Haich Versus P

Haich Versus P 3

The Thirdly

Written by Tom and Daniel. Writing and editing by Semeny Licket.

HAICH VERSUS P

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The following literature contains scenes of graphic violence, excessive profanity, and sexual content. If you enjoy watching South Park or HBO, you wouldn't be offended, but otherwise, reader discretion is strongly advised.

Foreword

HvP was originally written by Tom and Daniel. In previous instalments of HvP, my goal was to rewrite as little as possible as I read the series for the first time, making only rudimentary changes for clarity and providing further depth in detail before going back and polishing things up as per usual. The missing chapters of the original HvP2 notwithstanding, I had attempted to change as little as possible.

HvP3's manuscript began at upwards of 580 pages long, much of it empty carriage returns, ellipses, and perfunctory dialogue. There are longer books, but typically they're spread out across multiple volumes, and even in digital format this becomes unwieldy. HvP1 began just under thirty pages and was expanded to slightly over eighty. HvP2 started at approximately thirty pages with the final two chapters missing, and grew to somewhere around 142 pages by the time it was finished. That's only a quarter of what this instalment was before I abridged and edited it. Although not blurring the lines became difficult, I made it my mission to adhere to the original vision. I made certain continuity reparations, but at every juncture, it was my job to keep Tom and Daniel's sentiment consistent.

About the Author

The author grew up as a small Brazilian busboy on the outskirts of Danton, Mongolia, working as a grafter until the collapse of the Ugandan government in Soviet 1921. He now goes door-to-door selling doorknobs and has no bottom row of teeth. He first started writing about a year ago when he was fifty-one, and can be quoted as yelling at passing flocks of geese. He once tried to bench press a small cat and failed, and now moonlights as a key grip.

Dedication

In memoriam of ~~Ahuviya Rotem Harel~~ Isabel Rosa Araujo and his Bane otherkin, who commited suicide via penile extraction on September 29, 2015.

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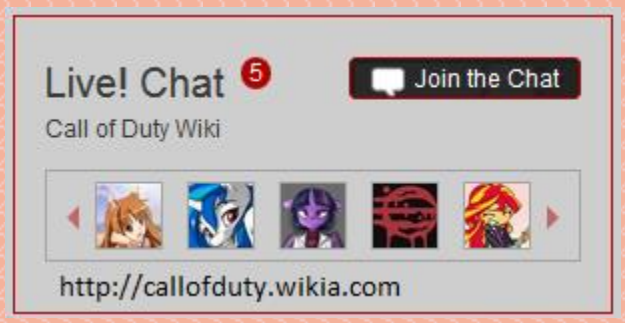

“Better than *Twilight: Fifty Shades of Hunger Games.”* – Jersey Shore

“Porn for internet users.” – Steep Hen Keeng

“Five fifths, ten tenths.” – ING

“Not fake like *My Immortal*.” – collected via the Internet

“It’s like *Freddy Got Fingered* only angrier.” – Tumblrina

“Your brain will melt.” – Semeny Licket

“Please cease and desist.” – Lemony Snicket, M. A. Larson, Paulie Schrier

“Shut your mouth, you cock-sucking faggot.” – Tarna Storng

“Maybe if I’d kissed pigeons, my career would take off again, too.” – Malice Adjourn Hurt

“That sentence made my brain hurt.” – Bird

Part I: Cracks in Stained Glass

Prologue

"You're not a leader."

The words haunted Daniel Williams all that fateful day when New York became awash in destruction. They sank into his brain like a drop of oil in the ocean, where it burrowed into the very core of him. In fact, there were three days in particular in which these words haunted Daniel's brain like an attic where your crazy great uncle offed himself: That day the Equestrians devastated New York City, the day he finally slew the enemy commander, Twilight Sparkle, and the day that his father told him he would inherit the title of the leader of the Human Resistance.

That first day came in the midst of a terrible, personal grief. The affluent Williams family had been in mourning over the death of James, Daniel's brother. Their father, Peter, had been distraught and morose, but as an army general, his stoic nature remained intact. It had been unsettling the way his father had remained so settled, sitting behind that desk and shuffling paperwork, distracting himself with the dismal details of that same endless war which had seen the decimation of the human population and just recently claimed the life of his son. James had been the leader of the Human Army, but along with his closest friend, John Horridge, he was killed in Berlin by Twilight Sparkle. The pony invaders from beyond the earth had been known to devour their victims, and James' end would certainly not have been a palatable sight.

"It's you, son," Peter had said. "You're to be the new leader of the Human Army. You will follow in your brother's footsteps. You will report for three months of marine training." That was how Peter tended to speak; in assumptive imperatives that usually began "you will". For the first time that day, Peter looked Daniel in the eyes. "Your mission will be to apprehend Twilight Sparkle to make her answer for her crimes against humanity, and to kill as many Equestrians as you can along the way."

Daniel couldn't argue with his father then. He hadn't spoken more than a few rudimentary words to his father, his mother, Jenny, or his sister, Becky for the longest time. No matter how he wanted to protest, he couldn't muster the voice to say he didn't feel like a leader.

That second day, the day he and his best friend, Tom Taylor-Randall, killed Twilight Sparkle in Berlin, the same words had taunted him. It was the day of his first major triumph. He'd endured many hardships. His own squad had been the only survivors of a vicious anti-aerial assault. Many civilians had been killed on their arduous journey. After so much experience, he had never felt more like a leader on that day, but it was on that day that he had overcome all the doubts he'd carried with him. It was that day he had decisively dashed them.

And then there was the day the ponies attacked New York. The day that Tom had shot Daniel on that collapsing bridge as the ponies destroyed the city in a torrent of a million gallons of water. The mission had been cursed from the start. His own men had turned disorderly, and the Resistance had suggested training a substitute leader, Oleg Vodnik, who was disagreeable and snide. Collin "Irish" Dwell had come to blows with Shaun Moulder, the latter of which was killed in a doomed battle in Hainan during which Daniel had been captured. The enemy had injected him with some form of drug that robbed of him all essence of leadership.

"You are a slave." Those were the words Daniel heard. During the strange twilight between the conscious world and the next, Daniel could hear himself speaking to himself. He was in some place that wasn't anywhere, arguing with his eight-year-old self as he tried to reason with how he'd come to the circumstances he faced now. His younger self still had the Scots-Welsh accent, as opposed to the Russian accent Daniel had adopted for his own preference.

"I'm a slave," the older version of Daniel said. "I couldn't stop myself. I carried out the attack on the human resistance and the American rebels. I destroyed that bridge and led the humans into a trap."

His younger self frowned up at him. It was an expression of profound disappointment. "Your regrets don't matter one whit if you betrayed them in body."

"Rainbow Dash wanted revenge against me for killing Twilight Sparkle. She drugged me to make me obedient."

"Did you kill Twilight Sparkle out of revenge, or self-defence?" the younger Daniel asked.

The older Daniel considered the question. Wasn't it both? What was the difference? "Our orders were to capture the leaders alive so they could stand trial before all the remaining nations of humanity. I should have waited for Rainbow Dash to attack me. Then we would have killed her as well."

The younger Daniel shook his head. "No, she was never going to give you the excuse. She had a mission to destroy the Elbsandsteingebirge base. You played into their hooves the entire time. They obliterated the Chinese Red Guard, they put down the North American rebellion by flooding New York City, and they eliminated yet another leader of the Human Resistance."

Now the older Daniel turned away. Wallowing in self-pity like this was making him feel worse. How could he call himself a leader when he realized he was nothing but a pawn? When Daniel his eyes from himself, however, he only saw Tom, and his mind reeled with recollection. He could not keep his mind from his best friend, and his haunting last vision: Tom had aimed that gun at him and pulled that trigger.

Chapter One.

The source of all life. Vengeance.

Water is wet. If you haven't been told that much, then you must turn back now. Turn back, and either never look upon this true and tragic history of the human race on the brink of destruction, or open instead the pages documenting its prior two decisive battles, following the exploits of a team known as Delta Squad in its resistance against the alien Equestrian menace. Then you will be up to speed on the death of Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash's sinister revenge that ended in the destructive flooding of New York City and the imminent deaths of Delta Squad.

Nicholas Bronson couldn't turn back, and he would have to be up to speed to escape from his underwater prison. He was being slapped awake, but the feeling was nothing compared to the severe cramps in his neck. He tried to slap back at the arm above him before he opened up his eyes and saw a soldier, Private Porch, looming over him.

"Bronson, sir? It's me, Porch. We're in deep doo-doo." Porch was sweating something terrible, and his thin moustache was itching. Beyond him, Nick could see the interior of the tank he'd ridden in during the battle of New York.

A thought struck Nick. He could see there was some predicament at hand, or he wouldn't have woken up in a tank. He could remember the tank being struck hard and everyone being flung against the walls. That must have been when he blacked out. He could discern all of this, but one question came to his mind. "How long have I been out?"

"I don't know," Porch answered. "A couple hours at most, I think. But Cheuse is dead."

Nick craned his aching neck to look over at a dead woman lying against the wall. Pain stung its way up his spine, and he had to refrain from looking. "Damn. Where are we? Are we still in the city?"

Porch helped Nick to his feet. "I don't think so, sir. I checked the periscope. We're under the damn water. The tank keeps making creaking noises. I don't know why it ain't flooded. I tried waking you up, but you were out like a light. I think Cheuse's neck broke."

Nick could see the tank was flooding, however. Water was pooling up in the far end of the tank. He stumbled over to the periscope, but all he could see was darkness. Something that looked like part of a fish swam by. He bit his lower lip and looked up at the tank's door on the ceiling. He then looked at Porch. "We're gonna have to swim our way to the surface," he said. "I doubt our rations will outlast the bends. Help me with the door." Nick could remember the last time he was in this situation. By now, he must have been much deeper than two years ago, with far more water pressing down on the tank.

He felt it was worth a shot, anyway. Nick managed to twist open the door handle, but it wouldn't budge. "Give me a hand here." Nick had the distracted Porch assist him, but even with the two of them pushing together, the water pressure proved

too much. They did manage to force it an inch, but then cold, salty water came rushing inwards, forcing the door shut after soaking the pair of them.

"Oh god, we're gonna die," said Porch.

"Hey, hey. We're not done yet," Nick said. "Grab her things, but nothing too heavy. I know it's harsh, but we're going to get out of this." Porch nodded at Nick's words, then began to search Cheuse's corpse. Nick set up his portable welding torch. "Damn. Not many electrodes left." He set the focus of his stick welder and waited for it to heat up. In the meantime, he asked, "Try the radio yet?"

"I did," Porch said. "But all I got was quiet static. I don't think anyone can hear us down here."

"Well leave it transmitting, just in case." Once his welder was ready, Nick pulled down his goggles. "It's thick, but we're out of alternatives. Watch the sparks." The welder hissed through the inside of the tank door's hinges. Gleaming sparks showered down upon the wet interior of the tank, letting out little tufts of steam where they expired. Nick needed to concentrate, and though Porch looked worried every time he glanced up at what Nick was doing, the private was kept occupied with mourning Cheuse.

Before forever and a day, Nick had the hinges detached. He abandoned his gear on the floor. It'd saved his Canadian bacon once too often, but he wanted to get to the surface as quickly as possible. Any extra weight would only slow him down, but for all he knew, the battle still raged overhead. "Get ready to take a deep breath. I'm gonna shove this thing open and we're gonna swim out of here quick as ya can."

Porch nodded that he understood and bulged his cheeks out. "Naw, naw, not like that. When we get in the water. And hold your breath in your lungs, not your face." Nick beckoned Porch closer, and then the pair of them pushed as hard as they could. This time, when the water gushed in under the door, it swept the barrier away.

"Shit, that's cold!" said Porch.

"Go, now! You go first!" Nick shouted over the sound of flooding water. The tank was already filled almost to the brim. The pair of them could pull themselves out one after the other and swim upwards, kicking and pulling against the dense fluid that surrounded them both. After a while of swimming, they were still suspended in the void that was the ocean with no frame of reference for how far they'd risen. They couldn't tell they were actually even getting closer to the surface, or changing in elevation at all.

After a bit further, Nick turned his light on, thinking it might make them easier to see from the surface, once they got close enough. Plus which, his welding goggles were a bit dark. Porch was having trouble seeing without goggles, but he, too, turned on his light. A moment later, Nick could see he was pointing it at something. He saw a tail lashing in the distance. He also saw a flume of bubbles pouring out of Porch's mouth as the latter let out a reflexive scream. All Nick heard were strange gurgles. He realized Porch's mistake and grabbed the other soldier's arm. He then kicked wildly with him in tow. Something collided with Porch's body and tore him from his grasp. With one wave of his flashlight, Nick saw a mass of red blood, and one word sprang to mind: Shark.

Lamenting the gruesome fate of Porch all the while, Nick swam furiously. He swam as hard as he ever had. A childhood of swimming the Mackenzie River came to mind, as if this supplanted Olympic training, and even as the choking sensation in his lungs moved up his throat, he swam. He swam until he broke the surface like a new-born and took his first gasp of air in what felt like ten minutes. He reached his arms skyward and felt them grabbed and hoisted out of the water. His stomach collided with something hard, but the pain subsided when he was rolled over into a boat. When he looked up and took his glasses off, Nick saw Becky Williams and Tyrone Jones above his head and knees.

Becky was the sister of Daniel Williams. She leaned down to hug him, even though he was sopping wet. "Oh, thank god you're alright!" she said. "We haven't been able to find anybody else alive, but we heard the radio crackling and it got louder at this point."

"Where's the navy?" Nick asked, feeling a little delirious.

"We managed to get in touch with Logan and Walsh. They're scouring the ocean for us," Tyrone said, referring to their squad mates, Logan Walker and Jimmy Walsh, the latter of which was an ace pilot.

"There're sharks in the water," Nick said as though he were reporting the weather.

"What? Where?" Tyrone aimed his gun at the water and cocked it. He scoured the surface with his eyes. "Man, I hate things livin' in the water."

"They could be dolphins," Becky suggested.

Tyrone gave her a cold look. "If it's sharks, we get eaten. If they's dolphins, they try to rape us. Which is worse?"

"The starving," Becky said. "Nick, did you manage to bring any food?"

Nick frowned. "All I've got are my rations. I tried to save the others in my tank, but…" His eyes turned downward. Becky rubbed him consolingly. He lifted his head and tried to sit up some so he could ask a question. "Can't we just sail back to New York?"

Becky shook her head. "Between the sharks and that dragon, we'll end up food ourselves."

"We didn't kill it?" Nick asked, referring to a particularly ornery beast which had kept the tanks at bay.

Tyrone expounded further. "We ain't got no oars in this thing. We were all washed up ourselves, but we managed to find this thing sinkin', hitched to the back of somebody's car. Had to lose the car then bail out the water. New York's gone, man. Lotta buildings got destroyed. Last we saw, everythin' was flooded. Everythin'."

The trio spent a grim couple of days drifting aimlessly. At one point, they tried to paddle with their guns, but it was futile. Tyrone's mood was sour, so Nick tried to cheer him up by thanking him for his aid in contacting the rebels. All hope was not lost, however, because on the second evening, when they worried the radio battery would die out soon, they saw the lights of a search boat and aimed their own lights toward it. They were rescued promptly by a contingency of the Human Resistance's navy. Logan and Walsh were waiting for them and they apologized for having to refuel and, to their great relief, Tom was there as well.

They found Tom wrapped up in a blanket in the infirmary. He'd been dried off for days, but still shivered as if hypothermic, or perhaps just traumatized. "Daniel had some sort of sonic device," he said. "I had to shoot him. I had to. You understand." Logan and Walsh had heard the news before, which now came as a shock to Becky, Tyrone and Nick.

Only Nick spoke. He grabbed Tom's hand and nodded. "I understand. None of us wanted it to come to this."

"He told me to do it," Tom said, pulling his hand away. "The ponies drugged him with something. The bridge under us collapsed and we fell into the river. I don't know how I wasn't crushed under the debris. I was eventually rescued by this boat. Becky, your dad's here by the way. He came looking for his son. But I'm sorry. Daniel's dead."

Chapter Two.

Two weeks after the attack on New York. Dunes of sand.

Catching sand in their hooves, eyes and ears, Rainbow Dash stood with Pinkie Pie in the middle of a desert in the blasted dunes of the Middle East. The Equestrians had struck a decisive blow for peace between the eternal aggressions between the natives. Now, much of the region was deserted and devoid of the sounds of screaming bazooka rockets and religious ululation. Rainbow Dash held a small black box on her hoof, and she examined it carefully. "So this will get us back home?" she asked.

"Yup, yup, yup! But what are we gonna do with the rest of our armies?" asked Pinkie Pie.

"Leave them! There is a small number of them left, and a stronger army yet shall be born from our world." She fiddled with the black box between her front hooves. "Now, how do I work this, eh?"

"You just press this button!" Pinkie Pie pointed to a button which was positioned in the centre of the first face of the time cube. Rainbow Dash placed her hoof on the button.

"When we get back, those pesky humans won't know what hit them!" Rainbow Dash laughed as she turned the crank on the side of the box. It played a wheezy, clanking tune that sounded familiar but couldn't quite be placed, and within a few moments, a swirling vortex of iridescent black and yellowish purple hues yawned open in front of them. Gravid winds pulled at their manes and tails. The orb looked exactly like a black hole and gave off a certain deathly feeling, like when one is standing up against a window on a high monument and gazing downwards.

"Are you sure you want to do this? The council will not be pleased with your failure," explained Pinkie Pie.

The word "failure" made Rainbow Dash's mood change. She turned and growled at Pinkie. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'The council will not be pleased with your failure!'" Pinkie Pie repeated.

Rainbow Dash threw both her hooves forward and pinched them around Pinkie Pie's throat. She squeezed and lifted Pinkie Pie off of the ground. Pinkie Pie struggled and gagged for air. "What did you say to me?" Rainbow Dash's voice was something akin to a draconic roar.

Pinkie Pie gasped for enough air to eke out each staccato word. "I'm sorry, my queen!"

"I have not failed, eh! I am simply taking time to prepare a better army!"

“I know. I’m sorry.” Pinkie Pie was turning blue. Rainbow Dash held her for a few more moments and then let her go. Pinkie Pie crashed to the floor and began to cough. Her typical carnelian pigment gradually returned.

“Now let’s get out of this heck hole!” Rainbow Dash turned back to the portal.

“Yes, my queen!” Pinkie Pie rolled onto her hooves. Rainbow Dash stepped into the portal and disappeared. Pinkie Pie rubbed her now sore throat and followed her queen through the portal. From the perspective of any onlookers, she spontaneously appeared in her home world, but to Pinkie Pie, her world had snapped into view around herself like an elastic band. She smiled as she saw all the colours from her home world stand out in flat, cartoonish hues. They were standing in a wide open park, overshadowed by several coniferous trees. Beyond that were many tall stone buildings with coiling slopes. She looked around, seeing ponies with their families eating dead humans like scenes from a Norman Rockwell painting. Swastikas on great, big banners hung from trees and houses. Yes, Equestria looked exactly the same as it always had: decked out in Neo-Nazi regalia.

As they passed by, one of the pony families could be overheard conversing: “What’s your favourite part of a human to eat?”

“The ass burgers, definitely!”

Pinkie Pie breathed in the toxic air and smiled. *Home, sweet home*, she thought to herself. She was interrupted mid-thought by Rainbow Dash calling her. “Come on, Pinkie, we got to get to the council, eh. Lucky for you the portal brought us back somewhere sensible this time.” Pinkie Pie nodded and followed her queen. The two of them trotted through the city of Canterlot and other ponies began to bow before Rainbow Dash. This sort of reaction from her fellow ponies made her smile with pride. The two of them walked for about a mile until they reached a palace. There were a flight of marble steps leading up to two big wooden doors.

“Are you ready to meet the council?” asked Rainbow Dash as she turned to Pinkie Pie. Pinkie Pie was nervous and did not answer. Rainbow Dash started up the stairs with Pinkie Pie close behind. They were met by two royal pony guards at the top of the stairs.

“State your business!” ordered the first guard.

“We are here to speak with Kaiser Celestia” replied Rainbow Dash. The second guard examined them both.

“Hand over all weapons and you may proceed,” said the second guard as he held out a box filled with a can of mace and an iDroidBerry cell phone. Rainbow Dash nodded and pulled a Unishot from her saddlebag and slipped it into the box. This was a weapon designed to paralyze a target while only numbing them to pleasurable sensation, so that they would die from gradual, excruciating pain. Pinkie Pie then stepped forward pulled out her Unishot from her saddlebags, along with a knife and two German Lugers. Rainbow Dash stared at Pinkie Pie with a shocked look.

“What? I like to be well-protected,” explained Pinkie Pie as she noticed Rainbow Dash’s facial expressions.

Rainbow Dash turned to the guards. “May we go in now?” asked Rainbow Dash with ostensible impatience. The guards stepped aside and Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie entered the palace. The massive doors parted to welcome them into a splendid hallway. The hall had a large table in the middle which was big enough to seat thirty ponies at once. At either side of the table was a fire that stretched down the length of the hall. The ceiling of the hall was held up by giant stone pillars and tapestries bearing swastikas hung from them. On either side of the room were two doors. The one on the left went into the sleeping chambers for the council and the one on the right led to the training area. At the far end of the hall, there were three thrones. Each of them had a member of the council sitting on it. The throne in the middle had the high Pony, Lord Kaiser Celestia, perched onto it. The throne to the right (which was slightly lower than Kaiser’s throne) had Kaiser’s brother, Prince Blueblood, slouching on it. The final throne to the left (which was at the same height as Blueblood’s throne) had Kaiser’s sister, Princess Luna, on it, looking a bit sleepy in the noonday sun that streamed through the abstract stained glass windows behind them. Rainbow Dash approached the high lords with Pinkie Pie close behind. Kaiser looked up and stared deeply at Rainbow Dash.

