can?”

“Progress does,” said Trenton. His mechanical voice resounded with what I can only identify as smugness. “The prototype was a failure, by all standards. Unstable, psychotic. A weapon is only useful if you know that it won't backfire on you. Gray Fox betrayed and murdered his makers, and that is a failing that I do not subscribe to. I am the second, the refined product, built on the foundation of the first without any of its flaws. Not unlike yourself, son of Big Boss.”

A shiver ran down my spine. “You know who I am?” This was the second person in Equestria who knew more about me than they let on.

“Word was that you perished in Manhattan Harbor in 2007. I admit, it pleases me that you did not.” The blue fire in his eye flickered in a curious way. “Though I am intrigued as to how you came to be here.”

“Same way you did, right?” I asked. I was coming closer to the body of the last soldier I'd tranq'd. His sidearm lay where I'd dropped it. I started to map out, mentally, how close I'd have to be to nab it and shoot without Trenton reacting. Odds were slim. “I went through the portal on the island.”

"That is the only way to get here, to my knowledge," mused Trenton. "But its terminus is squarely in the center of our base. The odds of one being able to slip through and out of our grasp are slim, even for one such as yourself. More to the point, the portal has been rigged to disperse the atoms of anybody who attempts to follow us here. A precautionary measure."

I was supposed to be dead? I wrote that off for the time being; I was supposed to be dead a number of times over. What's one more unto the multitude? "Obviously, you didn't do it well enough."

"Obviously," the ninja agreed. "I cannot say that I am surprised. The technology on that island is no doubt unreliable."

"Then why didn't you say anything to your commander?" I asked. "If you knew that there was the possibility that your plan wouldn't work, then shouldn't that have come up?" I was almost right next to the sleeping mercenary now.

"Commander Cain is a busy man," Trenton replied. "I cannot trouble him with my every errant thought."

"You may have wanted to trouble him with that one." Dive, roll, nab the gun, line up the shot, take it, drop the ninja with a single bullet. I had a window of maybe a second, if that. No time like the present. I drew a shallow breath and prepared to lunge...

"Ey you!" shouted a new voice, one that was female and rich with a rural, Southern-sounding accent.

Trenton about-faced sharply to meet this newcomer. His pose and body language told me that he'd been caught completely off guard. Suddenly, I found that my window had opened by a couple of additional seconds. I dove, rolled, nabbed the gun (an M1911; they were either on a budget or this Commander Cain appreciated antiques) and lined up the shot. In retrospect, I should have taken it, even though it likely would have been pointless. I experienced a momentary lapse, though, on account of what I saw just beyond Trenton.



Arrayed in a “V” formation were six ponies, each a different color. Two had horns (one was lavender and carried something pudgy, purple and spiky on her back; the other was brilliant white), two had wings (yet only one, the blue one with the rainbow mane, was airborne; the light yellow one stood on all fours), and two could have passed for normal equines but for their unsettlingly human facial features (one was pink, and the other, at the head of the group, was orange and wore, of all things, a Stetson hat).

Lucky for me, I'd gotten my giggles out in Zecora's hut. Otherwise, I might have experienced a full-blown psychotic episode.

Evidently, Applebloom recognized at least one of the ponies in the group, because she immediately wiggled free of Trenton's grip on her mouth. “AJ!” she shouted, her voice cracking on a high note. “Help me!” Trenton's hand clamped over her face again, and whatever else she had to say was shouted into the ninja's palm.

The orange mare with the hat (AJ, I guessed) dug her hoof into the dirt and bared her teeth at the ninja. “I'm only sayin' this once,” AJ said in a dangerous tone that left no room for debate. “Set 'er down. Now.”

Trenton responded by drawing his sword and holding the blade to Applebloom's throat. The cutting power of the HF Blade was such that the barest flick of his wrist would sever her head from her body. Of course, I knew that a Cyborg Ninja had the dexterity not to make such a mistake, and being under strict orders not to kill, he certainly wouldn't have done it on purpose. The threat was an empty one.

AJ didn't know that. With a mad roar, she charged at Trenton, closing the gap between them in moments. Trenton raised his leg high into the air and dropped his heel onto AJ's head the instant she came into striking distance. Her momentum seemed to evaporate into the ether; she came to a full stop, stood stock still, wavered cartoonishly for a moment, and then toppled onto her side, groaning. Triumphant, Trenton kicked her unconscious body aside. AJ rolled a few feet to the right, off of the path. Her hat fell off of her head and lay discarded on the road.