“Why have you approached your Lords? Is it perhaps you bring news of the humans’ demise?” asked Kaiser.

“No, Lord Kaiser. I am here to request a stronger army.” Rainbow Dash stretched her wings as she bowed.

“A stronger army? What happened to the last one?” asked Kaiser, who kept a calm tone.

“The humans. They...they were too strong,” explained Rainbow Dash who remained bowing and was now joined by Pinkie Pie. “I need an army that’s at least twenty percent stronger!”

“The humans were too strong. Ha! Perhaps you fail to be a good leader,” piped in Blueblood.

“With all due respect, Brother, this conversation is between me and Mother,” growled Rainbow Dash.

"Yes, but perhaps your brother is right," said Kaiser.

"No, Mother—I mean, my lord. We were winning until they managed to take my best soldiers from me," explained Rainbow Dash.

"Really? So I take it Twilight is dead, Big McIntosh is deceased, and Rarity and Applejack are pushing up the daisies!" Kaiser's voice went from soft and quiet to loud and fierce until she was letting loose an infuriated roar. The power in her voice made Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash shiver with fright.

"Yes, my lord," said Rainbow Dash in a frightened, quiet tone.

"Then it's settled. You are no longer fit to lead an army," explained Kaiser, going back to her quiet, calm tone.

"But my lord!" Rainbow Dash's protest was stopped by Kaiser stomping her hoof, suggesting to Rainbow Dash to keep quiet.

"We are training a small group of genetically enhanced Ponies. They are to form a squad and are to be called 'The Cutie Mark Crusaders'. Their training will be done in a year, and when their training is done, your brother and sister will take their army back to the human world and eradicate the humans. You will join them, but you are stripped of your title. From now on, you are Princess Rainbow Dash and your sister is Queen Luna," explained Kaiser. Rainbow Dash did not argue, and even if she did, it wouldn't make a difference, except possibly to perturb Celestia further. Kaiser stood up and signalled for Luna and Rainbow Dash to stand.

"Please swap trophies," ordered Kaiser. Luna took off a necklace of a swastika with the word "Princess" written on it, and Rainbow Dash did the same, except her necklace read "Queen". The two of them swapped necklaces. As Luna grinned, Rainbow Dash growled jealously. Luna slipped the necklace over her head and down her neck while Rainbow Dash donned the Princess Swastika.

"I hereby announce you Queen Luna. Your celebration will be tomorrow. Let them eat cake!" Kaiser patted her daughter on the shoulder, and then turned to Rainbow Dash. "How did you get here, by the way?" she asked, sounding curious.

"By using this." Rainbow Dash held up the cube.

Kaiser snatched it from her hoof. "Interesting," she said as she examined it. "Now go settle into the town."

Rainbow Dash nodded and then turned and marched towards the door. As she barged out of the hall, she cursed under her breath. "Nag!"[1]

"It could have been worse. She could have turned you into stone, or sent you to the moon, or banished you to some horrible dungeon somewhere!" Pinkie Pie sounded a touch too excited to be really reassuring. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie took their weapons back from the guards' box.

"No, that would have been better. It would have saved me from the shame!" Rainbow Dash snarled and twirled her Unishot in her hooves.

"You don't mean that!" protested Pinkie Pie. Rainbow Dash stopped and stared at Pinkie Pie, who was trying to get her to smile by pressing her hooves against Rainbow's cheeks. They were halfway down the stairs by now and Pinkie Pie had struck a nerve of Rainbow Dash's without realising.

"You don't tell me what I mean or don't mean!" bellowed Rainbow Dash as she knocked Pinkie's forelegs away.

"You're right. I'm sorry, Princess." Pinkie Pie now showed a great, big, sagging frown.

"What did you just call me?" asked Rainbow Dash angrily. Her scowl was more intense than a camping trip.

"I called you—" Pinkie Pie was stopped mid-sentence as Rainbow Dash grabbed her by the throat and threw her down the stairs. Pinkie Pie rolled down the marble stairs, hitting her head on every step. With each collision, her body emitted a strange, hollow squawking sound. Rainbow Dash continued down the stairs and stepped over Pinkie Pie's unconscious body at the bottom.

"I will get my title back. You'll see," muttered Rainbow Dash.

[1] In Equestrian, this term is the equivalent of the expletive "bitch".

Chapter Three.

Task Force 142. The figures in the dark. Yemen, a risky country.

Hoping for an answer, a skinny white man with distinguished stubble and a camou baseball cap asked, “Where are they?” He had a British accent and was looking through a pair of binoculars.

“I think they’re inside, Gaz,” replied Soap as he zoomed in with the scope. John “Soap” MacTavish, like Gaz, was a member of Special Forces, although he had a bit more experience in having survived by the skin of his teeth in the Equestrian attack on New York City roughly one year ago. Soap was Scottish, white, and had stubble. He also had what looked like a short attempt at a Mohawk growing atop his head.

“Do you think maybe we should go in?” asked Gaz.

“Nope. We wait for the signal.”

Gaz nodded. Then suddenly the lights of the fort went out. “What was that?” he asked, confused.

“Don’t worry, it’s probably a power cut,” Soap said in a reassuring tone. That’s when Soap saw a dark figure on the roof of the fort’s main building. His voice became very low, barely above a rasped whisper. “Wait a minute. Who’s that?” His finger stroked his weapon.

“That doesn’t look like one of ours.” Gaz peered towards the shadow through the binoculars. The figure disappeared down the chimney of the building. Then suddenly the darkened building lit up and rang with the sound of gunfire.

“Shit!” cursed Soap. “Every damn time.”

“Soap, Gaz, get your asses in here! We need your help!” John Price, another member of Special Forces, was roaring through Soap’s and Gaz’s ear pieces. Like Soap, he too had survived the crisis in New York, and though he could still taste the sea salt in his bones, it only fuelled him in moments of conflict.

“Come on, let’s get in there!” ordered Soap, as if there was any decision to be made. He threw the camouflaged blanket off of him and Gaz and leapt to his feet. The men charged for the building breaking out in to a tiring sprint.

Ten minutes earlier, the fort had been tense with conversation. A man named Imran Zakhaev had been ogling the little black box of the ponies’ operation. He was an older, white Russian with a bald head and a bushy goatee. “So the ponies will return?” Zakhaev asked, intrigued by the black box.

“Yes, and they will be powerful! More powerful than before. It would be wise to keep on their good side,” explained Makarov. Makarov was a middle-aged white man with a short widow’s peak and angular eyebrows. He had a penchant for dressing rich, although it was not appropriate for battle.

One of Zakhaev’s men cocked his MP40. A white man named Jermol noticed this and leaned in towards another white male named Sid. “Black guard, straight ahead. Keep an eye on him,” whispered Jermol. Sid nodded and kept an eye on the aforementioned guard.

“And you say you want fifty thousand dollars for this?” asked Zakhaev.

“Yes! Is that a problem?” answered Makarov with another question. He waved his arms from side to side, his numerous rings glinting in the dim light. He then flipped the ends of the towel his had adorning his shoulders.

“Well, you see, what’s stopping me from killing you and taking the money and the box?” said Zakhaev sternly, answering the question that answered the question with another question. Jermol conspicuously slid his hand over his shoulder around to his back where he had an M9 Berretta tucked away safely in his belt. Makarov was getting tense but showed no emotion. He retained eye contact with Zakhaev. The staring contest went on for several seconds with each man faking out the other in an attempt to get him to blink before Zakhaev disturbed it with a laugh. “I’m just joking with you, my friend.” Makarov relieved himself.

Meanwhile, Price was waiting upstairs, accompanied by an older white Russian named Yuri Raslov who had stubble on top of his head. The pair was waiting for two people: Griggs, a black man with short, curly hair and a Carlton moustache who rapped for a hobby, and Oleg Vodnik, a Russian who had been conscripted into Delta Squad and butted heads with just about every office he’d worked with. He had a dark black bowl cut and a ghoulish face that made him look as if he ought to have had bolts sticking through his neck. “Where are they? They should have come back up the pipe by now,” said Yuri with an expression of concern planted on his face.

“Don’t worry; they will be here.” Price kept a focus on Makarov and Zakhaev’s conversation. That was when he heard them mention the ponies return.

“Let me get this straight: Did they just say what I think they said?” Yuri hoped he’d heard wrong.

“No, you didn’t. Shit, we got to report this,” said Price. Then suddenly, the electricity went out!

“Holy shit, what was that?” asked Yuri, keeping his voice to a whisper.

“I don’t know,” replied Price trying to keep visual contact with Yuri.

“What was that?” asked Makarov.

“Go check out what’s wrong!” ordered Zakhaev as he turned to one of his guards. The guard turned around when a dark figure landed in front of him.

“Rest in peace,” whispered the figure. It then plunged its wrist blade into the guard. The other guards saw this and opened fire. The figure dodged the gun fire by jumping up into the air and disappearing.

“Shit,” called Makarov. Jermol and Sid pulled out their M9 berretta’s whilst Abraham pulled out a golden Uzi. The firing stopped and the palace fell silent. Price and Yuri were looking around in fear. The lights flickered back on. “Oh. Shit. Now what, is it more shit? Or, or is it less shit?”

“Search the perimeter now, you shitheads!” bellowed Zakhaev. Price and Yuri remained still to avoid detection, because Zakhaev’s vision was based on movement. A guard had walked in front of them, but had his back to them.

“Shit-tastic!” said Soap’s voice through Yuri’s and Price’s headsets. His voice was loud enough for the guard to turn around.

“Shit! I found them!” the guard cried. Yuri ran towards the soldier and punched him in the eye. The soldier spun around on one heel and Yuri wrapped his left arm around his neck. The soldiers fired at Yuri and the soldier he had taken captive was struck by the bullets. His chest exploded in pulpous masses of garish, red blood, and his body jerked and jolted around, spewing strands of pink saliva down his lips. Price and Yuri kept cover behind the barrier that went all around the top floor. Makarov looked up.

“Price!” he said as if he was cursing his name. Price and Yuri had begun to take down the enemy soldier.

“Soap, Gaz, get your asses in here now!” Price broadcasted his order through his headset.

“You know them!” asked Zakhaev in rage as he just only heard what Makarov said.

“What? Oh my god, no. That’s totally a load of shit,” stuttered Makarov.

“You brought them here, shit-for-brains!” Zakhaev stood up from his chair and lifted his golden Desert Eagle. He aimed at Makarov and fired. The force of the bullet threw Makarov and his chair backwards, and the seat began spinning around. Jermol fired his weapon three times and his bullets struck Zakhaev in the chest. Zakhaev’s lifeless body crashed to the floor. Sid crouched next to Makarov.

“Are you okay, sir?” asked Sid.

“Get the fucking briefcase!” Makarov clutched his left shoulder which haemorrhaged blood.

Sid grabbed the briefcase and closed it. Jermol offered his hand out and Makarov grabbed it with his good hand. Jermol pulled him to his feet. Makarov pulled out his Tokarev from his waist jacket and let off a couple of shots into the enemies. Then the lights began to flicker and the man in black returned. This time he brought five other men in black with him. Price and Yuri watched in horror as the dark figures darted around the hall, slicing up soldiers like a crew of emo teppan-yaki chefs.

“Get him out of here!” roared an older, gaunt man with a huge mole named Abraham as he pushed Makarov back. Jermol guided Makarov towards the front doors.

“I’ll get the box.” Sid ran over to Zakhaev’s body and pried the box out of his cold, dead hands.

“Hurry up!” ordered Abraham. As Sid turned to obey, one of the dark figures appeared behind him. Abraham tried to shout for him. “Sid, look out!” But it was too late. Sid froze as he felt a firm hand wrap over his shoulder.

“Rest in peace,” the enigmatic figure whispered. Sid gasped as an icy cold blade slipped in between his rib cage. The figure grabbed the box from Sid’s hands. Abraham sprayed his weapon, but the figure performed a back flip and then dodged side to side. The bullets flew past the figure, and he slowly walked towards Abraham.

“Abraham, come on!” ordered Jermol.

Abraham looked at Sid's dead body. Glassy eyes stared towards the empty space where the blade had punctured out the front of his body. His mouth was turned down in a weepy frown. "Oh, fuck this shit." Abraham turned and ran for the front door.

Meanwhile, Soap and Gaz were running across the dust planes towards the fort. "Right up here!" ordered Soap as he began to climb the east wall. The walls surrounding the entire desert fortress had bits that stuck out in a symmetric pattern. This would make it easy for the men to climb. Soap threw his M14 over his shoulder by the strap and began to scale the wall. Gaz waited until Soap was a couple of metres up the wall before climbing up after him. Soap planted his hand at the top of the wall and pulled himself up onto the ramparts, then turned and offered his hand to Gaz. Once on top, the two men peered at the main hall. There were at least sixteen of Zakhaev's men, lined outside and waiting to shoot the first hostile to come through the doors. When the doors of the hall opened, Jermol came out with his arm wrapped around Makarov.

"Drop your weapons!" shouted a guard.

"No! We are not the enemy! The enemy is in there!" replied Jermol.

"Drop your weapons now!" roared the guard again. Gaz and Soap watched the enemies when suddenly Gaz caught a glimpse of a dark figure approaching the sixteen armed men.

"I won't ask you again," shouted the guard with a thick Israeli accent.

"Look out behind you!" warned Abraham. The guard refused to listen and he and his men raised their weapons. They were about to shoot when the dark figure slipped a blade into the one guard right at the back. The guard choked loudly and dropped to the floor, stone dead. The other men turned to see the dark figure. One of the men shouted the dead soldier's name, "Jehoshaphat!" and then began to open fire. The figure walked casually towards the guard dodging every round, swaggering its hips like a shadowy pimp, and then it plunged its blade into his neck. The other guards gasped, waving their hands in shock at their cheeks, and opened fire.

"Get him, men! He killed Terry!" With the guard still attached to the end of its blade, the figure darted side to side, collecting the bullets collecting in the corpse like gold teeth on a bus in Louisiana. The figure then slid another blade out of its other wrist. Now they were in trouble. They were fine before, but at this point, they were in for it. The figure released the body as the other guards reloaded and began to dart in between them slicing them to pieces. Within seconds, all sixteen guards were dead.

"Die, you freakish piece of turd shit!" Abraham fired off his gun as he walked towards the indeterminate figure. The nondescript entity gave a deathly smile and performed a front flip over Abraham's head. Abraham turned around quickly. The figure plunged one of its blades into Abraham's eye. The weapon cut through Abraham's pupil in slow motion and exited out the back of his head. Jermol went to fire when the figure spun around and slit open his throat. Blood gushed from Jermol's wound like the People's Friendship Fountain in Moscow.

Makarov fell to the ground and Jermol reached out for him, his hand flailing blindly. "Help me," gasped Jermol before rolling onto his back and dying. The figure put away one of its blades and cleaned the other on Jermol's sleeve. Makarov didn't dare shoot; he knew what would happen to him if he did. The figure grabbed Makarov by the waistcoat and pulled him to his feet.

"Rest in peace," whispered the figure. The figure pulled back its arm and was ready to plunge its blade into Makarov's chest. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, the figure's head exploded. Makarov fell back to the floor and looked around to find his saviour. He was severely disappointed when he saw Gaz and Soap running towards him. The barrel of Soap's M14 was still smoking. Gaz grabbed Makarov and pulled him to his feet, and then Soap bashed him across the head with his M14. Makarov fell to the ground once again.

"Where's Price?" Soap's throat was getting sore from all of the constant roaring. He stuck the end of the M14's barrel into Makarov's face. Makarov was too scared to answer. "Where is he?" Soap roared again, this time jabbing the barrel of his gun into Makarov's temple. Makarov remained silent, but the silence was soon broken as Soap heard shooting coming from the main building. The doors burst open again as Price and Yuri came walking out backwards, firing their weapons into the hall. Price reloaded his M4A1 as Yuri kept up the fire. Price and Yuri positioned themselves next to Soap and stopped the shooting when they found out no one was coming after them.

"What took you so long?" asked Price as he turned to Soap.

"You know me, always fashionably late," Soap joked.

"What the hell happened here?" asked Gaz as he readied his MP5.

"There were at least six of those guys" replied Yuri as he pointed his gun towards the dead dark figure.

“Eh, well, time to see who he is,” said Soap as he knelt next to the body. He laid his weapon on the ground and pulled back the hood. It was a man—there was no doubt about it—but the man was pale and had stickiness going down his face. His eyes were still glowing red, and he had three ancient symbols carved into the top of his head. The only thing that was expected was the raging bullet hole in the side of the man’s head.

“What the fuck is this shit?” cursed Gaz.

Makarov was slyly crawling away. “Oh no, you don’t,” said Price as he kicked Makarov over onto his back.

“Fuck you, you fucking shit!” cursed Makarov as he spat on Price’s boot. Price snarled and slammed his boot into Makarov’s face. Makarov groaned and clutched his face.

“Call in for EVAC. This sack of shit is coming back with us,” ordered Price. He then sneered down at Makarov. “This is my favourite pair of boots!”

“Yes, sir,” said Soap. He then spoke into his radio. “Walsh, this is Soap. We need EVAC. We are in the main fort. You are clear to land. Hostiles eliminated. The trouble’s over. Over.”

“Er, roger that. EVAC will be over in ten minutes. Over,” replied Walsh.

“Well, this couldn’t have gone better,” said Yuri sarcastically.

“Wait, where are Oleg and Griggs?” asked Gaz. Before anyone could answer, the doors to the main hall reopened and another dark figure came walking out. The men readied their weapons. The figure dragged two dead bodies behind it, one by each arm.

“Freeze!” ordered Price. The figure stopped and released the bodies.

“Shit, it’s Griggs and Oleg,” said Yuri as he studied the bodies.

“You bastard!” shouted Gaz as he began to open fire. The figure made no attempt to dodge. It just stood on the spot and looked Gaz in the eye. Gaz pumped a whole mag into the figure. Every bullet, give or take a few, hit the figure directly in the chest. The heavy impact jolted the figure backward. Once Gaz had emptied his mag and the only sound was his empty gun clicking, the figure crashed to the floor.

“That was easy.” Gaz sighed with relief.

“Yeah. Too easy,” said Yuri as Price approached the body to examine it. The body lay still as Price stood over it. He poked it with the end of his gun to make sure it was dead.

“He dead?” asked Soap.

“Gentlemen, in my thorough medical opinion, he’s dead.” Price kept staring at the body when he noticed something unusual. Bullets were beginning to pop out of its chest and roll onto the floor.

“What’s going on?” asked Yuri.

“I’m not too sure,” replied Price. “The bullets are beginning to pop out of its chest and roll onto the floor.” Then the figure’s eyes opened. This made Price jump. Their eerie red glow froze Price on the spot. The figure shambled to its feet in front of Price.

“Price, move out the way!” Soap raised his riffle,[2] but Price was in the line of fire and no one could get a good aim on the figure.

“For the glory of Discord and his people,” whispered the figure. Price wanted to shoot the figure but couldn’t. He felt like he was in some kind of hypnotic trance. Then the figure plunged its blade deep into Price’s stomach. Price gasped as the figure pushed the blade deeper and deeper. Price began to have flash images of a man with a short beard shouting out to millions. He had an image of a battle between the dark figures and the ponies. And probably the worst image he had was of Soap lying on the floor coughing blood. His stomach was gushing with blood from where it had been cut open.

“Price, no!” yelled Soap. Then the figure pushed Price off of the blade. Price crashed to the floor and the men opened fire. The figure jumped to the side and quickly scaled the fort walls. Once the figure was out of sight, Soap ran over to Price and skidded next to him. Soap threw his weapon to the floor and supported Price’s head in his hands.

“Price, look at me! You’re going to be okay.” Soap looked into Price’s eyes, cradling his head on his thigh. Price did not reply. He was still breathing, but was looking up to the sky. Walsh’s chopper flew overhead and descended into the fort grounds. Soap threw Price over his shoulder, and as Price coughed up even more rich blood, Soap ran over to the chopper. He

[2] After the fall of human civilization, technology had to be scrapped together by phonetics.

slid Price inside whilst Yuri and Gaz dragged Griggs and Oleg's bodies onto the chopper. Gaz and Yuri turned back to get Makarov when Gaz saw a bullet pop out of the figures head which Soap had shot. Gaz didn't take any chances. He walked straight up to the man and raised his weapon. The man quickly took note of this and jumped to his feet, kicked the gun from Gaz's hand and kicked him backwards. The man looked Gaz straight in the eye and approached.

"Gaz!" shouted Yuri as he looked up. Noticing that Gaz was not going to move, Yuri left Makarov and darted towards the man. The man was now inches away from stabbing Gaz. Yuri just managed to jump onto the man and bring him to the ground. The man growled as Yuri threw punch after punch into his face. Gaz was out of his momentary daze.

"Quick, get something to tie him up with!" ordered Yuri. Gaz scanned the area when he found a long piece of rope. He grabbed it and ran over to Yuri. Yuri stood over the man and rolled him onto his stomach. Gaz quickly tied the man's hand as Yuri removed the man's blade, rendering the man defenceless. Yuri and Gaz lifted the man to his feet as the man roared and began speaking in a language none of them recognised.

"Get in the fucking chopper already!" ordered Soap as he kept pressure on Price's wound. The wound had torn wider and Soap was uncertain he could keep it covered with both of his hands.

Jimmy frowned. "Hey! Quit the cussing, or I'll turn this chopper back around, so help me!"

Yuri looked around. Makarov was gone! "Let's go!" said Yuri as he climbed into the chopper and shut the doors.

Chapter Four.

Quick to the grave. The unknown man.

Tom and Logan walked through the cast iron gates of the cemetery. Night had fallen, and a thick mist drifted over the grounds, illuminated by the moonlight. Tom felt cold from the minute they entered the cemetery. He never liked such places. The thought creeped him out that so many dead were just laying six feet below him, with nothing but the dirt and a casket lid between him and them. He felt like he was mingling at a particularly dull party but couldn't find someone to talk with. Tom blew onto his hands and rubbed them together to keep warm. Logan led Tom past various graves. Tom caught a quick glimpse of each one as they passed, but there was one that made him stop. The gravestone read: "Here lays Jake Smith, soldier, father and husband. We will miss you". The grave looked like it hadn't been visited for a long time.

"Are you ok?" asked Logan.

Tom turned to him. "Yeah. I just used to know this guy."

"Oh, well, I'll give you a minute. You know where I'll be." Logan left Tom with the grave.

Tom pulled his sleeve over his hand and rubbed moss off of the crumbling gravestone. "Hey, Jake. Didn't think we would end up here, hey? Man, I remember back in school what me and you wanted to be. I wanted to be an actor, and you wanted to be a games designer." Tom felt a little foolish speaking aloud to his dead friend. He knew Jake could not hear him, but as anyone does, he felt the need to speak anyway. There is never an adequate last goodbye when someone has died.

"Well, those are forgotten dreams, hey? I tell you now, if I meet you up there, you're buying the drinks. I'll send my regards to your family. Rest in peace, man." Tom stood up from the grave. Forgotten dreams. Everyone had forgotten dreams nowadays. No one thought life would turn out like this, but this far into the war, everyone had accepted it. Tom looked around to see Logan standing by Shaun's headstone. Tom approached him, but didn't speak.

Logan said nothing as well, just lit cigarette after cigarette and stared at the grave. After about three or so, he looked from where he was at various other graves. "Pissin' shame, ain't it?" he said. "Ain't no grave for Daniel. Family plot."

Tom felt a strong sulk welling up inside of him. He thought about Daniel being buried next to his brother, James. "What about us, though? His friends mean nothing to him?" The cemetery was deadly quiet.

Meanwhile, at a remote location in Siberia known as Alpha Base 219, Avery Johnson and Peter Williams marched into the torture room. There they saw the figure who had been dressed in black in the fort in Yemen hanging from the ceiling by metal shackles. His head was bowed and blood dripped from his mouth. He had been stripped of his dark clothing and weapons and was left in his leather trousers. He had pale white skin with a yellowish tint, and scars that were carved into ancient symbols were placed across his chest. The figure had been identified as a man and had a bald head with another set of recondite symbols carved at the back. The man looked up at Peter and Johnson as they entered. He grinned widely and cheekily. "I was wondering when you might show up," he said in a gravelly voice. It was almost too gravelly to understand.

"Has he spoken yet?" asked Johnson as he turned to the torturer, Justin.

"He just did," Justin said.

“I mean has he said anything useful.”

"Not yet, but he will.” Justin sharpened a long, silver knife. Justin was a big, athletic man who had been trained in the “arts of torture” as he called it for many years. He had dirty blonde hair and his left eye was missing and was replaced by a pure white glass eye. Justin had been to quite a few car shows in his time.

Johnson approached the nameless man and stared deep into his eyes. He squinted, pursing his lips so that his moustache looked like it puffed up. "So, who the hell are you?"

"I am the bringer of death™." The unknown man grinned.

Johnson swatted the man with the back of his hand. "I will ask you again. What is your name?"

"I am your worst nightmare." The man laughed. Johnson punched the man in the jaw. The man's head jerked to the side and he spat out blood.

"What is your goddamn name?" roared Johnson.

The man smiled and licked his own blood off of his yellow and black teeth. "My name is Harbinger!"

Johnson looked over at Justin and Peter. “I’m talkin’ to a goddamn emo kid here.” He faced Harbinger again. “So, Mr. Harbinger, how about you tell me who you were working for and why were you at that fort?"

"You've got my name, and that's all you're getting!" Harbinger was truly fearless.

"Well we’ll see about that!"

“You will never see.”

“Oh, we’ll see all right!”

“No, you won’t.”

“Yes, we will!”

“Never.”

“Yes, we—“ Johnson ceased this turn in the conversation and looked to Justin. "Make this pansy-ass poser talk!" Johnson shook his head as he exited the room with Peter close behind.

"Who do you think he is?" asked Peter. Peter Williams let out a weary sigh and kept his eyes trained on his clipboard.

"I don't know, but it seems to be one war after another with this damn place." Johnson shook his head in annoyance. Couldn’t he have a day off?

Justin turned to Harbinger and grinned. "I'm going to enjoy this" he chuckled.

"You're not the only one." Harbinger let out a coy laugh. He showed no fear towards his torturer and kept his smile, even when Justin sharpened the twelve-centimetre-long blade before him. Sparks spat out off of the blade as Justin ran a metal shard up its length.

"Let's see if you keep that tone.” Justin placed the metal shard down onto a table and brought the blade close enough to Harbinger’s face so that the latter would be able to see his own reflection.

"Oh, believe me, I will." Harbinger was smug. He continued to appear smug even as Justin rammed the blade into Harbinger's ribs. Harbinger held in his emotions. He had been taught to do so and was very good. He must’ve gotten straight A’s in that course. He didn't even flinch. Justin twisted the blade, expecting a more entertaining reaction from his victim, but Harbinger just smiled.

"Is that the best you got?" Harbinger asked, grinning like a Cheshire cat. For some reason, he meowed.

Justin grunted in anger. His victim showing no pain made him angry. He didn’t graduate from torturer’s school at the Queen Mary University of London for this. He pulled the blade from Harbinger's ribs and chucked it into the table so it stood up with a twang. As he scanned his table of tools, nothing particularly useful popped out to him. Engineering was next door, so maybe they had something useful. He instead headed to the door. "I'll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

"I'll miss you every second you’re gone," joked Harbinger. His character had begun to unfold the more time he spent in the room. It was only a matter of time before he started talking, and he knew it! He had to get out of the shackles, and quick!

Soap waited anxiously outside of the medical office in the base’s temporary building. For the best part of an hour (you should’ve been there), doctors and nurses had been rushing back and forth like a relay race, working on keeping Price stable. *I*

should have saved him, thought Soap. *I should have shot the thing before it got Price. He could die because of me!* These thoughts ate away at Soap like a ravenous disease. If Price died, he would never get over it. Price was like a father to him. He always had his back. He always kept him safe. And now, he had failed him. Soap paced back and forth, hoping for someone to come out and tell him Price would make it.

He heard doors flinging open and saw a man with lots and lots of blood all over his smock rush over. He threw his arms around Soap, his grin easily as wide as his hug. “Great news!”

Soap felt elation lift off in his chest like a rocket from before NASA went bankrupt. He didn’t want to say anything. He wanted to let the moment of relief just wash over him, to cleanse him.

“It’s a boy!” said the doctor in a loud, cheerful voice. “Well, it’s a frog baby, but it is a boy!”

Soap frowned. “I’m not waiting on a pregnancy,” he said. It felt so obvious that it was pointless to say, but for whatever reason he couldn’t command the anger to admonish the mistaken medical professional. He remembered those moon landings had been faked. The doctor’s large grin turned into an equally large scowl as he walked away, patting Soap hard on the arm. Soap returned to scuffing a dark ring on the linoleum with his boots, but as the time wore on, that fabricated glimmer of hope began to fade.

He then heard the sound of a heart monitor giving off a deadly noise: the constant, drawn-out beep ringing from the tent. After the fall of human society at the hooves of the pony menace, they’d had to reverse-engineer technology from their vague notions of how it once worked, and so the heart monitors now beeped when a patient’s heart stopped. Soap charged into the room to see Price laying still. His heart rate shown on the monitor was a straight, green line. The doctor checked his watch and called the time. Price was dead.

Soap ran his hands over his head and felt the anger build up inside him. He pushed past the doctors and nurses and grabbed Price's body. "Wake up, ye bastard!" roared Soap as he shook Price. Manly tears rolled down his stubbly beard. A doctor tried to pull him away. Soap was caught in the moment of anger. He turned and punched the doctor in the face. The force sent the doctor stumbling backwards into a table of bric-a-brac and to the floor unconscious. All the objects on the table and counter rained down on him, including small cups of pills, a few stethoscopes and hypodermic needles, and a series of rubber mallets used for testing one’s reflexes by hitting the knees. One of the nurses ran out of the room and returned shortly with three soldiers. Two of the soldiers grabbed Soap's arms whilst the third wrapped his hand around Soap's neck. They pulled Soap from the tent. He kicked and shouted and tried to wiggle out of their grip, but it was no use. He couldn't take them all on. He tried to calm down before they made him. When the soldiers thought he was calm enough, they let him go. Soap ripped his arm away as the last soldier released him. Tears swelled up in his eyes as he pushed past more soldiers standing by. He rubbed his eyes with his fists and sobbed openly as he headed for the main gate of the base.

Justin re-entered the room with a blow torch. "I know it's not much, but I brought it just for you," explained Justin as he examined his borrowed tool.

"Give me your best shot." Harbinger chortled.

"Will do." Justin lit up the blow torch. “Gonna cook me some Harbinger like a fresh hamburger.” The torch gave off a roar of sound and an immense heat. Harbinger showed a flicker of anxiety when he sucked on his lips. Justin hadn’t noticed it, but he did notice Harbinger's knife wound had healed.

"Some metabolism ya got, Hamburger. Let's see how quickly this heals, too." Justin pressed the nozzle of the blowtorch into Harbinger's ribs. Harbinger wailed in pain. He screamed louder and louder as the torch burned through his skin and muscle. His flesh seared and crackled until it smelled of warm spam. Justin pulled the torch away after about thirty seconds of twisting and pushing. "Wow that really hurt you, hey." He let out a chuckle.

"I'm going to rip your head from your shoulders and cram it up your butt when I get out of here! And then everyone will call you head-butt!" Harbinger roared in anger and rattled his chains.

"Really? That reminds me; someone borrowed all my sodomy gear." Justin pushed the blowtorch onto Harbinger's chest and traced a thick circle of burns around his left nipple. Harbinger screamed again.

Peter and Johnson were long out of scream range as they entered Johnson's office. Johnson sat behind his desk in a big leather chair which let out a short floompf of wind and squeaked as he adjusted his posterior into the most comfortable position. "Take a seat, they’re all good," offered Johnson.

Peter sat at the other side of the desk on a wooden chair. It was about as comfortable as wooden chairs have ever been, but he didn’t complain. Johnson reached down and opened the third drawer to his desk. He smiled as he saw a bottle of aging whiskey staring back at him on top of a pile of other bottles of ethnic alcohol. Johnson pulled the bottle from the desk along with two small glasses. Johnson poured one glass of whisky. "Do you want some?" asked Johnson.

"Tsk. No, thank you, I don't drink whisky," replied Peter. Johnson screwed the top back onto the bottle and took a sip from the glass. Peter leaned forward, which was about as comfortable as sitting back. "Johnson, I need to talk about the cure."

"Don't worry, we are doing everything we can," Johnson assured him.

"Yeah, but you see, it's been a year now, and there've been no signs of improvement. You said we would have a cure by now. Soldiers could be going rogue left and right." Peter folded his hands and cocked his head. There was a hint of him being perturbed in spite of his authoritative nature.

"Yes, but with all due respect, sir, we have other things to worry about. I mean, we've not heard boo from the Equestrians since the New York crisis, and we could possibly have another war on our hands. I mean, I hate to say this, but from my perspective, some cure we can't get a hold of is the least of my worries. Now I know you're concerned about your son. He was a…a capable soldier and showed some promise as a leader of the Human Resistance, but every soldier has his time." Johnson took another sip of whisky.

Peter was begging to lose his temper. His head turned from side to side to avoid eye contact. "With all due respect, Sergeant Major Johnson, my family is the rightful leader of this country and I say this is our number one concern!" He pounded the desk with his finger. "So call your boys in research and development and get them to find a cure!"

Johnson didn't take kindly to being told what to do. He was used to exercising his authority over the military, and not to sweat the higher ups, but he knew he couldn't argue with Peter. He reached for the phone on his desk and dialled the number of the lab. The phone rang four times before being picked up.

"Hello?" A strong Scottish accent came through the phone.

"Andrew, is that you?" asked Johnson

"Yes, sir," replied Andrew in the thick Scottish accent.

"How is the cure coming along for the pony obedience toxin?" Johnson asked.

"Aye, I already told ye, cap'n, as ye well ken. The only way te make a cure for P.O.T. is to find the substance they injected him with and reverse its effects." explained Andrew.

"Thank you, Andrew. That is all."

"Aye! Thank ye kindly, sir," said Andrew as he put down the phone.

"Well, I hope that phone call clears everything up for you, Mr. Williams, sir. As you just heard, the only way to find a cure is to get the substance from the ponies. And, well, they have disappeared, so there is no possible way of getting it. I'm sorry. Here, why not have a drink? Booze solves everything." Johnson started to unscrew the whisky again.

Peter fidgeted with his clipboard and let out a growl of a sigh. "I told you I don't want your drink." He stood and headed for the door. When he grasped the knob, he turned his tired gaze upon Avery. "Oh, and Johnson, if we don't have a cure before the end of this year, then you're fired." He departed from the room and slammed the door.

Johnson just stared for a few moments with nothing to say. His mouth parted a little, and then he squinted and shook his head. "Aw, man, that can't be right!"

Peter Williams did not return to his office. Instead he returned to a darkened bedroom. He clicked on the light and looked at the bed, which he then approached to sit at the bedside of his son. Daniel lay still and was slowly breathing in and out, hooked up to a series of machines and medical paraphernalia. Hopeless tears rolled down Peter's face as he watched his son. "I'm sorry, son. It looks like I can't get a cure for you. The doctors here at St. Schaivo's say if you don't wake up by the end of the year, they will have to pull the plug. But I won't give up. I will go to the ends of this Earth. I'll find this blasted Equestria itself if I have to. I love you, son." Peter kissed Daniel's forehead and slowly left the room. Daniel lay as deathly still as ever, but deep inside his subconscious, he was very much alive.

Chapter Five.

Ganzfeld logic. Arguing with yourself.

Awaking in an uncomfortable hospital bed, sweat ran down Daniel's chest and face. He could feel the blood pumping around his head and with every pump came a shot of pain. He blinked. Where was he? One minute, he was strapped to a chair with Rainbow Dash standing in front of him, and the next he was here. He tried to move his body. Nothing happened. It was like he had no control over himself. He just lay there like a limp banana peel. He began to panic.

"H...hel...p." Daniel gasped as he desperately tried to call out. He was really panicking now. He tried to move his body again, but still nothing happened. Tears began to build up in his eyes. What if he would never be able to move his own body again? These thoughts did not help the situation. Daniel could only move his head. He turned it from the left to right. He was searching for clues to where he was. *Maybe I'm in a pony hospital. Maybe they drugged me,* thought Daniel. Then he remembered being injected with something. *Rainbow Dash! That bitch! She did this to me!*

"Nobody's coming to help us, Danny boy," said a young, Scots-Welsh voice. Daniel groaned and shut his eyes. He could hear the voice of his younger self as clear as day. It sounded weird to him, the way one's voice never sounds right when played from a recording. It also sounded strange because the tone was sneering and simpering at the same time. How could he be so hostile to himself? What was most disarming of all about the voice was how close it sounded. After Daniel had adopted a Russian accent, he never thought he'd hear himself speaking in his old voice again, but there it was. If he focused too long on the voice of his inner child, he could picture his own voice from way back then, and then his whole body standing in the room along with him. He thought he could see his younger self standing just there in the corner where his vision was getting blurry.

"You betrayed the human race for us. They're going to just let you die. We should be dead." The younger Daniel scuffed his feet against the floor and pouted. He couldn't even make eye contact with himself.

Daniel tried to ignore the phantom image of his self and noticed a remote in his hand. It looked like one of the remotes patients in hospitals have when they need to call a nurse for help. Daniel tried to push his thumb down, but like his body, it did not move.

"And our own best friend pulled the trigger. You remember the bullet, don't you? You could feel it whirring like a drill through your bone, and lodging itself in our flesh. It burnt like the sun and felt like a wrecking ball expanding inside of us!"

Come on, Daniel, you can do this, he thought. He took a deep breath and put all his strength into it. He could feel the strain on his whole body. Pain jolted out of his thumb like lightning passing through his whole body. Still nothing happened.

"You can't do it. Just like you couldn't stop yourself from being used by those bastards. You couldn't stop Rainbow Dash from molesting us. You couldn't stop the ponies from attacking that city."

Damn it, come on, you fool, thought Daniel. His thoughts were becoming more and angrier. Daniel took three deep breaths and tried once again. The strain of his muscles brought discomfort to Daniel, but he didn't give up. He kept pushing and pushing. It was the only thing he could do.

"You are a fool. Did you think we liked ponies? I hated ponies. I hated Becky always talking about horseback riding. Ponies are dumb. Ponies are for girls. Ponies are gay."

The blood pumping around his head became faster and faster and brought more pain. He knew he had to push. It was the most he could do for the longest time.

"Gaaaayyyy."

Daniel fought through the pain and kept straining himself.

"Faaaagguhhht."

Then a miracle happened! His thumb pushed down just another to give off a noise. Daniel waited patiently and anxiously. Nothing happened for a couple of minutes. Daniel began to think it was a waste of time. Then a tall blonde woman entered the room. She was wearing a nurse outfit and had a name tag which read "Clemets". His younger visage was nowhere to be seen. Daniel thought she was beautiful. There was no way she was working with the ponies. He tried to ask for help, but nothing came out. Clemets leant over the bed and kissed Daniel on the lips. Then she pulled away and leant down near his ear.

"Don't give up," she whispered softly. Then she turned away and exited the room.

Daniel gasped as he suddenly sat up. He looked down at his arms and tried moving them. They moved almost instantly. Daniel let out a breath of relief, and then looked down towards his legs. He tried to wiggle his big toe. After three attempts he managed it. Daniel was overwhelmed with excitement. He could move! He swung himself around and placed his feet on the cold marble floor of the hospital room. He pushed himself off of the bed onto his feet. A pain went shooting down the left side of his ribcage. He fell to his knees and clutched his side until the pain stopped. He scrambled back onto his feet and took a moment to regain his balance. Then he staggered over to the door leading into the corridor.

Daniel was about to exit the room when the door slammed shut. The loud bang made him jump. *Must be the wind,* Daniel thought as he reached out for the door handle. He gripped it tightly and pulled. The door did not move; it was as sturdy as a rock. He pulled again, putting more force into it this time. Still nothing happened. Daniel gritted his teeth and tried once more. He pulled as hard as he could. The door handle came off, and he fell onto his back. The hard linoleum smacked against his spine. The door remained as it was only this time without a handle. Daniel pulled himself back onto his feet.

"Damn. Hey, is anyone there?" called Daniel. He was amazed how his voice had returned to him so quickly, although there was still a throaty layer to it. "Hey, anyone? I need help! I'm locked in my room!"

There was no reply. “Damn it,” Daniel cursed under his breath. He grabbed the help button on the remote. He pressed it and waited for at least a minute. No one came. Daniel pressed it again and again and again and again and again and then one more time. Still nothing happened. No one was coming. Daniel dropped the button. For the first time, he noticed there was a second door at the other side of the room. Daniel staggered for it. When he reached it, he yanked the door open. The door came off of its hinges.

"Shit!" Daniel laid the door on the floor. He could now see that behind the door was a dirty bathroom. There was one toilet which was covered in blood and stains which Daniel could not identify. Neither did he want to, although he was certain his friend, Collin “Irish” Dwell could have. Damn, it’d been so long since he’d seen Irish. As of that moment, Daniel still had no idea Irish had been injured just before the failed liberation of New York City had commenced. The walls of the private bathroom were covered in dirty yellow wallpaper. There was a sink with a mirror above it. The mirror was cracked but still serviceable.

Daniel staggered over to the sink and placed his hands on its brim to support himself. Looking up at the mirror, his reflection stared back at him. Daniel could see bruises and cuts scattered across his face. His beard had grown thick and untidy. There was also a bloodstained bandage wrapped around his head. He reached up and grabbed the bandage, and when he pulled it off, it revealed an X-shaped scar on the left side of his forehead. Daniel reached up and felt the scar. It gave under the pressure of his finger, but he couldn’t describe the sensation. It felt numb. Daniel rubbed the scar and suddenly felt the urge to be sick. He bowed his head over the sink and heaved. Vomit rocketed against the roof of his mouth, then out into the sink. Blood was mixed in with the vomit.

Something coloured gold was poking out of the bloody excretion. Daniel wiped his mouth with his hand before reaching for the object. He couldn't make out what it was. He held it under the tap and ran the water over it, washing the blood off and down the sink. He could now make out what the object was. It was a bullet. The end had been blunted and there was no shell in the case.

Daniel was confused. **Then suddenly!** The ground, walls and ceiling shook violently. Daniel was thrown back and forth as if between two guys at baseball practice. He could hear a war siren going off. Daniel gripped onto the sink for support and turned his head to see a window placed on the far wall. He had not noticed it when he came in. He pushed himself away from the sink and struggled towards the window. He rested his arms on the frame and peered out. He recognized Moscow, but it wasn't like the Moscow he knew. No, the buildings were on fire. That seemed different. Enemy pegasi flew through the air and took down Soviet jet fighters. On the streets he could see men struggling to push back wave after wave of pony infantry. Daniel watched as hundreds of soldiers were being slaughtered. Then a pegasus flew over the top of the hospital building and dropped a bomb. The bomb crashed down through the ceiling and landed on Daniel's bed.