Suddenly, I remembered that I was holding a loaded handgun. Springing to my feet, I fired twice, striking Trenton in the back on both

rounds. He jerked with each impact, but showed no other sign of harm, or even that he noticed my attack.

Lightning-quick, super strong *and* bulletproof. A winning combination for anybody to have. I was barely holding my own against him at reduced strength; I doubted the ponies had a prayer.

Four of the five who hadn't charged the freakishly powerful ninja snapped out of whatever trance they had been in and followed their friend's example, charging headlong. Purple Horn bucked its luggage to the ground before taking off, and it remained behind with the yellow coated, pink haired straggler. Rainbow got to Trenton first, turning in midair and bucking at his head with a pair of powerful back legs. Trenton sidestepped, raised his right arm and smashed his elbow, vertically, onto Rainbow's head. She fell beside his foot, unmoving but alive.

That seemed to stall the other three who had charged—Purple Horn, Curly Hair, and the Pink One—because they skidded to a halt upon seeing Rainbow getting dropped with one hit. Trenton took advantage of their shock; moving in a blue (and yellow, thanks to Applebloom) blur into the middle of their number, he set to work. A kick to Curly Hair's side before she could react to his presence sent her sprawling to the dirt with the wind knocked out of her. Another kick at Purple Horn was deflected by a sudden violet shimmer that seemed conjured out of nothing. Trenton recoiled and recovered in the same moment, switching his target to the Pink One. He attempted the same heel drop that had felled AJ, but the Pink One bounced (yes, bounced) aside. With the broadest, most out of place grin possible, she reared her front legs up and stomped both of her hooves onto that foot.

Trenton's agonized, computerized screech filled the air. He was bulletproof, but not hoofproof. I wondered if that was a design oversight.

Purple Horn attempted a charge. Trenton planted his back foot onto her face and shoved her away. She skidded through the dirt beside the Cowardly One and the spiky purple thing. The former gaped, wide-eyed; the latter knelt beside Purple Horn and cradled her head. I chose that moment to sprint at Trenton, dropping the useless gun as I went. Trenton kicked the Pink One in the belly, hard enough to raise her up a few feet into the air, then spun, pivoted and kicked her again, launching her like a

cannonball at me. She and I collided, and I was sent backward, landing hard on my back once again with the grinning pink pony on top of me.

“Hi there!” she said, looking into my eyes with an effusive smile. Our collision and the pain that it no doubt caused her apparently was not enough to dampen her spirits.

This was the very worst mission ever.

The Coward's shocked expression melted, solidifying into one of grim resolve. “No,” she whispered in a ragged voice.

Trenton hissed, but didn't turn to face her. His grip tightened on his sword. “No!” the Cowardly One shouted, this time with iron in her voice. “How *dare* you hurt my friends this way! How *dare* you lay your hands on Applebloom like that! Don't you have a single shred of decency in your being you *monster?!?*” Her wings unfurled and beat furiously, drawing her into the air, and she advanced on the ninja at eye level. Finally, he turned around to meet her furious stare.

A pair of gentle blue eyes, forced into a mask of anger that they looked completely foreign in, met a single, ferociously burning blue eye that betrayed no emotion but rage. The mask faded; the anger in her eyes gave way to fear, and the beating of her wings slowed. The Coward drifted back to the Earth, staring at the ninja and quaking. “I...I...” she stammered. The iron was gone from her voice.

Trenton raised his sword. It was a dramatic gesture, but a pointless one. The sharp side of the blade faced away from the Coward. He was going to strike her with the blunted end. It was nonlethal, but debilitating; a hardy man (or pony) could withstand a blow like that, but she didn't look too hardy from where I was sitting.

I pushed the Pink One off of my chest and climbed to my feet, breaking once again into a full-tilt sprint toward Trenton. The sound of hoofbeats from behind told me that my collision buddy was following closely.

We didn't make it in time. The sword descended on the terrified pony.

From the side of the road galloped a rejuvenated AJ; she slammed into the Coward, knocking her out of the path of the blade. The sword struck AJ in the back of her neck, accompanied by the crackle of electricity. AJ yelped; she didn't have time for anything longer than that before she crumpled to the dirt and lay fetal and motionless.