"Oh, shit!" shouted Daniel as the bomb went off. The blast threw him through the window and he began to fall nineteen stories. The wind resistance blew hard against his undignified hospital gown as he fell faster and faster. Daniel closed his eyes as he plummeted closer toward the ground. Then he felt something grab his shoulder. Daniel opened his eyes as he was pulled to the side and dragged through the air. He could see he was being dragged by a dragon. The terrible beast belched forth a noxious fireball in some errant direction. Daniel tried to struggle free in spite of the danger of falling, but he noticed the dragon was carrying him towards an apartment building. Daniel kicked and struggled in frustration, and then the dragon released him.

Daniel was flung forward through the air, and then he smashed through another window. This one belonged to room 219 of the Red Star Hotel. He rolled along the deep, red carpet and collided into a coffee table and lay still. His back was now aching and his arm felt as if it was broken. Daniel rolled onto his back, gasping for air. When it seemed he had gotten all the breath he would get back, he turned over onto his stomach and pushed himself up.

He could hear the sound of gunfire in hallway. Daniel staggered over into the kitchen and quickly rummaged through the drawers. He managed to find a slightly rusted but still sharp kitchen knife. Daniel readied the knife as he waited behind the front door of the apartment. He heard heavy footsteps in the hallway growing louder and louder. Sweat rolled down his forehead as the footsteps grew nearer, and then abruptly stopped.

He could see a shadow peeking from under the crack of the door. The knob of the door rattled then slowly turned. Daniel kept his posture as still as he could, damning his wounds for trying to betray him. The door swung open, but still he waited for whoever could be behind that door to enter the apartment. The barrel of a grease gun emerged from behind the door. Daniel tightened his grip on the knife handle, and as his presumed enemy entered the room, Daniel lashed out at him. Halfway through his lunge, Daniel could see it was Shaun, but he couldn't stop himself in mid-lunge. Shaun managed to spot Daniel at the last second. He performed a forward roll and slammed Daniel into the wall.

The two of them stopped and looked at one another. Shaun was wearing the standard green uniform with a green helmet. He carried two duffel bags on his back: One carried his supplies, and the other carried supplies for Daniel.

"Hey, Dan." Shaun was grinning. Daniel couldn't believe what he was seeing. Shaun Moulder was one of his subordinate soldiers who had been inducted into Delta Squad about three years ago when their plane had been attacked and everyone else was killed. Not even eighteen back then, Shaun had been a member of his squad up until getting killed in the battle of Hainan a year ago. How he could be standing in front of him now, Daniel would never understand.

Daniel pulled the knife out from the wall. "Shaun? Is...is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me," Shaun said.

"How? I...I mean, you're...you're…" Daniel stuttered. He was expecting Shaun to finish his thought for him.

"Dead?" Yeah, that was it.

"Yeah, exactly." Daniel kept staring at Shaun as if there was something wrong with what he was seeing. "How is this even possible?"

"I'll explain later, but right now, we got to get moving, so here." Shaun threw one of the duffel bags to Daniel.

Daniel caught it, but just held it for a moment. He wasn't sure he liked waiting around for Shaun's explanation. He had seen a lot of strange things during this war with the Equestrians. He had seen colourful ponies that talked and flew. He'd seen their genetic mutations of their own kind and the brutal evisceration of countless people. He'd even caught the bizarre sight of countless ponies hoisting a sphere of ocean into the air and crashing it down upon an urban gauntlet. And he could think of people he would like to see alive again: His brother, James. A woman named Deidre who lived in a cabin with her husband and had been killed for protecting him. A man named Sam Fisher and his son, J-Rod. To be frank, Shaun had never been Daniel's closest companion, and in truth, he'd kind of gotten on his nerves, but in the end, he still considered him to be a member of Delta Squad. And, finally, Daniel had a sneaking suspicion that he'd returned from the grave, as he thought about Tom shooting him in the head. He wasn't one to suspect Shaun's motivations.

Daniel rested the duffel bag on the floor before opening it to peer inside. There was a pair of green combat trousers, a pair of black boots, a green army jacket with sergeant stripes on the side and Daniel's communist t-shirt. There was another pocket on the side of the duffel bag which he opened that to see a Thompson with three spare magazines and a Colt 1911 .45 pistol with two spare magazines. All five of the magazines were in splendid condition.

"Get dressed; we got to get out of here quick," instructed Shaun in his same old nasally tone. He stepped back into the hallway to keep watch. Daniel slipped off the hospital gown and into the fatigues provided. Once they were both ready, the armed men made their way down the corridor. Shaun stopped at the lift. "The power is still on. We can take the lift, or we can take the stairs. It's up to you."

Daniel thought for a moment. The elevator just reeked of a trap, and having fought off his recent immobilization, he was desperate to exercise his legs. "I think its best we take the stairs, just in case."

Shaun nodded and opened the stairwell. The two of them charged down at a steady pace. They could hear the war raging on outside, but so far there didn't seem to be any sign of inhabitants within the building. Once they reached the ground floor, they opened the door into the corridor with caution. They could see a group of fifteen ponies waiting for the lift. Shaun and Daniel crouched down and rolled behind the check-in counter.

"Okay, there's possibly eleven to eighteen of them. We can take them out or wait for them to pass," whispered Shaun. Daniel thought back to his prior attempts at stealth. The ponies had eventually caught up with them in the jungle and destroyed the cabin they'd hid out in. Pinkie Pie had alerted everyone in the vicinity to his position when he'd been on his involuntary mission to sabotage New York City. He didn't like his track record, but caution seemed especially prudent in his current situation.

"We will wait for them to pass," replied Daniel in a whisper. Shaun nodded. They waited for a couple of seconds before they heard a ding. The lift was here and they could hear the ponies march into it. Once they heard the sound of closing doors, the two of them made their way for the front entrance. The lobby was smartly decorated and well-looked-after, but the scenery soon changed as the men walked outside onto the street. Dead soldiers and ponies littered the black tar, painting the road a gruesome red. Cars and buildings were alight with flame, spewing forth foul-smelling smog.

"What's going on?" asked Daniel.

"The ponies have attacked. Come on, we got to keep moving."

The two of them charged across the street into an alleyway. Shaun made sure the alleyway was secure before going down on one knee and pulling out a map. He placed his weapon on the ground and opened the map up as Daniel crouched down next to him. The map showed Moscow and all of its alleys, building, streets, homes and bars.

"Okay, we are here on Lenin Lane, and we need to get here outside the Ivory Inn. That's where the EVAC is," explained Shaun as he pointed out the various locations.

"Well, how about we cut through Communist Street? It will cut down on at least ten minutes," suggested Daniel.

"Yeah, but there is one problem. When I passed Communist Street, it was like a blood bath. For every soldier or pony who fell, ten more replaced them. My guess is that they are still fighting over there."

"Well, what time does EVAC leave?" asked Daniel.

Shaun pulled back his left sleeve revealing a watch with a black leather strap. "It leaves in twelve minutes." He sighed and shook his head.

"Well, then I think you know we have no choice. Communist Street it is!" ordered Daniel.

"Okay, but if I get shot, I'm blaming you." Shaun folded up the map and slipped it into his pocket. Daniel wasn't sure the joke sat well with him. He already blamed himself for Shaun's death in Hainan. The two of them climbed to their feet and made their way out of the alley. Six minutes later, the pair of them was just around the corner from Communist Street. They could hear the shots, screams and explosions two streets away, but now the sounds were almost deafening.

"Are you ready?" asked Shaun as they stopped on the corner of Communist Street.

"Ready when you are," replied Daniel. Shaun nodded again.

"Here goes nothing!" said Shaun as he ran out into the street. Daniel followed close behind him. The street no longer looked like a street. There were so many bodies that Shaun and Daniel were jumping every five seconds to avoid them. The street had been ground into something resembling cookie crumb ice cream topping by tank and mortar fire. A Humvee was crashed into a lamppost which had fallen on top of it. Hundreds of soldiers lined up at Shaun and Daniel's end of the street, whilst thousands of ponies lined up at the opposite end. Shaun and Daniel charged towards the enemy with all the other soldiers. Explosions went off around Daniel. Dust and dirt flew into his face. The explosions were so loud it nearly made his ears bleed. Shaun dived forward into a hole in the street which had been made by a mortar. Daniel followed him in.

"What are we doing?" screamed Daniel over all the noise. Shaun ignored him. Instead he aimed his gun and fired several shots. Daniel watched as Shaun hit three ponies not even nineteen yards away from them.

More ponies were mounted on a heavy machine gun hidden behind sand bags, but Daniel felt his stomach flip over itself to see who was leading them. A familiar purple unicorn, Twilight Sparkle herself, was barking out orders at her minions. It couldn't be her. He and Tom had killed her at least two years ago, by his count. "Do as I say!" she was shouting. "But do it better! And do it before I even have to tell you to do it!" It had to be her.

Shaun spoke as he picked off more ponies with his weapon. "Their leader, Twinkle Sprinkle. She's back."

Twilight trotted off to direct more of her soldiers. Once Shaun was certain the ponies were dead, he climbed to his feet. "Come on!" he yelled as he charged forward. Daniel followed him closely. Shaun ran towards the enemy, firing an entire magazine. There was a tank parked just up in front of them, and there were four soldiers hidden behind it. The tank was firing towards the main lines of the ponies. Shaun ran and slid behind the tank. Daniel followed.

"Who's in charge?" asked Shaun.

"I am," said one of the soldiers. "Lieutenant Patrick Rears."

"Okay, Lieutenant, I need you to tell the tank to follow us," ordered Shaun.

Patrick let out a laugh and resumed shooting. "Sorry, no can do. Plus I think I outrank you there."

Daniel spoke up. "You listen here. I am Daniel Williams, and I demand you to follow our orders!"

"Shit, why didn't you say so? I'll tell them right now." Patrick stood at attention and saluted before climbing onto the tank and opening the hatch. Another soldier poked his head out of the tank. "I need you to follow these two men!" Pat pointed towards Daniel and Shaun.

"Da, sir!" replied the soldier as he closed the tank hatch.

"There you go!" shouted Patrick.

"Thank you. Now let's move!" Shaun ran out from the tank and darted down the street. Daniel, Patrick and the remaining three soldiers followed him. The tank followed alongside, providing some semblance of cover. The tank fired shell after shell at the ponies. Within three to five minutes, the street had been cleared.

"Good job," said Daniel once the noise had died down enough for him to be heard.

"Thank you, sir, and good luck." Patrick saluted. Daniel nodded then he and Shaun continued on towards the EVAC. The two of them just managed to reach the EVAC zone, but by then, the helicopter had already lifted off from the ground.

"Hey, down here!" yelled Daniel and Shaun as they waved their hands above their heads. The helicopter pilot and passengers noticed them, but did nothing. The helicopter had seven men and five wounded on board. It wasn't going to turn around for just two people.

"Shit!" cursed Daniel.

"Er, Dan, I don't think EVAC is the worst of our problems." Shaun pointed towards the next street over, Gorbachev Avenue. Daniel looked to see a whole army of ponies marching through the street. This pony platoon had not noticed them; not yet anyway. Twilight Sparkle had returned, yelling out perfunctory orders, most of which the ponies were already doing. Shaun and Daniel scanned for a good vantage point, and Daniel noticed a Humvee parked on the pavement. He ran over to it and found three dead soldiers inside: One in the driver's seat, one in the passenger seat, and one in the back seat. None of them had taken the time to remove the keys from the ignition before expiring.

"Over here!" called Daniel.

Shaun turned to see the Humvee and quickly made his way for it. "Good find," he said as he ran around to the driver's side. Daniel and Shaun pulled the bodies from the front seats, threw them onto the road and climbed in. The windshield was bloody with five bullet holes in it. Shaun raised his scrawny leg up over the dash and kicked the window out of its frame (it took him a few tries) so that now they had a clear view. Shaun put the Humvee in reverse and pushed up his thick glasses on his grimy nose. The two of them kept their eyes on approaching pony infantry. That's when they saw the EVAC chopper being shot down.

“Trot closer!” Twilight Sparkle squealed. “I wanna feel the splash damage!” The powerful unicorn grabbed a Panzerfaust from a member of the advancing Equestrians and fired it. The rocket struck the helicopter in the tail router, forcing it to spin out of control and crash into a nearby building in a huge, awesome explosion.

It didn’t take long for Twilight’s squadron of ponies to turn their fire upon Shaun and Daniel’s Humvee. "Get on the gun!" roared Shaun as he reversed the Humvee. Daniel scowled at the idea of Shaun, the most junior member of the Delta Squad, giving him orders. Even when Becky, Jimmy and, hell, even Oleg had joined, Shaun was still the youngest and most inexperienced member of the group. Daniel climbed into the back and stood up. He slipped through the hole in the roof and grabbed the gun. He cocked it and began to fire as Shaun sped off. Shaun drove onto the Great Trotsky Highway which led from Moscow to Kiev in the Ukraine.

When the ponies disappeared in the rear-view mirror, Daniel climbed back into the front seat. "Where are we heading?" he asked.

"To Ukraine. There is an army base there. They can help and send reinforcements," replied Shaun as he pushed the Humvee up into the eighty-eight miles-per-hour range. “Boy, it sure was handy when they finally conceded to Russian rule.”

"I think it is about time you tell me what the hell is going on," said Daniel.

"Well, we are being attacked by the ponies, so we are going to get reinforcements. I thought it was pretty straight forward." Shaun let out a cocky, obnoxious laugh.

"No, smartass. I mean tell me why the hell I woke up in the hospital. Why was I paralysed until a nurse kissed me? Oh, and the big money grabber: Why the fuck you are alive!"

"Well, you see, you're in a k--" Shaun was cut off mid-sentence as a Pegasus flew overhead and dropped a bomb in front of the Humvee. The explosion sent the Humvee into a front flip forwards and land upside down. The war machine skidded along the road upside-down and stopped when it slammed into a barrier. Daniel and Shaun lay unconscious inside. Twilight Sparkle let out a victorious laugh as she leapt off the backs of her soldiers and landed on the pavement with a loud clop.

Daniel wasn’t sure yet what had him trapped other than the wrenching sensation in his gut that made him want to throw up. He thought he was seeing double when his eyes focused on a pair of purple legs approaching. He fidgeted with his seatbelt, stupidly trying to wrench it free rather than depress the button. He could hear her hoof steps getting closer and closer. When he looked up, the figure of his under-aged self stooped over to peer through the windscreen of the felled vehicle. Then the younger-

aged Daniel shook his head disparagingly. “How can one man possibly hope to fight an army of thousands of ponies? It just doesn’t add up.”

Chapter Six.

The rainbow’s frown. Delegating targets.

Ponyville, Equestria.
6:30pm, local time.

Rainbow Dash stared out of her bedroom window, but all she saw were the clouds passing her by. Her entire house was made of solid clouds and situated high in the sky, so it was the only view she had, most days. Negative emotions brooded inside of her until she had to set her body into motion. It took some doing; she’d put on a bit of weight in the months that had passed since her return. She traipsed outside, trotting aboard a lawn of fluffy white cloud as though it were a solid object beneath her hooves. She ripped off a hunk as though splitting a cotton swap, and pushed with her wings to ride the nimbus to the town below. A mixture of anger and jealousy built up inside her as she watched her sister, Queen Luna, strutting around underneath with two armed guards. It had been a year since Rainbow Dash's title was taken from her, and every day for that year she had spent being jealous and plotting against her sister. *Once we invade then I will have my chance,* the wily pegasus thought. She lost herself in her angered emotions. *I could say she was shot by a human. Then I would have to be crowned Queen again. And to think I gave up my hooves for these vile human arms.* She examined the “monstrosities” as she called them: Pinkie Pie had granted her and many of the other ponies, on and off throughout their missions, hideous protuberances similar to a dragon’s claws, a diamond dog’s paws, or worst of all, a human’s fingers. *When I am Kaiser I will give everypony their hooves again. Then we won't need these things!*

Rainbow Dash's thoughts were broken by the sound of loud whizzing and banging nearby. Rainbow Dash pried her head off of her cloudy pillow to see Pinkie Pie wearing a grey army uniform and hovering on a crazy contraption similar to the one she had fled from New York City with. It resembled a candy cane-coloured bicycle with a set of propellers on top.

"What is it?" Rainbow Dash’s voice was a growl, and she sank herself down towards the ground. Pinkie Pie slowed her pedalling to follow.

"The Cutie Mark Crusaders have finished their training! Queen Luna is gathering the leaders. We get to return to Earth!" Pinkie Pie sure sounded excited about returning to the endless fray of subjugating humans and doing battle with them.

"Earth. That shithole." Rainbow barely mustered a voice above her own breath.

"Queen Luna requests you immediately!” Pinkie squeaked.

"Geez, alright already. I'm going!" Rainbow Dash stomped her cloud into smithereens of tiny tufts, and Pinkie Pie disembarked her whimsical vehicle to leave it at the side of the road. The two of them walked down the colourful cobblestone path and past the many different-sized houses. Each house had a swastika flag hanging from the roof to show the support they had towards the armies. The two of them drew near to Ponyville’s town hall and stopped outside the door.

"Cheer up, Rainbow Dash! Once Luna sees what it's like out there, she’ll be begging for you to take back your title!" Pinkie Pie gave Rainbow Dash a great, big smile.

"Buck off, Pinkie." Rainbow Dash entered town hall which had been set up into a conference room. The room had a long, black table in the middle with twenty leather chairs surrounding it. At the end of the table were two televisions for making satellite video calls, like the kind you see in public schools more concerned with fancy gadgetry than in teaching children, or in big office buildings designed to feign working and milk the public dollar with insulting advertising and substandard products.

Rainbow Dash took note of who was at the table. At the opposite chair, farthest away from the televisions, sat Queen Luna. Next to her on the right hoof side was Prince Blueblood who was proud of his own prim and proper posture, and to the left of Luna was an empty seat. Rainbow Dash assumed it was her seat and she went to sit down.

Luna stopped Rainbow before she could sit down. "I’M SORRY SISTER, BUT THAT ISN’T YOUR SEAT,” she said, using the traditional Royal Canterlot Voice™.

"Well, where do I sit?" asked Rainbow Dash.

“ANYWHERE ELSE YOU LIKE! THE CHOICE IS YOURS.” Luna swept her hoof over the many empty seats surrounding the table. Rainbow shuffled along the floor until she was three seats away from Luna. Then she sat down and muttered her angry thoughts. Pinkie went to join Rainbow Dash when she was stopped. "PINKIE PIE, THOU SITS HERE.” Luna pointed to the seat to the left of her which she had just denied Rainbow. Pinkie bowed and sat down.

"What, how is that fair? She isn't even royal blood, eh!" protested Rainbow Dash.

“YES, BUT SHE HAS DONE MORE FOR US THAN YOU, SO SHE HAS A HIGHER HONOUR AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED,” snarled Luna, who was getting sick of Rainbow Dash’s protesting.

The door opened again, and this time Kaiser Celestia strutted inside, followed by two guards and three other ponies. When Celestia sat down, the other three ponies sat across from her. "And who are these?" grunted Rainbow Dash.

Celestia stared at her with what looked like intolerance glimmering in her eyes. "These are the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Maybe if you weren't too busy being jealous of your sister, you would know that much.”

Though these were clearly adult ponies, ready for battle to savage the human race and enact other nefarious deeds yet to be transcribed in these historical reports, they were still brimming with sickly, youthful exuberance, like an off-brand soda that’s gone flat and been spilt all over the parking lot of the department store from whence it had been bought. The ponies introduced themselves as though they’d spent a lot of time practicing giving speeches and talking about themselves and how wonderful they were.

The buttermilk-yellow pony had masculine features (by pony standards) and long, floofy hair like neon blood. She wore a large, dark pink bow in her hair, and had the cutie mark of what appeared to be a hammer with a gun on one side of the hammerhead. When she spoke, she had a very strong hayseed accent. “I’m Apple Blood! I mean, Apple Bloom! I’m the Cutie Mark Crustacean—I mean, Crusader—demolitions expert! I’ll totally get revenge for what happened to my siblings. Oh, but I suppose I’ll have to get venge first. And then I’ll *re*venge Applejack’s and Big Mac’s deaths, and then we can take over their slave labour empire in the Americas!”

The next pony was so white she could get lost in a snowstorm. She was so white she could get a sunburn standing in front of the television. She was so white she made marshmallows look robust and tan. She was so white that she couldn’t dance, and that was just perfect because she acted as though she treasured her vain little voice which sounded something like a tea kettle with a bad cold. She had a curly mane of pink and mulberry, and a cutie mark that looked like a megaphone with a semi-automatic riffle sticking out of its bell. “Ahem. I would also like revenge, because in life, you just can’t keep going around cutting corners. Because I learned something that day my older sister was slain in cold blood on the island of Hainan, which is roughly the size of Belgium and contains three prefectures. Um, contained. I am the Cutie Mark Crusader propaganda officer, and I believe it should be spelt c-u-t-e-y because you change around fewer letters from the root word, ‘cute’. Scootaloo? I believe it’s your turn now.”

“Huh?” The third pony, Scootaloo, had spaced out. She was kind of pale orange, like a tangerine that spent its time in the basement, and she had a dull magenta mane that stuck out in odd directions as if to escape her scalp. She also had a touch of the tomboy to her. “Oh, right. Okay. Um. My name’s Scootaloo, and I totally want to eat a human because I hear they taste like spam. I want to be a pony because I—I mean, I’m a Cutie Mark Crusader pilot or driver or whatever the word is when you cart someone around on vehicles all day.”

“Chauffeur,” Sweetie Belle butted in.

“Shut up, I know that! Ahem. The one pony I would get revenge on if I could is Rainbow Dash.”

Even Celestia gave a strange look at Scootaloo for that remark. Luna just smiled. Of all the ponies looking awkward at her faux pas, Rainbow Dash’s jaw just dropped in annoyed horror. Scootaloo noticed the odd looks, realized part of her mistake, and corrected herself. “I mean, I would get revenge *for* Rainbow Dash, when she was killed, um, doing something. Fighting the enemy. Yeah.”

“I’m not dead!” Rainbow Dash shouted. Everypony ignored her.

Apple Bloom whispered to Sweetie Belle who whispered to Scootaloo that Rainbow Dash was indeed alive and sitting right over there. Scootaloo looked shocked, and then blushed. “Um. I mean, I would get revenge for Rainbow Dash and her horrible failures in defeating the human soldiers in China and wiping out the rebellion in New York.” She smiled proudly and punctuated her diatribe with a nod.

Rather than argue the points they had raised any further, the conversation continued. "No way! The aging serum worked." Pinkie Pie gasped as she stood up, then bowed. "It's an honour to meet you.” She quickly added, “Again, that is.” The Cutie Mark Crusaders nodded together.

"Okay, let's get this started. Rhymer, bring our good human followers up on the screens, thank you," ordered Celestia as she turned to one of her guards.

"Yes, my lord. I obey your word," said Rhymer as he made his way towards the televisions.

"Wait, is this all of the council?" Rainbow Dash looked around the table at the still-empty seats. Even with the Cutie Mark Crusaders replacing the deceased Twilight Sparkle, Fluttershy, Applejack and Rarity, by Rainbow Dash’s count, there were still some ponies missing.

"YES," Luna replied slowly. "IS THERE A PROBLEM?"

"Well, yeah. It's a bit empty in here, eh," continued Rainbow Dash.

"Maybe if someone hadn't gotten our best soldiers killed, we'd have a bigger turnout." Blueblood snickered. "You also broke the rules set for us by our previous general, Herr Sparkle, in fighting on the humans' terms with guns and explosion."

"Shut it, Blueblood!" Rainbow Dash snapped. "When we fought by *our* methods in New York, we achieved victory far swifter and with fewer casualties than we did in the entire history of our invasion! You may think of me as a loose cannon, but I get results!"

"SHUT IT, BOTH OF YOU!" ordered Luna. The Prince and Princess fell quiet as Joseph Kony and Kim Jong-Il appeared on the televisions. Of course they did. "WELCOME, BOYS," she greeted them.

Joe and Kim nodded their heads. "Thank you, your majesty," they both said, more or less in unison.

"I EXPECT YOU ARE READY FOR BATTLE?" she asked.

"Yes, my Queen," replied Kim, who had a very pudgy face for a man whose citizens were so thin.

"And how about you, my little Kony? Are you ready?" asked Celestia.

Joseph was smoking a cigar. He blew out toxic smoke and smiled. "Yes, Ma'am." He quickly shoved a second cigar into his mouth to smoke on as he had removed the other to answer.

"GOOD. THEN I SUPPOSE WE SHOULD GO OVER THE BATTLE PLANS," said Luna. "JOSEPH, YOU AND YOUR ARMY WILL HOLD ONTO THE BLACK BOX, ASSUMING THAT LITTLE SHIT, MAKAROV, HAD DROPPED IT OFF."

"He has not yet, but I will make sure he does." Kony sucked hard on his cigar.

"GOOD!" Luna turned a page of her battle plans which were laid out neatly on the table. "AND KIM, YOU AND YOUR ARMY WILL ATTACK CUBA, YES?"

"Yes, my queen," replied Kim with a nod. "That will be most simple a journey for the Democratic People's Republic and Totally Not a Totalitarian Dictatorship of Korea."

"GOOD. YES. WHATEVER. WE WILL HANDLE THE REST. THAT IS ALL."

Joseph and Kim nodded, gave a Nazi salute, and disappeared off of the screen.

"YOU ARE DISMISSED," said Luna as she left the table.

"Oh, good. We came here to watch you talk to two radical zealots on TV. That was the high point of my day. Wait, what? Why haven't we discussed what the Cutie Mark Crusaders are doing, or what *we* are doing?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"BECAUSE WE CAN'T TRUST YOU, SISTER," replied Luna with a smile.

Rainbow Dash stood up. "Excuse me? For one thing, it was Twilight Sparkle who sent Spike off to go get us dragons, who, might I add, tend to eat ponies alongside humans, and she killed off Fluttershy on a whim. And the Apples were no help at all, instead running their tedious little pot plantation to work the humans as slaves for their family business. I was the only pony out there actually *fighting* in the damn war! Even Pinkie Pie's just screwing around all the time." Pinkie Pie nodded in agreement with Rainbow Dash's words, but said nothing. In fact, none of the other ponies said anything. They just smiled and rolled their eyes as though they weren't hearing a damn thing Rainbow Dash had just said. There is little worse in social interaction than having a good point go ignored, except perhaps having a slew of good points that one can string along into a tirade which then gets ignored. If you have ever worked at a real job in your life, especially in the service industry, then you will know what this feels like.

"Come on, Rainbow Dash; let's go get us some fresh air!" Pinkie Pie touched Rainbow Dash on the shoulder, and then began to bounce merrily towards the exit.

"Screw this shit!" Rainbow Dash stormed out of the conference room. Well, at least their army would be mobilizing again. What pony could say what sort of trouble the humans had gotten into during a lax year from their overlords?

Chapter Seven.

Research and development. Me and my camera.

Not unlike one of the white mice in their little mazes, Andrew Grant scurried around his lab. He had three assistants with him: Two males and one female. Their names were Rick, Andrea and Mitchel. Andrew had his team working around the clock to find the cure for the Pony Obedience Toxin, because Avery Johnson had threatened to fire them if they didn't.

At the same time, they were juggling their duties to continue Andrew's newest weapon design: what he called a Silverback. This was a robot-type machine which someone could climb inside and control. The Silver Back was at least nine feet tall and made out of steel. It was easy to control and could take a hell of a beating. They'd squashed a bowling ball flat just like an orange. The head and torso were the cockpit and covered by a rocket-proof, bullet-proof, artificial glass pane. It was all very top secret and required very rare materials that were extremely hard to manufacture even before human civilization had been derailed.

Andrew had been making two types of Silverback. The Light Infantry Silverback came equipped with a long silver blade which was attached to the right arm and a chain gun which was attached to the left arm. The other Silverback was the Heavy Infantry Silverback which was mounted with a rocket launcher that was capable of firing seventeen rockets before reloading and a heavy-duty shotgun which was bigger than the average man. What he really wanted, however, was a whirling drill arm with a flamethrower attachment, and he was having great difficulty deciding which arm to attach which weapon onto.

Andrew turned to Rick. "Pass me the wrench!" ordered Andrew, holding out his hand. Rick said nothing. He just handed him the wrench. Andrew used the wrench to first scratch an itchy spot on his upper back, then tightened some loose bolt on one of the Silverbacks' arms. The workspace was just above room temperature and was making the lab workers sweat. Andrew wiped a slick of perspiration from his shiny, wrinkled forehead. "Andrea?" beckoned Andrew.

"Yes sir?" replied Andrea as she typed away at computer screens. She was decompiling a program that would allow Angry Birds to be played by the pilot. They had decided it might not be necessary, even though the pilot might be stuck inside of the Silverback for a long time between battles.

"Have I received any new emails?" asked Andrew.

Andrea sighed and opened up Andrew's emails, even though it is rude to read other people's correspondence, no matter how flimsy the security is. There was a "(1)" next to the inbox marker. "You have one email, sir," said Andrea as she stepped away from the computer. Andrew handed her the wrench and sat down at the computer. He opened up his inbox. There was a new message from someone called "Anonymous".

"Anonymous," as you know, is not a proper name, but it is a moniker used in place of a name for two reasons. The first reason is that people were unable to track down the originator of a correspondence, such as a quotation or a poem attributed to an author whose identity remains unknown. The second use of the term "anonymous" is when a person deliberately wishes not to be attributed to their deeds so as to avoid the repercussions all actions have, such as when a spy is trying to warn another country that Equestrian forces in Cuba plan to kidnap someone of significance, or when someone wishes to evade punishment for intimidating others online with their autistic, self-empowering hate speech, or avoid having to pursue work they have promised to do, such as the undermining of a greedy and hurtful cult. "Anonymous" is a word which here likely refers to the latter condition.

Andrew was intrigued. He opened up the email to see a large document appear before him. The first line read "Important notice! Ponies plan to reinvade earth". Andrew quickly skimmed the email before printing it off to share around the office. He did not click the email advertising "little blue pills" because he could not be certain if they referred to a fake erectile dysfunction remedy (even though he suffered from this malady) or common sleeping pills which are typically blue and, although their effectiveness is limited, they can help a person who often stays up way too late at night, either because they are working on creating radical new war machines, or because they are compiling several war correspondents' notes of interminable length.

"Mitchel, get me Johnson!" ordered Andrew.

Ten minutes later, Andrew had handed the printout of the email to Johnson (who infamously didn't use his spam box), who was reading over the transcript using a pair of half-moon reading classes with a cord attached around his head.

"Well, sir, what do you think?" asked Andrew, who was bouncing on his heels on the opposite side of Johnson's desk.

"Where did you say you got this information from?" asked Johnson as he put down the papers.

"A source, sir" replied Andrew smartly.

"Oh, really? Well, as long as it's a source. Uh, just one question comes to mind: Is this source reliable?" Johnson took a gulp of aged whisky before Andrew could respond.

"Well, I don't know, sir," replied Andrew honestly. Unhelpfully, but honestly. "That Yemen thing turned out to be true."

"What do you mean you don't know?" asked Johnson, who was beginning to think this was just some kind of a joke, because it suited his impatient disposition.

Andrew didn't know how to answer that question at first. He didn't know how to explain to someone what "I don't know" means. He'd never met anyone before who didn't understand the phrase. He tried his best. "Well, it said 'anonymous', so I don't actually know who it's from."

Johnson threw the papers at Andrew and stood up from his desk. He was not happy. "You listen here. I don't have time for no-good, brainless pricks like you! I have had the worst day today, and then you come to me with something that looks like a bad joke gone wrong, then you tell me you don't know if you could trust the source. For all you know it could be some spotty, greasy kid who is thankful for his first pubic hair! Bring me something useful next time!"

Andrew swallowed his anger and tried to remain calm. He was certain that before the war, his superior would not have gotten away with speaking to him in such a disparaging and vulgar manner, but this was after the war. There was nothing he could do. He swallowed down the hurt that solidified in his throat so that it would smother the burning anger in his stomach. "It did say, sir, that the ponies were going to send a scout party in the Middle East."

"And what's your point?" asked Johnson who was sliding back down into his seat. Some whisky would help calm him down.

"Well, I mean, the ponies won a decisive victory in New York City. They decimated our forces and the rebels. Then they just up and disappeared for a year? Couldn't they be up to something, maybe? We could send scout choppers over the desert to see what they can pick up," suggested Andrew.

Johnson was about to shout once more when he realised that that was not actually a bad idea. "Okay. I'll send choppers out if it'll make you happy. Now get back to the lab," ordered Johnson. Andrew saluted and left the room in a hurry. Johnson picked up the phone and dialled the air hanger. True to his word, the choppers would be sent immediately. Boy did he have a hard knock life in this outfit.

Approximately ten minutes later, Logan and Tom could be found wandering the dark streets of Moscow. Snow was drifting down from the sky rather than just blowing off of the roofs of nearby buildings, and the streetlights gave off a warm, welcoming glow. Tom dropped another empty beer bottle to the pavement.

"Well that was the shittiest beer I ever had," said Tom before breaking into a yawn.

"Yeah. Fancy getting a real beer?" asked Logan as he tossed his half-empty bottle into the snow with all the others that had piled up in Russia after the pony holocaust.

Tom checked his watch. The time was nine in the evening. Tom thought it would be best to head home when he remembered Bella was probably pissed with him. Well, definitely. She was always pissed at him. She'd be laying there on the couch with the squirt that looked just like her making a ruckus, and she'd already be tired of her, and tired of Tom, and nagging him for being out all evening instead of taking care of her crotch dropping. The image of what awaited him helped Tom come to a decision. "Yeah, sure. I could use a decent drink." He took the lead towards the Ivory Inn.

"You're getting the first round." Logan chuckled as he followed close behind. Remembering he couldn't bring in outside booze, he quickly finished off a bottle of Jekyll Island he'd stowed in his back pocket. The two of them entered the almost-empty bar together. There were a couple drinking by the window, a man sitting at the bar on his own and smoking an electronic cigarette like a complete tool, and the bartender. The bartender wasn't doing much, just cleaning dirty beer mugs that were shaped like bears. Logan and Tom approached the bar, and the bartender looked up.

"No, you get out!" ordered the bartender. "Not after what you and that Irish plebe did the night before."

"Hey, look, I ain't here to cause a fight. Just here to drink. No one ever got punched just 'cause they had some alcohol," explained Tom.

"No, get out; you're barred," ordered the bartender, who apparently was doing rather well for himself to be able to refuse paying customers like this.

Logan pulled out a badge from his wallet. "Look, let him stay. FSB."[3]

"I don't care who you are. That man caused too much trouble last night."

"Look, you let him drink here, or I organise a raid," explained Logan.

"You can't. I ain't done nothing wrong." The bartender's eyes went all shifty, the way a cartoon character's does when he's done something wrong, or the way a real person's does when they've been cornered with inflammatory accusations.

"Yes, but I can organise one on a suspicion," replied Logan.

"Oh yeah? And what suspicions do you have, then?" asked the bartender.

"Er...drugs," Logan said after a moment.

"Drugs?" The bartender sounded genuinely surprised, though for what no one could be certain.

"Yes. I have a suspicion that you are under the influence of drugs, that you are selling them, and that you are making them. Alcohol, for one. Maybe tobacco. Do I need to go on?"

The bartender felt threatened by this. "Fine, but he can't drink too much." He pointed at Tom as though he were an unleashed dog ready to run amok.

"Good. Now, I'll have two pints of lager and a packet of crisps," said Logan with a cheeky grin.

One hour later and many kilometres away, as Logan and Tom were sucking down enough drinks to kill an elephant, Jimmy Walsh and his partner, Corby, were investigating the intel by the anonymous contact. Walsh was piloting a Blackbird while his partner kept his eyes peeled.

"See anything?" asked Walsh as he pushed the Blackbird forward.

"Not yet," replied Corby, who was boredly sucking in air through his teeth.

"Well, keep a look out. We need to make sure the informant isn't lying."

"Understood, sir." Corby looked out towards the dark desert plain until he caught eye of a man standing in the middle of the desert. "Look down there."

Walsh looked out to see what Corby had indicated. "Okay, I'm going to fly over and take some pictures." Walsh pushed the Blackbird in the direction of the man.

The man was Makarov. Makarov stumbled from side to side. The wound in his shoulder was really beginning to cause him pain now; enough pain as though he was giving birth out of his shoulder. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out the black box. "You better be ready," Makarov muttered to himself. He placed the box on the ground and opened it with the crank handle. A catchy tune that was a bit difficult to place played, and then a forming portal launched out in front of him. That was when Walsh and Corby flew overhead. Makarov made the stupid mistake of looking up as the camera took a picture. He cursed and pulled out a knife, knowing it wouldn't do him any good down here, but if they landed to come pick him up, he would slice their throats. He wasn't exactly known as a charming man.

Three ponies jumped through the portal. They were just scouts; nopony of any real significance: A pegasus known as Eagle Eye and two earth ponies, Shoreline and Smelling Salt. "Welcome," Makarov greeted them with only brief eye contact, really scanning for the Blackbird.

"Is this it? Where's your vehicle?" asked Shoreline.

Makarov knelt down and closed the box. The portal disappeared in front of them with a whoosh. "Yes. I've got it tucked between these two rocks over here," explained Makarov, pointing.

Walsh turned the Blackbird around and flew by, taking one more picture: This one showed Makarov and the three ponies together. "We need to get this back to HQ," said Walsh as he flew back towards home.

Who were those people? Makarov wondered as he climbed into his car with the three ponies. He doubted they could have been his allies, whoever they were, but he considered which of his enemies they might have been.

Two hours later, back at headquarters, Andrew had tempered the images taken by Walsh and brought them to Johnson for inspection. "Sir, our informant appears to have been telling the truth."

[3] Federal Security Bureau.

Nodding his head gravely, Johnson studied them for a moment. "Damn it! I knew we hadn't seen the last of them." He threw the photographs across the room where a large pile of refuse was now beginning to collect.

"What shall we do, sir?" asked Andrew.

Johnson thought for a moment. "Send a letter to every former service man. I want them all back. You heard the plans. We need an army again. A bigger, better army. And we need it now."

"Yes, sir! I will tell the receptionist to send them straight away," said Andrew before he saluted and left the room.

Johnson shook his head and looked out of his window. "I'm too old for this shit," he said to himself. He chugged some more whisky straight from the bottle and hiccupped. And that was the start to the deadly upcoming war!

Chapter Eight.

Booze is good food. Rise and shite. Some kind of mistake. Military standards.

Hours had passed when Tom and Logan finally came stumbling out of the Ivory Inn. "You up for another?" asked Logan who spoke like he wasn't even drunk, despite the seven pints he had downed.

"Nah, I...I got to go," gasped Tom as he pointed in the vague cardinal direction of his home. He slapped his hand on Logan's chest a few times. "But hey, man. Hey. Hey. Even though you still get to do army stuff, and I'm just a civvie now, come have a drink with your old bud. Yeah?"

"Hell, if there's gonna be booze, how can I refuse?"

"Ha-ha, yeah." Tom smiled as Logan patted him on the shoulder. "See you some time, mate."

"Yeah, okay, mate, catch you later," said Logan before belching and staggering off into an alleyway.

Tom swayed and stumbled towards his garden gate, looking as though he were dancing only to keep himself upright. He opened the latch to the gate before face-planting onto the concrete path leading to the front door. The gate slammed shut behind him.

"Oh, fuck." The beer seemed to have softened to blow quite a bit. Tom scrambled to his feet and rummaged through his pockets for his keys. Before he could find them, which was sure to be a lengthy struggle, Tom heard his gate open again. He turned to see a young soldier. "What do you want?" he asked, trying to focus his blurred vision.

"Sergeant Thomas Taylor-Randall?" asked the soldier who stood at attention. Tom would've tried to stand to attention, too, but he worried he might fall over. He definitely couldn't have stood straight at any rate.

"Hey, that name's my name, too. Well, not any more. Wait, was I a sergeant?" Tom's voice was taking on a lilting, sing-song quality as he tried to keep down anything else that might come up through his throat alongside the syllables he was speaking.

"Here you go, sir," said the soldier as he handed Tom a letter and saluted. As the soldier walked out past the gate, closing it behind himself, Tom turned the letter over in his hand several times and studied it. He wasn't sure reading it would accomplish much as he couldn't even begin to read the address. The lines were all running away from him. He eventually pulled his front door keys from his jeans pocket. Tom tried to remain silent as he opened the door, but there's a little known fact that alcohol has an effect on the biochemistry of living organisms. Inebriation was, if you can believe this, impairing his sensory input and motor functions. As the door swung open and Tom tripped his way inside, he collided hard with the banister of the staircase. The door kicked open when he thumped his knee into it, and it banged loudly against the wall as the balustrade let out a noisy crack. Well, he'd kept himself from falling on his face again, at any rate. Drunkards have that peculiar talent of getting the other party more injured than themselves, like magic. The house lit up by the living room lights, and Bella stood in the doorway. She was wearing only her pants and one of Tom's T-shirts.

"You look so fit," said Tom as he grinned and imagined things.

"Just don't, Tom! You have had me worried sick. First you disappear again, then I find out you were sent to jail. And when I find out my friends have bailed you out, you don't turn up for another five hours!" ranted Bella.

"You're so angry when you're pretty," said Tom, patronising her.

For some reason, Bella grew madder. "You know, ever since you were kicked out of the army you have..." That was all Tom heard Bella say before she became just a background noise to him. His eyes glazed over and he opened his letter to try to read it, which was something of a Herculean task even when he was sober. He failed as the words began to join each other to

form new words. Letters jumped about, and he kept thinking he was reading the wrong word in place of a similar one. His inebriated reading comprehension was only slightly better than the auto-co-wrecks feature on an iDroidBerry smartphone.

"And now you're not even listening to me," whined Bella, sounding like a small, yappy dog. She snatched the letter away from him and stared at it. "What is this, anyway? Oh my, like, god." Bella's mood did not improve, but it at least softened some as she sat her caboose down on the steps.

Tom slid down the door and landed on his ass. "What does it say?" Tom could feel a strong headache coming on, kind of like a migraine pretentious people make up to excuse themselves from having to answer uncomfortable questions, except real.

"It says...it says you're back in, like, the army. Someone called Avery Johnson wants you to report to his office tomorrow. The ponies are back."

Tom had no time to react as he fell unconscious due to the beer. Who could have imagined that ingesting alcohol would have some kind of negative repercussion?

A note from the original author:

this is chapter 5 i know its short but that only because word has ran out of the 30 day trial. So i had to use word pad. Which is 30nnoying cause i dont know how many pages i have done and i cant check spelling errors. Sorry next one will be longer and the whole team is back in next chapter.