Applebloom shouted the pony's name once ("AJ" stood for "Applejack." I guessed that was the sister she'd talked about) before devolving into incoherent, babbling sobs.

Trenton spared a glance to the purple spiky thing, who still knelt beside Purple Horn and stared back at the Ninja with a frightened expression. He looked briefly at the Coward, who shut her eyes tightly and whimpered. With a disgusted grunt and a shake of his head, he turned his back on her, sheathed his weapon and leaped straight into the air. A moment later, he landed in front of me, his faceless mask and burning blue eye mere inches from me.

"No witnesses," he said, choking Applebloom again to stifle her. I heard the Pink One growl at the act, but she made no move to stop him. "I will take her, and they will follow, and you will be among them."

"Is that an order?" I whispered harshly.

Trenton headbutted me, driving his metal forehead into my bandana-covered brow, and kneed me in the gut. It felt like a locomotive had plowed into me at full speed. I gasped and fell, clutching my skull in one hand and my stomach in the other.

"Decide what it means for yourself," Trenton said mockingly. "The castle in the forest's center. You will come. She will be imperiled if you do not." I watched him shove the Pink One out of his path and stoop to retrieve my discarded M1911. He seemed to weigh the weapon in his hand for just a moment. Then he pointed it into the tall grass off of the path and fired a shot. The suddenness of the motion and the noise made the Pink One jump. I can't say it didn't surprise me too. Field commanders don't typically execute their soldiers for a poor job.

Trenton pointed to the first soldier I'd tranq'd and fired a second time, putting a bloody hole in his head. He aimed for the last one, the one I'd

held hostage, and fired a third shot. The soldier jerked briefly in his sleep, then lay still.

The sound of the gunfire shocked Applebloom into silence. Trenton met my gaze again, leveling the weapon at me, and for a moment, I fully expected him to fire.

But he didn't. He hesitated. His hand trembled, and finally, released the gun, let it fall to the ground, and instead pointed at me with the hand that had held it. "No witnesses," he repeated, as if that was all the explanation needed. And then he was gone, sprinting down the path into the forest with Applebloom in his grasp. In seconds, he was out of sight.

I'd saved her from the Manticore, an otherworldly beast, only to let her get swept away by a monster that was far more familiar to me. Another failure for the pile of failures in the career of Solid Snake. Yet the pain in my head was excruciating enough to take top priority over flagellation, and the pain in my stomach made *that* look like nothing. I shut my eyes and ground my palm against the spot where Trenton had hit me, as though that would somehow make my migraine go away, and pressed my other hand tightly against my abdomen.

"Hey," said the Pink One in her high, girlish voice as she trotted up to me and poked her face into mine. "You okay there?"

That was a very trying morning for me, one of the most trying I'd endured in recent memory. "Okay" was the last word I would have used to describe the situation, or myself. And yet, the question made me chuckle. The chuckle built into a pained, breathless laugh as I shook my agonized head and raised it to look the Pink One in her sapphire blue eyes. For an instant, I could have sworn that I saw the outline of a billowing black cloak in the air behind her.

"I haven't been okay in a very, very long time," I replied through my fading laughter.

She always wore a smile on her face, even when locked in mortal combat with a monster. Against Trenton, it was one of glee. But the one she offered me now was one of sympathy and reassurance. "At least you've got one thing down. When the world's got you on the ropes,

sometimes all you can do is laugh." The obtrusively pink pony with the cotton candy mane held her hoofed leg out to me. "My name's Pinkie Pie. What's yours?"

I heard stirring behind me, accompanied by the nervous voices of four young ladies. The rural Southern drawl, so similar to Applebloom's, was not among them, and in my heart was a festering concern for Applebloom. Not on account of her kidnapping. But on account of the idea that, for all she knew, she'd just watched her sister die.

I was under no obligation to do anything for her. I was under no obligation to come here in the first place, really. But I wasn't willing to write off that filly because I'd been too slow to keep her safe. In that moment, I swore to myself that I'd find her and save her, no matter the cost. In doing so, I gave myself another reason to fight.

I took Pinkie Pie's hoof in my hand and shook once, with as much strength as my envenomed hands could summon, and forced a grim smile onto my face.

"Call me Snake."