In Andrew Grant's laboratory, there was a monkey, and in the monkey's glass booth were a plush facsimile of a monkey and a wire facsimile. The wire facsimile was very uncomfortable, but Andrew had attached a bottle of milk to it, so that the monkey had to cling to the awkward wire monkey in order to sustain its needs. The monkey would then try to go to the fabric doll monkey for comfort, but Andrew would shut off that half of the booth so the monkey would sulk and huddle in the corner as far away from the wire monkey as it could get. Such is an accurate portrayal of life, when people impose unnecessary discomfort upon us in the guise of sustaining us in an endless cycle of masochism.

In the Taylor-Randall household, there were two couches. One was a cushy, svelte couch with two plush seats and matching throw pillows which were actually quite comfortable, even though the arms of the couch were quite sufficient in their own right. It was the perfect sort of couch to sink into to read, and Bella had spent many content months lying there, speaking to her belly during her pregnancy as she swelled up as though from an allergic reaction to a mutating germ. The other couch was three seats wide so whoever sat in the middle was pinned between two other people with no place to put a drink, and the upholstery was some rough, bumpy texture that itched the skin on contact.

Tom awoke on the uncomfortable couch, but the furniture wasn't even the last of it. His head was pounding, and the light hurt his eyes. Tom groaned as he sat up. *What happened last night?* Tom wondered as he glanced around the room. He didn't see much through his squinting eyes. He tilted his head to the left and then to the right, cracking his neck loudly. "Was I drunk?" he mumbled aloud. At least, he thought that was what he said. "What the hell? Every time I drink I wake up with a headache. That's just not fair." Tom took a deep breath and noticed the strong smell of coffee lingering in the air. Tom stood and cracked his back. Blood pumped violently around Tom's, head bringing him a sharp pain that he could actually feel throbbing in his temples. He staggered into the kitchen to see Irish of all people making a cup of coffee.

"Well, hello, Mr. Sleepyhead," said Irish cheerfully. Was Irish a morning person? Tom was beginning to remember why he used to hate Irish.

"Irish, what are you doing here?" asked Tom as he opened a cupboard door and grabbed a box of painkillers. Irish didn't answer. He just stared at Tom with an odious grin. "What?" asked Tom, annoyed.

"Did you get it?" Irish answered with another question.

"Get what?" Tom said, answering the question with another question in turn. He downed the painkillers with a glass of water.

"Did you get the letter?" replied Irish, questioning the question to the other question and downing a cup of coffee.

"What letter?" Tom questioned, answering a question to a question to a question to a question. Beginning to get annoyed, he refilled the glass with water and drank.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. The letter from Johnson. The army's back on!" explained Irish.

Tom choked on the water as he jumped back in astonishment. "What? How?" He sputtered and wiped his chin with his sleeve.

“Can’t believe it myself. The ponies have returned.” Irish was all too gleeful at the proposition of a second holocaust. It’d only been a year, and even without Equestria’s leaders, the human race still couldn’t say they’d recovered from the damage.

“What? Why the hell are you smiling about that?” Tom grimaced.

“Because we finally get what we wanted. We got our job back! We knew those wankers couldn’t stay away from getting a good thrashing.”

Tom considered splashing Irish in the face with his water, but thought better of messing up his own kitchen. “Have you gone mental? Those ponies eat and enslave people. There are still concentration camps out there to liberate. Whole countries have been wiped off the map.” Tom’s diatribe could have been ceaseless, but he discovered he was fingering the infamous letter which had been conspicuously left on the counter. He unfolded the letter and skimmed it again. Nothing seemed familiar, but the gist was pretty clear.

He threw the letter back to the counter, but it drifted onto the floor. “It’s an error,” Tom said. “I was dishonourably discharged, remember? I fucked up. I snuck out of infirmary on two separate missions I wasn’t briefed on. We’re lucky all of Delta Squad wasn’t court martialled.”

Irish frowned. “Don’t be like that, Tommy! If you’re not in it, Delta won’t be the same without you. Maybe they’ve rescinded it.”

“Delta will never be the same without Daniel.” Tom’s comment sent both men into silence.

Irish stared at the floor and then into his mug of coffee where he saw the screaming face of Kyle McLachlan. “So how’d Bella take it? She sounded kind of stressed when she let me in.”

“Shit!” cursed Tom as he turned and exited the kitchen. He quickly made his way up the stairs and into his and Bella’s bedroom. Bella sat on the bed, tears rolled down her cheeks. She turned to look at him as if she had been waiting, and he wiped a tear from her cheek. Tom sighed as he took a seat next to her. Every time he saw her, she seemed to be upset, and he didn’t fancy the unshakable feeling of responsibility he had.

“It will be alright,” said Tom, giving her a limp pat on the back.

“Oh, Tom. It’s just like last year all over again,” she replied sadly.

He saw what she meant, but he wasn’t sure he agreed. “That was different,” Tom said. “Sure, we’d all received a summons and left to hunt down the enemy leader, but last year I was still in the army. I was running through advanced training exercises and engaging in minor sorties here and there. But most important of all, Daniel had come around to deliver the news. Not some courier whose face I barely remember.”

Bella leaned her head back and moaned. Her mascara was running, making her look like a deranged raccoon. “Oh, will you let it go with Daniel? Daniel is dead! He was your friend, and I am your girlfriend.”

The complaint hit Tom in the gut, which wasn’t helping his nausea. Rage boiled into his head, but the painkillers hadn’t kicked in yet, and his migraine batted him down like a plump fly to a bug swatter. He didn’t *want* to go back to the army. Couldn’t she understand that? Couldn’t she empathize with him? Tom noticed she was holding a picture of them and their daughter, Claire, at the park. That was the other thing that was different. Back then, Bella was only pregnant. Although a life had been growing inside of her since then, now that Claire was a separate entity, he had twice as much to worry about.

“Hey, you know me. I always make it back.” Tom raised his hand toward Bella’s shoulder, but before he could touch her, she burst into tears. Tom felt disappointed in himself. He sat there and stared at his hands in his lap, feeling a kind of numbness just wash over him. He inhaled deeply, but even that seemed to make Bella sob even harder.

Irish interrupted the awkward moment by calling up the stairs. “Oi, fat boy, get ready! We are going to be late!”

Tom sighed and stood. He leaned in to kiss Bella’s forehead, but instead whispered to her. “I got to go.” Bella kept her head bowed and nodded. With regret in his heart, Tom entered Claire’s nursery. She was still asleep in her small crib like a precious little angelic Kewpie doll. Tom smiled. She was his light when it was dark; his joy, his everything. Her innocent, miniscule mind was spared the horrors of watching savage, technicolour ponies eviscerating men on the field of battle. How long would he be able to protect this tiny girl from the traumatic war that defiled the world she had to grow up in? How many tears would she shed because Tom could not obliterate every last pony menace from the face of reality?

“Goodbye, Claire bear.” Tom kissed her on the forehead before exiting the room.

One hour later, Tom and Irish had arrived at Moscow base (traffic on the Karl Marx Expressway was revolting). As they stood in a great, long line to be registered, Tom tried to explain to the clerk that he had received his note in error, but this only earned him a strange look until two more guards had him escorted to Johnson’s office. He awkwardly took a seat and

waited as Johnson sat behind a large paper report that obscured his face, though Tom could tell he was drinking a whisky. Tom couldn't decide whether he wanted to get his attention to get this over with, or prolong whatever uncomfortable diatribe had to be said. In the end, he said nothing, because he knew full well that Johnson knew he was here, and he was a civilian as of this moment. If Johnson wanted to waste Tom's time, he'd have to waste his own as well.

Avery Johnson shuffled some papers on his desk and projected a grim sigh towards Tom. "As you ought to know, Taylor-Randall, you disobeyed explicit instructions from a medical officer and compromised mission parameters. Twice. And that earned you a dishonourable discharge. If this had been any ordinary war instead of a siege by technicolour mind-shit from a parallel dimension, and the planet had ten percent of its population back, you'd never come within thirty-five feet of olive drag again. But, as I've just elaborated, this is not an ordinary war. We need all the men we can get. But make no mistake. You will not be shirking orders again, or we will discharge you on the spot, even if we have to drop your sorry ass in the midst of enemy territory. Am I understood, marine?"

Tom just sat there. No, he didn't understand, but he couldn't just say that. Being called a marine and told in no uncertain terms that he was inducted back into the army brought back that desensitizing mind-set that he was to obey his superior's whims. He hadn't been asked for his opinion or his thoughts. Johnson was talking to him as if he was already a soldier again, and this was perfectly clear. He finally managed a quip, and he wasn't quite sure he was still sober. He wasn't quite sure Johnson was. "Well, I guess you'll have me scrubbing toilets in no time, sir."

Johnson's whisky interrupted him from responding right away. He spun his finger in the air. "Uh-uh. You get your ass out there, find Irish and you two can be escorted to your barracks. Delta Squad's back together."

Tom knew better than to complain about a dead comrade to Johnson. He wanted to complain about it to Irish, but seeing him sitting down in a hallway, bouncing his knees as he waited, told Tom not to bring it up with him, either. Already he wanted to think of Daniel as just another lost soul who gave his life for his race, like James Williams, or John Horridge, or Shaun Moulder. "Looks like I'm back in," Tom said. Without even trying to, he sounded excited. Yeah. Fighting cheerful, colourful ponies. That's what gave his entire life meaning.

Irish laughed happily. "Yeah, alright!" In just a few minutes, the pair was being escorted to their barracks by a female officer. "Girl, you have too much of a fine ass to be in the army." Irish meant it as a compliment, which gives us a wealth of insight into what sort of a human being he was.

If it can be believed, the woman did not take it so lightly. She even looked offended at his jocular good cheer, as though somehow the implication that there was a more appropriate line of work for a person to be on based upon certain prodigious features of their anatomical structure was displeasing to her. Once they reached the barracks, the woman kicked the door with enough force from her steel-toed boot that the door opened and broke a part of the frame. There was a loud bang that echoed down the hallway, calling other soldiers to look out from their rooms. A nearby vending machine accidentally deposited a soda for free.

"Thanks," Tom said quietly, though he felt more intimidated than grateful.

Irish looked long and hard at the door and wracked his brain. He turned to the woman and asked, "So, are you going to give me your number now or later?"

The woman smiled and then kneed Irish in the crotch. Irish let out a loud groan as he dropped to his knees in agony. She then grabbed their duffel bags and threw them into the room like bowling balls. Despite being laden with clothing and personal effects, they slid all the way to the far end of the room or hit the foot of the bed. She then stepped aside, bowed with sardonic courtesy, and marched off with monumental posture.

Tom walked over to a free bed and placed his bag on it. Luckily his clothes had cushioned his belongings, although he'd only half expected anything to come of today, so he hadn't packed anything too important.

Irish came walking in slowly with his arm crossed over his crotch. "Oh great, where do I sleep?"

Tom looked to the left of him to see a broad-shouldered man in a blue Hawaiian shirt and green shorts with his back to them. Or maybe he just had long bangs. He had long, pitch-black hair that ran down over his shoulders and halfway down his back. On his feet he was wearing sandals. Not exactly military dress. To the right, he saw that someone had already claimed the bed by putting their belongings on it. "I don't know. Find somewhere down there." Tom pointed down the barracks which seemed to be full of new soldiers that neither he nor Irish had ever seen, not that they had memorized their entire military when they were in Delta Squad.

"Fuck that!" Irish approached the long-haired man to the left of Tom. "Excuse me, mate." He patted the man on the shoulder. When the man turned to face Irish, Irish could see he had a scruffy black beard and a pair of dark sunglasses.

"Irish, is that you?" asked the man enthusiastically.

Irish could not be certain he did not know the man. “Sorry, mate, but who are you?”

“It’s me, Nick!” Nick pulled off his glasses to expose a perplexed expression.

“Nick?” Irish was astonished. Even Tom looked surprised.

“It’s great to see you, man!” Nick gave Irish a manly, heterosexual hug.

“Nick! Long time, no see.” Tom vigorously shook Nick’s hand.

“Tom, it’s good to see you, too.”

“Where did you get off to?” Tom asked.

“Yeah, and what the fuck happened to your hair?” asked Irish.

“Aw, I got caught up doing some mechanical work for some higher ups, and they pay a lot, so I used my money to take a trip down to Hawaii. Not exactly the vacation spot it used to be before the ponies detonated those bombs in the volcanos during their oceanic culling. And, well, you know I was down there when they tell me I’m being called back for a tour of duty. Kinda surprised they found me, really.”

“Shit, man. Unlucky.” Irish laughed.

“Hey, who’s on the bed on the other side of me?” asked Tom.

Nick grinned. “Er, I’ll let you find out.”

Tom turned to see a more familiar face enter the barracks. “Tyrone!”

“Tyrone, my man!” Irish held his hand out for a more informal greeting.

“Irish.” Tyrone chuckled. The two men slapped their hands together as if neither was capable of applauding by themselves, then they tripped at each other’s fingers as though intending to tug the others’ off. This was a form of “street” handshake, and is considered a very high honour of prestige, at least on par with being able to shop off of the Payless Shoe Source’s clearance rack.

“Man, what happened to your face?” asked Tyrone, noticing the garish red scratches that ran every which way across Irish’s face. Tom was glad Tyrone asked; he’d no idea where they’d come from.

“Oh, never mind that. Hey man, how come you never give me a call?” asked Irish.

“I’ve been busy. Yo, Tom. Yo, Nick. Yo, yo.” Tyrone shook their hands in turn.

“Now all we need is Logan, and we got a full house,” said Nick as he began to unpack his bags.

“Yeah. Logan and Daniel.” Tom spoke these words into his bag.

“Shit, man, how’s he doing?” asked Tyrone.

Tom pulled out folded shirts and pairs of underwear, along with a couple of uniforms he’d been given at registration. “Same as always. Spent last night drinking with him as usual. Guess we’ll be back to nights at the Ivory Inn together, eh?” He tried to cheer himself up with the offer, but it didn’t work.

“Shit, man, well let’s pray he gets better,” said Tyrone.

“Hey, Tyrone, maybe we should go find a couple of beds,” suggested Irish. Tom looked confused.

“Yeah, sure, man. A’ight, catch you guys later,” said Tyrone as he started down the other end of the barracks. “A’ight” is a word which here means “alright”, but the word “alright” is simply too much effort to pronounce in its entirety to the person you’re speaking to.

“Hey, Nick, who’s next to me?” asked Tom.

“Er, some big Russian guy, I think.”

Tom thought for a moment and remembered the image of a big Russian named Raymond. *Nah, what’s the chances of that?* Tom thought. When he turned back around, he noticed a pair of giant legs standing to the left of his bed. He brought his head up to make eye contact, but bunched up his shoulders, preparing to duck. The man was indeed Raymond. He was brutish and blocky and made Oleg look like he’d been a pipsqueak. Raymond must have been weaned on a diet of bovine growth hormone and was staring at Tom with an angry glare. His nose was still broken, and he had a thick plaster running along the bridge of his nose with blood stains on it. He said nothing and let his miserable expression speak for him. His face wasn’t much to look at even without these conditions, as it resembled something of a big, greasy peeled potato.

“Look, I’m sorry about my friend. He was just a bit drunk.” Tom hoped the giant would accept his apology.

Raymond just continued to stare for a couple of minutes before leaning down to Tom. “I don’t care,” growled Raymond through a haze of eggy breath.

Tom sighed as if this drama was beneath him. He knew this was going to become another fight. “Listen, we could fight here if we must, but this time I got three friends who are willing to die for me like I am for them against a human from a bar on the same side of the war as us. So take your best shot, but it’s your funeral.” Tom was proud of his attempt to scare the giant, even if it didn’t go over very well.

Raymond grinned and leaned back. “I’m not going to get you here, but believe me, I will get you.”

Tom could feel that his heart rate had picked up. Now he was not just worried about getting his head blown off by talking ponies; he was worried about the Iron Curtain Giant who wanted him dead.

“Who’s that prick?” Nick had been listening to the conversation.

“Like you said, a prick.” Tom retained eye contact with the beast.

“Attention!” roared Drill Sergeant Toby Rombres. Every soldier stood at attention and faced the Drill Sergeant. “Alright men, report to the briefing barracks to find out which platoon you’re in and where you will be sent!” ordered Toby.

“Sir, yes, sir!” every soldier in the barracks replied in unison. The sound made Toby Rombres wet on his own sense of authority.

“Well, I guess this is it,” said Tom.

“Yeah. Let’s just hope we’re in the same squad,” replied Nick. The men all left the barracks in an orderly queue. The briefing barracks were small and claustrophobic. The room had at least a hundred soldiers in it, all waiting behind a table for Johnson. At the other side of the table, there was a whiteboard which covered most of the wall. On the table there was a projector which had been loaded with film.

“It’s fucking crowded in here,” Irish moaned, pointing out the obvious with an unnecessary expletive.

“Thanks for that, Captain Obvious,” said Nick, even though it was obvious Irish was pointing out an ostensible fact.

“Fuck you, Nick,” Irish shot back dully.

“Hey guys, where is Logan?” asked Tyrone examining the room.

“He’s got his big-time job. I doubt he’ll come back to help his mates. Fucking asshole,” said Irish.

“What’s going on with you and him, man?” asked Tyrone.

Tom butted in. “He was doing his job, and Irish got mad over that fact.”

“Fuck off, Tom, it’s more than that,” Irish insisted.

“Oh really? Care to enlighten us?”

Irish thought before once again saying, “Fuck off, Tom.”

Tom chuckled. “I rest my case.”

Logan entered the briefing barracks when Tyrone caught eye of him. “Hey Logan, man, over here!” Tyrone had to yell over the noise of a hundred men talking about their heterosexuality and where to score primo shirka at once. Logan noticed Tyrone and quickly pushed his way through the crowd. “It’s good to see you, mate.” Logan grinned wide as he shook Tyrone’s hand. He then turned to see Irish. “How are you doing, Irish?” asked Logan, trying to be civil.

Irish made no such pretence. “Fuck you,” he said, pushing away and disappearing into the crowd.

“Wow. I’ve had less cattier girlfriends. What’s his problem?” asked Logan.

“Ignore him. He’s still pissed about last night,” explained Tom.

Logan shrugged and turned to Nick. “Nick, is that you?”

“Yeah, man.” Nick grabbed Logan’s hand and shook it hard.

“What the hell is wrong with your hair, man?” asked Logan.

“How do you mean?”

"I mean you look like you should be on horseback, shouting 'You can take our land, you can take our wives, but you will never take our freedom,'" Logan joked. He went on to explain, "It's a *Braveheart* reference. See, towards the end of this film, there's a big battle, and William Wallace is painted up like an American footballer, and gives a speech."

The men laughed awkwardly along with Nick, but cut their chortling short when Johnson entered the room and yelled, "Attention!" Every soldier in the room finally shut the hell up instead of jabbering on like a classroom of hyperactive teenagers and stood at attention, facing him. "At ease, men," said Johnson. The men relaxed, some taking seats on the floor and window sills. "Right, listen up. The ponies have indeed returned. We received intel last night concerning their return. That intel concerning their return indicated that they were returning, and we have visual evidence to prove so. Now the info is from an unknown source but gives details of the ponies' plans." Johnson turned on the projector, and a map of the world popped up on the whiteboard.

Johnson grabbed a wooden cane and pointed to Saudi Arabia. "This is where they were spotted. They seemed to have come through a portal linking their world with ours. Now we know this already because this is how they arrived in the first place. The only problem is now they have made a device that can link the two worlds. This is the device." Johnson changed the slide to an image of the plain black box that Makarov had been fighting over.

"Now the source says this black box, codename the McGuffin device, will link the two worlds when opened, and that there are two countries which each have black boxes. The first one is Somalia. Intel says that Joseph Kony has turned to the ponies, which if this is true then Joseph's men are probably with him. This means we will be sending some of you over there to sort things out and retrieve the box. We also have intel on the ponies coming here to attack us, so some will stay here and defend Russia. And we also hear that our friends, the Cubans, are a primary target. So some will be sent overseas to help out there."

"Sir, how can we trust this intel?" asked a soldier among the crowd.

"Well, there are no one-hundred percent guarantees in life. Now form an orderly queue at the desk to find out where you are stationed." On Johnson's order, the men lined up.

"This is it," Nick whispered.

"Yeah, time to find out where we are." Tyrone gently nudged Nick's arm with his fist.

"Yeah, let's hope we're together," said Tom. But unfortunately for them, they would not all be together this time. They all would not have each other's backs. It was time to find out!

Tucked into his office, Johnson spoke into an intercom. "Ramirez, send those five into my office." An intercom is a device people talk to in order to simulate talking to other people without having to speak to them face to face. An hour went by before Logan, Tom, Irish, Nick and Tyrone had finally reached the desk. Johnson had a grim look at them all for taking so long to get from the door to his desk, and Logan was the first in line.

"It's good to have you back, men. Your service in the last war was outstanding, let's have a repeat, yes," said Johnson, brightening up almost immediately. He then added, "Well, except for the miserable time we had hunting down Rainbow Dash, losing the core of our forces and the American rebels, and your unauthorized involvement in the New York crisis. But as we've already been through with some of you, we've decided to let bygones be bygones over that whole sticky affair."

"I intend to do just that, sir," replied Logan.

"Okay, you're in Delta team," Johnson told him.

"Thank you, sir." Logan bore a wrinkled grin as he strayed off towards the door and waited for the rest of his friends. Nick was next.

"Nick! Good to see you again," said Johnson.

"Same to you, sir".

Johnson looked down at some cue cards he was holding. "Right, you are in...Bravo Squad."

Nick's heart sank. "Er, sir, I think there is some mistake," he said.

"What mistake would that be?" asked Johnson. "C'mon. Speak up. Tell your commanding officer, who outranks you, what mistake he's made."

"I'm supposed to be stationed in Delta squad like last time?" Nick had a hopeful grin on his face.

"No, Nick. No, that's wrong. Like you said, that was last time. Now get going to Bravo Squad," Johnson ordered.

"But sir!"

"Now, Nick! And get a haircut. In fact, get 'em all cut. We ain't sending you into battle like that. If you don't get a haircut, we'll have to send you back home," ordered Johnson.

Nick pulled himself away from the table and walked past Logan. "This is bullshit!" cursed Nick as he left the barracks.

"Sir, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you something," Logan said.

"You have my permission. Speak."

"I'm just wondering why you feel the need to split us up from our original squad?" asked Logan, coming off a bit more annoyed than he intended to sound.

Johnson nodded. "Ah, well, you see, it's because although you *were* successful *sometimes*, you fucked up *most* of the time!"

"Sir, how does that make sense when you just sat there and told me that our service in the last war was outstanding?" questioned Logan.

"No, I believe I said your service was outstanding. Not theirs. Now get out of here, and get back to your designated squad," ordered Johnson. Logan gritted his teeth and left the barracks.

Tom stepped forward next. "So what squad have you decided to put me in this time?" He let out a sigh.

"Hey, you watch your attitude, and remember who you're talking to!" Johnson shuffled his papers again. "You're in Delta with the Aussie," he continued. Tom left the room quickly without saying anything. He was relieved that he had been put with Logan. In a way, he was relieved just to be back doing what he was used to, and he felt a tenuous grasp on that much, like a rubber band kept him tethered to his position here and might snap with enough strain.

Irish was next, followed by Tyrone. Johnson looked up at them as though they'd been an afterthought. "You two are both in Charlie Squad."

"Thank fuck for that." Irish sighed with relief as he and Tyrone exited the barracks.

"Man, that's fucked up how they are separating us like that." Tyrone grunted as they made their way to Charlie Squad's briefing room.

"Yeah but at least we're together, man."

"Yeah. I just feel sorry for Nick."

Nick entered the barracks of Bravo Squad. Of the four men huddled together conversing with one another, he recognized none of them. "Fuck this." Nick leant against the wall and cracked open a can of Heisler beer he'd smuggled inside.

That was when Becky Williams entered the room. Looking around, she immediately noticed Nick. "Nick, is that you?" Elated, she went in to give him a hug.

Nick accepted the hug, throwing one downcast arm around her. "Thank God I have a familiar face in my squad," said Nick before lighting his cigarette.

"Where are the others?" Becky asked.

Nick exhaled several angry puffs of smoke before he could respond. "That asshole Johnson separated us."

"Yeah, he's probably just stressed. He's taken on a lot of responsibilities in the wake of Daniel's and Oleg's deaths."

Nick let out a long stream of smoke like a steam engine, then said, "You're part of the Williams family. Leadership of the army should've fallen to you."

"To be honest, I'm not sure why it hasn't," Becky said. "And to be more honest, I'm not sure if I could handle the sudden responsibility."

A pale-faced man wearing a fedora and huge black shades with a fancy Italian suit and a yellow button-down shirt with a popped collar came over to them. He had short, black hair and his left ear was pierced. He wore a white, short-sleeved t-shirt with combat trousers, black boots, and thick, black sunglasses. He had the exact sort of goatee that reminded Becky and Nick of an unpleasant, self-professed Commander who had been killed along with his partner in the flooding of New York. "The name's Eddie. Eddie Guerra." The man held out his hand towards the pair of them. Despite his name, he didn't look particularly Spanish.

"Becky Williams." She took his hand and shook it.

"Nick Bronson." Nick inhaled a deep breath of smoke. He sputtered and coughed.

"'Ello, Becky, Nick. I've just come out of the CIA a year back. I decided to join the army. Give it a go, you know. How about you guys? What's your story?" asked Eddie.

"Called back into the army." Nick kept his answer confined to another exhale of smoke.

"Cool. And what about you, Missy?" Eddie turned to Becky.

"I'm Daniel Williams' sister. War is kinda in the family," she replied.

"It's an honour. Hey, can I have one of those?" asked Eddie, turning back to Nick. Nick nodded and handed him an unlit cigarette.

"Have you got a light, mate?" asked Eddie. Before he could even get the cig between his lips, Nick shoved the lit end of his own against Eddie's tip so it would ignite.

"So who are the others in our squad?" asked Nick.

"We got Phillip Jack Brooks, Marque Lamont, and our squad leader is Sergeant Wallcroft." Eddie pointed out the various new faces.

"Hey, you three, gather 'round here!" ordered Wallcroft in a distinctly British accent. He was an older gentleman with a scrunched in face, circular wrinkles around his eyes, and a long chin with protruding lips as though he'd spent his life with lips caught in a vacuum cleaner. Nick and Eddie threw their cigarettes to the floor in a synchronised manner. Without waiting them to approach, Wallcroft shared the details of their mission. "Okay, men, we are going to be dropped off into Cuba. There we shall keep Fidel Castro and his son safe," explained Wallcroft once everyone had crowded around him.

"So we're babysitting," groaned Phillip. He was an older white male with hair slicked back into even rows and stubble that thickened on his upper lip and chin.

Wallcroft feigned confusion. "Yes, Lieutenant Brooks, is there a problem?"

"No, no, I was just making sure we're on the same page," replied Phillip. Under his breath, he added, "I hate these escort-type missions."

"That's good then".

"Sir, if you don't mind me asking, why are we helping the Cubans, anyway?" asked Eddie.

"Yeah, plus I thought we didn't like them too much," piped up Marque.

"Well, get your facts right; that's the Americans," explained Wallcroft.

"I'm an American," said Nick. "We haven't disliked the Cubans since the red scare. Even the so-called embargo with the United States was only a series of legislation on trading between the two."

"Well, you're going to just have to play nice with our oversea friends. And get a haircut!" ordered Wallcroft.

Nick sighed. He liked his new hair but it seemed to be a problem to everyone. He also didn't like being ignored; Wallcroft had told him off as though not hearing anything he'd said. As a Canadian, he didn't have any issues with a person for being from Cuba, but there was a nagging feeling running down the back of his spine about helping this small island nation. Maybe he was just dreading a repeat of the disaster at Hainan, the small island off the southern tip of China.

Over at Delta Squad's barracks, Tom and Logan found one man sitting on a window ledge who appeared to be deep in thought. The other soldiers had evidently not arrived. Logan noticed by the man's stripes that he was an American sergeant. His hairstyle made him look a bit like MacTavish; his hair was trimmed very short but kept thicker at the top like a tiny Mohawk. His face appeared quite a bit scarred and beaten. Like most of the men, he had a major five o'clock shadow with thicker stubble around his upper lip and central chin. When he noticed the two waiting by the door, he spoke up. "Ah, you must be Tom and Logan."

"Yes sir, I'm Logan, he's Tom."

The man leapt from the window sill and shook Tom and Logan's hands. "I'm Sergeant Roebuck. I'll be the new leader of Delta Squad," he explained.

Logan stood at attention. "Where is the rest of the team, sir?"

"Logan, please relax. I'm not a control freak; you don't have to stand at attention every time we speak." Roebuck let out a chuckle.

Logan thought about relaxing, but found he didn't know how. "Yes, sir. So where are they?" he asked a second time.

"They must still be at the sorting hat ceremony," Roebuck guessed.

Tom wandered around the small room. There were five beds and a table at one side of the room, showing the same kind of set up as the briefing barracks.

"Are we going to be staying in here sir?" asked Tom.

"Yes we are," replied Roebuck.

"And is that compulsory?" asked Logan.

"Sorry to say yes, why? It's convenient and cosy. You'd rather share space with a dozen other guys?"

"Is this Delta squad?" A scruffy-looking man with an angry expression and a Serbian accent had entered the room. He had something of a front-heavy face with wide features.

"Yeah. My name is Roebuck, and I'll be your squad leader." Roebuck sounded a little like a camp counsellor.

The newcomer approached the trio. "My name is Niko Bellic. What is yours?"

Logan noticed from the pained expression on his face that Tom was having difficulty understanding Niko's exaggerated accent. "I'm Logan. He's Tom".

"Well it's good to meet you. I hope we can keep each other safe," said Niko.

The final two members of the squad entered. The first was a medium-sized black man that was more skin and bones than muscle. He had a *lot* of tattoos and ornamentation in the shape and national colours of sub-Saharan Africa, and it was clear he was growing an afro. A pair of heart-print tighty-whiteys could be seen above his drooping pants which sagged over his socks and flip-flops. In his pocket was a pair of gag glasses with a false nose and moustache. "I'm Carl Johnson, but you can call me CJ." That was how he introduced himself. He and Niko exchanged suspicious glances.

"It's good to have you on board, CJ. Your father tells me you're a good fighter," said Roebuck.

"Wait, are you Johnson's son?" asked Logan.

"Yeah," CJ said as though he were thrusting the word out. "I am. And what's your name?" Logan and Niko introduced themselves, with Tom keeping his down to his name. "A'ight, cool, cool. So who we waiting on, or is this it?" asked CJ.

"We got one more on the way. Then I can give you boys your mission briefing," explained Roebuck. And speak of the devil, the fourth man entered.

Tom rolled his eyes back in his head and let out an exasperated sigh. It was Raymond! Raymond, the man with whom he'd gotten into a mild altercation earlier. "Oh, come on!"

Raymond ignored him and asked, "Is this Delta Squad?"

"Sure is, buddy! C'mon in, and I'll give you guys your mission briefing." On Roebuck's command, the men crowded around him. Tom made a conceited effort to keep as much distance between Raymond and himself as possible.

"Right, we're being sent into Africa. Intel shows that Joseph Kony is still alive and working with the ponies. Our mission is to go in, take him out, and acquire intel specifically regarding the ponies. Any questions?"

"Yeah, when do we leave?" Niko asked.

"And how many rations do we get?" asked CJ.

"After a two week period of retraining. We're gonna run you through the standard rigorous fitness exams and shooting regimens. Don't want you guys getting rusty." The dimples of Roebuck's small grin accentuated his glaring scars. "As for the rations, MRE coffee is so notoriously bad, the less you get, the better. Hence the acronym—Meals Recycled from Excretion."

Tyrone and Irish burst into Charlie Squad's barracks. There were two men and one woman sitting around. The men were playing Cards Against Humanity, a popular pastime among unfunny white people who are too old for Magic: the Gathering, and the woman was sharpening a toe knife.

"Is this Charlie Squad?" asked Tyrone.

One of the men looked up. He had a cigarette placed between his lips and it had burnt down to the butt. "Yeah. I'm your squad leader. The name's Dmitry Kalashnikov," said the man. He had a scar blinding his left eye and a tattoo of an L-shaped tetromino beside his other eye, with the inward hook at the top.

"I'm Tyrone."

"And I'm Irish."

Dmitry scoffed. "Yeah, I can tell you're Irish from your accent. What's your name?"

Irish frowned. "People just call me 'Irish'."

"Yeah, I know who you are." Dmitry grumbled and pointed at the woman picking her feet with her knife. "Over there is Zone Tan. She's a dyke. Or, as Stephen Moffat might've said, 'a cannibalistic, reptilian minger.' Say 'hi'." The word "dyke" refers to an artificial structure used to hold back a reservoir. You may be reminded of a story-like sentence in which a Dutch boy sticks his thumb into a hole in a dyke to prevent his village from being flooded, proving you can be heroic even if a bit impractical. Like the controversy of referring to people by terms they find offensive, pressing the matter can be a lot like holding back a great flood by keeping one's thumb forever on the issue in the dim hope that somebody will come by to replace you. In the end, that potential flood remains in place, and perhaps the best solution would have been if the little Dutch boy had just left a wad of his chewed gum there instead.

As Tyrone and Irish raised their hands and said hello, the woman cursed and threw a spare boot at Dmitry. "Hey, fuck you!"

"Point proven," joked Dmitry.[4]

"And this one playing cards with me and cheating is Ezio Auditore da Firenze. He doesn't speak much Russian,[5] but he sure follows other people's ideas pretty closely."

Ezio turned to them and nodded. He was a frowny man in a white hoodie. "Aloha," he said.

"Yeah, you too," said Tyrone.

Irish whispered an aside to Tyrone. "Man, this ain't fair! How come we get the band of misfits?"

"Shut up, man!" warned Tyrone, bulging his eyes out.

"So I guess we best get to explaining what we are doing." Dmitry discarded his cards and extinguished his butt in the deck. "As you know, the ponies are making a return. Lucky us! And they think it would be wise to attack us here. Our job, along with three hundred other men, is to hold the city and protect it. Questions?" Without waiting for any, Dmitry turned back to his insipid little card game.

"Yeah, do we have to sleep in here?" Irish noticed five beds evenly spaced out. The co-ed squad didn't make him blush, but it was safe to say that his squad mates were putting him off somehow.

"Yes, unfortunately," said Dmitry. He didn't elaborate as to why this arrangement was unfortunate.

"Oh, great." Irish sighed helplessly at Tyrone.

"Yes, I'm sleeping with a knife. Any of you try to lay your dirty hands on me, and I'll cut your pecker off." Zone Tan growled. She literately made an animalistic growling sound.

"Back at you," Irish muttered.

"Whether we like it or not, this is our new squad. Our new extended family." Tyrone said.

"Yeah, and they all are fucking imbred!" cursed Irish.

"What did you say!?" Zone let out a kind of monkey-ish screech.

"Oh, shit!" cursed Irish.

Chapter Nine.

Caffeine and panic. Social bonds. Break. The harbinger.

Even after Gaz had been debriefed, recent events continued to loop in his head over and over again. Price was dead! Oleg and Griggs also gone. It was a complete mess. The hour was late. "I need a coffee," Gaz said to himself as he ran his hands across his face.

Gaz made his way down a narrow, well-lit corridor. He passed three doors on either side before turning into the one on the left at the end. Inside, he saw four metal tables with metal chairs. There were also three machines to the side: one serving

[4] You are not missing a portion of this text. It is unknown in the original manuscript what point he believes to have been proven here.
[5] All dialogue has been rendered in the language of the narrative for your convenience, except where pertinent.

coffee, one serving snacks and the final serving sandwiches. He made his way to the coffee machine as intended. He paused to examine his choices. Standard coffee or a “lartay” as the latte button had been labelled. What a variety of choice. Gaz fed a pound into the machine and slipped a paper cup into the nozzle bay. He selected a latte, which only came black on this machine (one of many lost arts following the pony holocaust). His hands were heated as the black liquid choked and splashed out into the cup. Once it was filled, Gaz took a seat at one of the tables.

He was all alone in the entire room. Gaz lowered his head so far to gaze into his coffee that he could no longer really “see” it. *Is it my fault?* he wondered. *Could I have just reacted quick enough to stop Price from being hurt?* His thoughts sipped away at him, draining all the heat away and leaving him with chills. He wrapped his hands around the scalding hot coffee cup but couldn’t feel its warmth. The door to this desolate little mess hall creaked open, and Gaz looked up to see Yuri Raslov stagger into the room. He had a bottle of vodka in one hand and his M9 Beretta in the other.

"Yuri, are you ok?" asked Gaz. It was hard to tell. Yuri always had his Beretta when he drank, and he always drank vodka.

Yuri staggered further into the room and took a gulp of the Russian water. He said nothing apart from “Glug, glug.”

"Yuri?" asked Gaz again, louder.

Yuri stopped and swung his head round to face Gaz. He could’ve given himself whiplash like that. "Just fine and braaap!” (“Braaap” is a word which here refers to the onomatopoeia for belching.) “Dandy." Yuri grinned stupidly before taking another gulp of vodka.

"Look, maybe you should give me the bottle," suggested Gaz as he stood up from the table.

"No!" snapped Yuri. He splashed some vodka on the floor when he jerked his bottle out from Gaz’s reach.

"I think you’ve had too much." Gaz didn’t need a breathalyser to tell Yuri was drunk. He was Russian.

"Yeah, well, maybe *you* have had too much." Yuri sneered and raised his weapon. Gaz noticed it had been cocked.

"Oh, shit! Yuri, watch where you point that thing, man. One of us could get hurt!" said Gaz as he began to walk towards Yuri.

"That’s not what the NRA says! Guns don’t kill people!" Yuri raised his weapon and waved it around like a firecracker.

"Yuri, what's gotten into you, man?"

"What do you think?" Yuri let out a throaty roar before taking another giant gulp of Vodka.

"Yuri, calm down. We’re all grieving, but that doesn't mean you can go around aiming loaded guns at people." Gaz reached out slowly for the gun.

"We...we could have saved him!" panted Yuri. “Don’t touch my gun. I’m the NRA! I support gun control.”

"The NRA *wants* people to have guns, you drunken loony. Look, we can’t blame ourselves.” Gaz managed to get his hand around the barrel of Yuri’s stiff, dark gun.

"Fuck off!" Yuri kicked Gaz to the floor. "We failed him!"

Gaz clung to Yuri’s legs and sobbed. "Yuri, please, this is stupid! You’re out of control!”

"We failed him! We were his team, and we let him down!" Yuri, too, began to wail and moan.

"Yuri, people die in war! That's what’s supposed to happen! We can’t blame ourselves!”

"Like hell we can’t!" screamed Yuri as he put the gun to his temple. He started rambling incoherently at the top of his voice. “Bulabbadajabewda!”

"Yuri no!" shouted Gaz. That's when three soldiers barged through the door. They instantly noticed Yuri as he turned to face them. The three guards didn't think; they just charged forward. Yuri pointed his gun towards them. One of the soldiers grabbed his hand in which the gun was placed and pointed it towards the ceiling. The second soldier restrained the other arm and the third soldier landed a right hook to Yuri's face. Yuri fell unconscious. He had been so close, too.

"Get him out of here!" ordered the third soldier. The other two dragged Yuri from the room by his ankles and discussed getting Chinese food, but remembered their favourite take-out store had been bombed in the initial Equestrian siege. The third soldier offered his hand to Gaz. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah, just peachy." Gaz was lying. “Peachy,” among other ersatz definitions, does not mean the sensation one feels just after witnessing one’s co-worker brandishing a gun and threatening suicide.

Nodding, he waved his hand a little and introduced himself. "I'm Commander Martin Walker.”

"Just call me Gaz.”

"What happened here?" asked Martin, who was still holding out his hand.

"We, er, we just lost our squad leader. He was taking it a bit over the top," replied Gaz.

Martin pulled out a metal chair and sat in it backwards. “Well, let me rap with you, son. Losin’ a member of your squad is never easy. Please, just take a seat right there.”

Gaz nodded and sat back down in his original chair. "So how come I've never seen you around?" Gaz took a swig from his coffee which had finally cooled to a drinkable temperature.

"Adams, Lugo and I have been on a mission in Derby for six weeks. We got back yesterday.”

"Adams, Lugo, who are they?" Gaz blew some bubbles in his coffee when he momentarily forgot how to sip.

"The two men that just restrained your friend.” Martin had a half-open smile as he nodded towards the door.

"Oh.” Gaz was quiet for a long time, and the two men blinked at each other. When Martin said nothing further, Gaz asked, “What were you doing in Derby?"

"We were bringing order back to the city. When the ponies attacked it, they eradicated the government and turned the city against its own race. We had to straighten things out." Martin pulled out his canteen and unscrewed it with much difficulty.

"How did that go?"

"Not too well," Martin replied dully.

"Oh, sorry to hear that.”

"Yeah, well..." Martin took a swig of water.

"You want a coffee?" Gaz stuck his thumb toward the machine.

"Nah. When you’re in a desert city, inhaling sandstorm after sandstorm, you appreciate your water as much as your weapon." Martin screwed the top back onto his water. Gaz nodded. Establishing a rapport with Martin, a new friendship, was helping in the wake of the loss of Price.

In the torture chamber, other social bonds were being forged. "Argh! You bastard!" Harbinger cried in pain as Justin pushed the blowtorch up against his pale, thin skin.

"Who are you working for?" asked Justin as he pulled the torch away.

"I'm going to kill you." Harbinger mustered a grin.

Justin shrugged. "Suit yourself." Justin pushed the torch to Harbinger's chest again. Harbinger let out another terrific bellow of agony. He kept telling himself to remain patient for the perfect moment when Justin would slip up. "Haven’t you had enough yet?" asked Justin as he placed the torch onto the small metal table. “You’re not the only guy I gotta torture today.”

"Ha. I can take as much pain as your mum can take cocks, and believe me, that's a lot." Rivulets of blood dribbled down Harbinger’s lower lip as he laughed.

"You listen here," growled Justin as he pulled Harbinger towards him by the hair. They were now face to face. "I am going to crush your puny head!" Justin grimaced in disgust as some of Harbinger’s hair came off in his hand.

"Not if I do it first!" Harbinger laughed. Justin went to punch him in the face, but Harbinger smiled and opened his eyes wide. Justin froze as Harbinger's eyes glowed bright yellow, like a pair of radioactive lemons. He began to mutter in an ancient language that may as well have been nonsense. His jaws opened wide, until the gaping space between his ferocious, inhuman teeth encompassed the field of his head. A slender tongue stretched out from that abyss like a forked, flattened worm that slithered through the air between both men as though timidly practicing its balancing act. It flickered and prodded blindly against Justin’s cheek before rising to tickle his left eye. His lids twitched, but could not close. He could feel that tongue squeeze its way under his eyeball and sift around uncomfortably around his retina. Feeling that ocular organ push around and shift within its socket was a disturbing sensation, and when his eye was squeezed against its boundaries, a stinging pain started to spark through his temple and down the side of his face. Parts of his body began to convulse, like his knee and fingers, but his face remained paralyzed. He could not scream. He could not move. The tongue slipped deep into his head somewhere, and he became vividly aware of spaces and masses inside of his own skull that he had remained blissfully ignorant of his whole life, even when forcing others to discover them. There was a sharp, stuffy sensation behind his uvula, and Justin retched reflexively as Harbinger’s tongue moved its way out of his mouth.

Harbinger tensed his entire tongue and tugged on it hard. Justin's head caved in immediately, moulded into a garish, triangular shape. Justin's final, terminal breath gurgled and whistled out of his broken cerebrum, and Harbinger zipped his tongue back into his maw like a retracting tape measure. Justin's ugly corpse stared at Harbinger, twisted and scrunched into a charnel mask like a broken toy.

"Told you so," Harbinger said in a childish, mocking tone. He grinned smugly as he dribbled blood all around his mouth. He blew hard into Justin's mangled visage and sent him thudding to the floor. Harbinger pulled his arms down and his shackles broke under the pressure. As simple as that, he was free.

Harbinger slowly opened the door and poked his head out into the hallway. There was one guard with his back facing him. Harbinger exited the room and paced towards the guard who turned to see him. The guard pulled out his handgun, but it was too late. Harbinger knocked it from his hand with one swipe and smacked him in the nose with the palm of his hand. The guard's nose burst into a stream of blood just like a broken water balloon, and the force managed to spear the cartilage straight up into his skull. The guard slid down the corridor wall, his expiring body still twitching.

Harbinger continued on his merry way, skipping down the corridor where at the end was the weapon lockup. Here, his confiscated weapons and armour were kept. Harbinger wasted no time kicking the door open. There were two guards examining one of his wrist blades; they both turned to see him.

"I believe that's mine," Harbinger said. The men didn't know what to do. They had been caught shamefully off-guard. One guard went for his riffle which he had placed on the table, and the other dived for the alarm. Harbinger leapt forward onto the table. The man grabbed his riffle but recoiled in fear. The second guard was about to hit the alarm when Harbinger grabbed his wrist blade and threw it at the man. The blade struck him for the back, and he landed in front of the alarm, dead. His head clattered loudly to the counter, and his hand stopped several inches short.

Meanwhile, the second man had just finished cocking his riffle. "Die, motherfucker!" he yelled as he held in the trigger. Harbinger gasped as two bullets hit him every second.

Martin and Gaz were still talking when they heard the sound of gunfire echoing through the hallway. "What was that?" Gaz asked.

"I don't know. Let's check it out." Martin pulled out his M9 Beretta, and Gaz did the same. "Stick with me!" Martin ordered as they rushed out of the room and down the corridor. They ran for about a minute before coming to a door swiss-cheesed by bullet holes. They paused. Martin used three fingers to count down until he nodded burst into the room alongside Gaz. They were surprised to see the soldier standing over Harbinger's body, with smoke still drifting from the barrel of his weapon.

"Who is that?" Martin drew his gun back toward his chest, but kept it cocked. The surviving guard didn't answer; he remained perfectly still and stared down at Harbinger. Gaz reached forward and grabbed the man's riffle from him.

Still, there was no reaction until Gaz asked him if he was okay. The guard finally turned toward him and spoke. "I got him." His expression turned to a nervous smile. Gaz looked back towards Martin with a helpless shrug.

"Okay, well, look out!" warned Martin as he saw Harbinger rise up behind the guard. Before one could even type out "before it was too late," Harbinger grabbed the man and snapped his neck. He snapped it hard. There was a disgusting crunch as much of his upper spine was wrecked, like the shell of a culinary lobster.

"No!" Martin opened fire with his handgun, but Harbinger managed to zip from side to side, dodging every bullet like lightning. He grabbed Gaz and threw him back into the far wall, before slamming his fist into Martin's chest. Martin flew back and crashed into the stone wall of the corridor. Harbinger ignored the duo; instead he grabbed his cloak and pulled his blade from the first soldier's back. He slipped his blade back onto his wrist and grinned wickedly.

Gaz's head had collided pretty hard with a counter, and his vision was blurred. He lifted the riffle and whistled for attention as though he was hailing a cab in Los Angeles, only more masculine. Harbinger turned to look at Gaz, who smiled and opened fire. Four bullets struck Harbinger in the chest with rapid succession, sending him off his feet and out of a nearby window. Harbinger let out a wail as he fell three floors before crashing onto the bonnet of a parked Humvee. Adams and Lugo came charging down the corridor. Adams grabbed Martin and pulled him to his feet, whilst Lugo looked out of the window. Harbinger was nowhere in sight.

"What happened, Walker?" asked Adams.

Martin grabbed Gaz and pulled him to his feet as well. "What was that?" asked Martin.

Gaz looked back at him and shook his head uselessly. He couldn't say for sure what Harbinger had been. He only knew what he knew. "The thing that killed my squad leader and my two friends!" Harbinger had now escaped. This was only going to prove to be bad!

Soon Harbinger ran to race the wind. He'd just jumped the wall of the army base and escaped without notice, but that was sure to change as soon as Martin and company got their bearings together. The main gates groaned open, and Harbinger could hear the motors of three Humvees in pursuit. He was already about a hundred yards ahead of them, but a heavy snowfall was impeding his march.

"I see him over there!" roared one of the Humvee gunners.

"Dung!" Harbinger trudged faster. He could feel the warm glow of the headlights from the Humvees pushing against his back. They were catching up, and they were doing it fast. *The only way I can get out of this is to show my true form,* thought Harbinger as he grew very tired. *It may be against my code, but I must do it!* That's when two Humvees rolled up on either side of him.

"Hold it steady! I got a good shot!" shouted one of the Russian soldiers.

The third Humvee pushed behind Harbinger. "I got the shot!" called out its gunner.

"Fire!" shouted another. Harbinger was struck down by six bullets flying from behind and either side of him. Harbinger's roar was cut short like a punctured balloon. His body flailed into every other bullet and collapsed to the ground. The third Humvee rolled over his carcass. Harbinger lay dead, his blood staining the cold white snow. The Humvees stopped and the men exited them, slamming the doors amidst the din of the wind and rushing the flurries into a frenzy.

"We got him," one of the soldiers said, proudly. At least twenty-six of them circled around.

"Alec, check him," ordered the soldier in command, shouting over the gusting tumult.

The youngest of the men marched towards Harbinger, his gun swinging at his side. "Yeah, he's dead." Alec laughed as he kicked Harbinger's stiff corpse over onto his back. Harbinger's lifeless gaze stared up into Alec's bright green eyes. Alec stared into those glassy orbs as though transfixed, waiting for some reason to pull the trigger on his weapon. He became lost in the moment, puzzling over who this strange escapee was, and didn't even notice when the bullets began to push their way out from and drop out of Harbinger's Swiss-cheesed wounds.

One of Alex's friends asked, "Alec, what's happening?" He'd noticed the bullets rising out of Harbinger's form as if the body was bread baking in an oven, then oozing out like bursting pimples and rolling to land in the snow. Alec remained silent. He hadn't even heard his friend's voice. His focus still fixated onto Harbinger's eyes, which appeared far less glossy and deeper as if they could be looking at something.

"Alec!" the soldier called again, concern now evident in his voice. Alec still did not say a word, and he continued not to respond even when Harbinger opened his glowing, yellow eyes.

"Shooting me wasn't very nice, now was it?" growled Harbinger. Blood began to pour from his proliferous bullet wounds. Alec swayed back to consciousness with a pang of fear.

"Alec, what's the matter?" asked the officer in charge. Alec wanted to scream for help, but he couldn't. Harbinger leapt to his feet, then before the other soldiers could react, he grappled Alec and pulled his body in front of him.

"Alec!" cried one soldier.

"Let him go!" cried a second.

"You brought this upon yourselves, humans!" Harbinger's voice was like a nasty snarl.

"Let him go!" shouted the officer in charge.

Harbinger grinned. "Or what?"

"Let him go or I'll shoot!" shouted a soldier.

"Don't make us do it!" said another.

"I would like to see you try." Before anyone reacted, Harbinger snapped Alec's neck like a pretzel stick.

Amidst the blaze of opening fire, several soldiers could be heard bellowing in rage. Using Alec's dead body like a meat shield, Harbinger began to mutter words in his ancient language. Their very invocation must have been significant, because the gunfire rendered them inaudible. When the men stopped to reload, Harbinger dropped Alec's body onto the snow. The men worried as Harbinger held his hands out, his eyes turned bright white, and he continued his archaic speech. A gleaming, xanthous energy drifted out of Harbinger's fingertips and coiled up his arms like fat, ethereal worms. The men were too stunned to shoot. Harbinger roared the final words of his preternatural incantation as the yellow phantasm sifted into his eyes. He dropped to his knees on the cold, wet ground, and everyone fell silent. Harbinger bowed his head and the silence continued for a couple of minutes. In all that time, the soldiers did not attack.

"What's happening?" one soldier asked another, who replied that he didn't know.

Then suddenly! Harbinger pulled his head up and let out a deafening roar that blew the top layer of snow away from him. The men stumbled back, covering their ears as a new sound rang out from the now-thrashing Harbinger. He appeared to be taken by a seizure, and was howling in unadulterated pain.

"Holy shit!" cried a solider as two wings tore their way out of Harbinger's back like mighty spears. They unfolded like sickles and then stretched out their leathery flaps of skin as though someone were wrapping on a condom. His torso and head grew long and misshapen. His skin burned to a feverish crimson, and his back crackled and stiffened into rigid, shiny scales. His meagre clothing tore into scraps which fell from his body, and his limbs swelled to match his elongating form. The men gasped and some ran away as the intimidating entity of a blood red dragon stood in Harbinger's place.

"God help us!" gasped the officer in charge like a panel in a Jack Chick comic.

"God cannot help you now," said the dragon that was Harbinger. His voice was deep to accompany his unveiled form, and his tone was sinister and robotic.

"Fuck you!" cried a soldier as he fired at Harbinger. It was no use; the bullets did nothing to the beast. Harbinger laughed and lowered his head. He inhaled like a mighty bellows, then snapped open his jaws with a click, blowing a stream of blue and yellow fire at the men. The first line was incinerated instantly, the second row was being cooked alive, and the third row of men was heaved up on an updraft and flung away. The officer in charge crashed through the snow beneath him, his body blotched from heat and cold. He crawled away in impotent fear as he smelt burning flesh and heard his men crying out for help. The last remaining soldier unleashed his gunfire, which was no match for another wave of Harbinger's conflagration. Only Harbinger and the commanding officer remained.

When one thinks of a military commander, provided they are thinking of one from their own country, they think of idyllic qualities a person must possess to carry the heavy burden of ordering other human beings to lay down their lives in the pursuit of violence and the hypocrisy of peace. Usually these are nice qualities, but only a few of them truly pertain to leading a regiment to take lives. Honour, bravery, cunning, confidence. One does not usually think of a man carrying an armful of pufferfish he intends to juggle while wearing a religious sense of duty over a coat of bravado.

"Please don't kill me," begged the officer as tears welled up in his eyes.

Harbinger just stalked over the man who was pitifully crawling through the snow. His massive draconic paws sizzled through the frozen surface, melting perfect prints where they stepped.

"Pathetic." Harbinger sneered in disgust at the puny mortal set before him. The smell of roast flesh hungered the terrible beast so. He scooped up the officer alongside a mouthful of snow which melted almost instantaneously on his tongue. The man screamed as the prison of teeth closed in around him. Chewing with his mouth open, he pressed the wailing human between his tongue and the bumpy roof of his mouth, then slid him down that slimy peristalsis. Harbinger kicked off from the ground and took flight just as the human disappeared whole like so many pounds of raw meat behind that scaly belly. "I am coming, brothers!"

Chapter Ten.

Things get chaotic. Drinks on me.

Harbinger set down aback a flat, aclinic dais there hinged on the west rocky face o' the mountainsides. A precise location to map was veritably very not known; time was definitely 4:48 am right on the dot. The sky was obscure dark, the chill, airy gust billowing down like a crude, ugly, oppressor. The barometric pressure would not have been ideal for fishing, even if the platform wasn't miles above sea level. Harbinger let out a strange, reptilian wail of pain as he transformed back into human form through means which have not yet been discerned. Once the agonising procedure was over, it left Harbinger standing naked in the frigid, lofty night. We're talking full-frontal here, with taut man-ass winking in the pale night. Harbinger grabbed a discoloured rock from the mountainside that he knew was loose and rolled it away. This revealed a dark tunnel behind it, leading deep into the mountain and maybe about as high as Harbinger's humanoid waistline.

"I hate this part," growled Harbinger as he dropped to his knees and began to crawl deep into the tunnel. His heightened vision made it easier to see in the darkness, but the stony interior was an absolute bitch on his bare knees. Humans were such pathetic creatures, made of soft, vulnerable flesh, and he cursed the passage's size mandating this puny, unscaled form. After a few minutes of crawling (which always seemed like forever for Harbinger and his blistering knees), he made it through the tunnel and into a dark room. This room had a giant iron door as its one defining feature. Harbinger brushed the dirt off of his freezing, naked body and approached. He took a deep breath of the musty cavern air and knocked three times. The sound echoed like stage gunshots. For a while, nothing happened. Displaying impatience, he knocked another three times. After a few

seconds a small slit in the iron door opened. Behind the slit was a pair of yellow eyes. The rest of the face remained hidden behind the door.

"Password.” The word came out more as a deep growl than as a voice.

Harbinger rolled his eyes and took another deep breath. "We are watched over by the one night mother, and she will protect us through our crusade.” The slit in the iron door was closed and the door was unlocked. It slowly pulled back, revealing a wide open chamber of complex design. A massive domed room had been carved into the mountain’s interior, which opened up downwards through a series of concentric levels. A kind of transparent tower resembling irregular glass rose up into the ceiling from deep in the floor, forming a conduit for glowing magma that in some respects resembled a gigantic, skinny lava lamp. The massive den sort of resembled something from Dante Alighieri’s depictions of Hell from *The Inferno,* although it’s a well-known fact at this time that the man did absolutely no valid research in the realm of accuracy.

The chamber was filled with hundreds of Harbinger’s kind, all in similar-looking human forms, as though the disguises they wore were mass produced and the templates were in short supply. They tended to have achromatic skin with narrow noses and elongated, reptilian eyes, as well as mostly androgynous builds. Harbinger paid little mind to the others who were milling about, reclining on glittering stones like furniture throughout the room, and more to the man behind the iron door.

This man was Harbinger’s brother, Kane, and he was holding a kind of shiny uniform for Harbinger to wear. It resembled latex to an extent, and was finely patterned with scale-like markings. It fit snugly around the neck, over the chest and arms, and loosely below the waist. "Here you go, brother," he hissed as he handed the clothing to Harbinger, who put the armour on quickly. He no longer felt cold because of the channel of magma, but the feel of scales was preferable to them for its familiarity. Harbinger winced in annoyance at the pain of the armour brushing against his various wounds.

"His Highmost Underlord Dictator for Strife, Reginald P. Discord Mott Fizzypop Moon-Unit, wishes to speak with you," explained Kane, rolling his otherwise inexpressive eyes as he read out the nonsensical series of titles and names.

"Yeah, what about?" Harbinger let out a snort.

"Your other kin made it back without you seven hours ago. You need to answer for the uncounted time," replied Kane bluntly.

"Oh, well, that’s a simple matter of my other kin abandoning me at the hands of those vile simians!” Harbinger ground his teeth together.

"Don't flame the messenger," hissed Kane as he moved his hand towards the door of Discord’s quarters. It was a rather noticeable entrance, as the décor in that space hardly matched the rest of the cavernous interior. Jukeboxes, arcade machines and soda stands lined the walls, lit up by some unknown electrical means, beeping and booping even at this distance. The door itself split down the middle, with the left door intimidating and grey and carved with the images of wailing faces, and the right door bright yellow with magenta swirls and covered in soft, tickly down.

"Fine!" Harbinger flicked up his hood and made the trek around the uppermost level, passing by the slopes to the lower levels and descending the deep incline before the bipolar door. The doors had big brass handles on the outside depicting theatrical masks of comedy and tragedy. Harbinger pushed open the doors and stepped into the hall that was Discords quarters. It was a push door.

Harbinger immediately hissed and had to shield his eyes with an arm. He noticed too late that the floor beneath his feet had been modified into a conveyor belt which drew him forward into the garish room before the massive doors slammed shut behind him with a resounding boom. Bizarre paraphernalia littered the room like a suburban trash house. His instincts envied the glittering of the hoard, but the objects contained therein appeared incomprehensible to him. For one thing, the light shining all around emitted from glowing dance pads carpeting the ground, and a rotating mirrored ball installed in the ceiling. A round table was taking up much of the space in the middle, but the table was toroid-shaped, and the only chairs were nailed in place around its off-centred interior. The table’s surface was covered in bowls of safety pins, marshmallow trail mix, and a ham radio. Another, smaller conveyor belt ran through the room like an out-of-control hamster tube had been crossed with an automatic sushi dispenser, and it ran over a trough of what appeared to be a river of melted pistachio ice cream. Holographic posters lined the walls depicting various images Harbinger couldn’t begin to decipher. Among diverse other toys and bric-a-brac too superfluous even to waste time mentioning lest it doubled the length of this manuscript was a great dollhouse to one side filled with burly action figures and a pair of chattering false teeth. Balloons hung from the ceiling and sank as far to the ground as they could, displaying doodles of rats and spiders on them. Everything in here annoyed Harbinger for reasons he couldn’t quite explain, and he dared not, for sliding into place beneath the magnificent mirrored ball was Discord himself, listening to a Victrola playing “Puff the Magic Dragon”.

Discord was a strange-looking creature. His body was serpentine in stature and mismatched in every detail. He resembled a long dragon in some respects, but the drawing of several distracted children constructed over the course of eight

sleepless nights in many others. Deciding where to start on describing this whimsical anomaly would be like revealing the charnel anatomy of some eldritch horror, or deciding which corner to slice first when eating a circular cake. Even his face was difficult to examine given how often he flapped those tawny grey, knobbly equine jaws of his. His oval eyes, positioned under bushy white eyebrows, were somehow beady and bulging at the same time, with irascible ocherous sclera and asymmetrical tomato-hued pupils. From his chin dangled a thick tuft of white hair, and from his mawkish overbite jutted a single curved fang.

Other aspects of him appeared more draconic in nature than equine, although both aspects of him made his association with the Equestrians glaringly apparent. Even so, gazing upon his humorous visage could make one mysteriously absent-minded that they weren't staring at something endemic to an alternate reality. Atop his head were a two horns, and their dissimilar features would merit hesitation to name them a "pair". One protrusion was more like a cervine antler; the other was like a wavy, bulbous blue goat horn. A narrow black Mohawk like a horse's mane travelled down the back of his head. Below the scruff of his neck, his body was a kind of dull, brownish maroon, scaled but appearing matted in rotten down. His left arm segmented into an avian's clawed foot, if it was an arm, and his other arm was a bloated, muscular lion's leg, ending in an equally vicious paw. Situated low on his spine but looking as if they'd provide no semblance of practical lift were two blue wings; one light and feathered, the other dark and chiropteran, both on the verge of ornamental stubs. His tubular, mostly uniform torso sported two irregular legs that appeared to have been stuck on as an obligatory after-thought. One leg appeared to be a customary scaly, green hind leg befitting a dragon. The other leg was a light tan horse's leg, all the way down to its fetlock and hoof. His body seemed to forget the rest of itself, and from the end opposite his head was a long, spiny tail of thick, amaranth scales that resulted in another tuft of wizened ecru hair.

As though dissatisfied with this confection of disjointed parts for an ensemble, Discord was wearing a shiny mohair jacket, white and glittering with rhinestones, with the huge lapels flipped upward (whether he wanted them to or not). He was sporting a pair of shades that had colourful LEDs lighting up along the frames. He dipped the shades, leered at Harbinger, and announced himself. "Discord Stu is bringing the chaos to *you!"*

Harbinger gawked at this surreal display. Discord frowned and drew close. "Well? What is it you want? I'm a busy draconequus. I've got calamity to sow and whole new species to torment."

Harbinger winced again. There was a peculiar tic in his lower right eyelid he had in a human form. Dumbly, he managed to say, "Um, *you* summoned *me* here, sir?" It sounded more like a question.

"Oh, that I did. Glad you could finally join us, Hamburger, was it?" Discord adopted a disaffected tone and hopped over the table to grab a seat inside of it. He plucked a manila folder marked "Order" and tapped its edge upon the table's surface, then drew out a disorganized manila folder marked "Chaos" and shuffled the papers from the former into the latter.

"Sorry, my lord, the humans, they—"

Discord interrupted Harbinger. "Would you care for a tiny glass of water?" From a chilled thermos, he began pouring ice cubes into a Star Wars collector's glass. He tipped the glass back as he fixed Harbinger with a tepid poker face and crunched noisily on a cube.

Harbinger hissed under his breath. He may have pledged his undying loyalty to this person, but dealing with him directly was always…off-putting. "No, my Lord. I need to tell you what the humans were doing."

"Ooh, ooh! Don't tell me. Let me guess. I think I have an idea." Discord unscrewed an incandescent lightbulb that had been somehow attached to the head of a power drill, and tapped the still-illuminated item to the side of his head. "Were they throwing one of those tacky Mardi Gras celebrations? Did you earn some cheap, plastic beads by ingratiating yourself at the cost of your dignity?"

"No, sir, I—"

"Did they get confused when they tried to vasectomize you, then demotivate you by saying lizards don't need to wear blue jeans?" Discord furiously rubbed the lightbulb back and forth between his paws.

"We're endothermic fire-breathers. We're anatomically ex—"

"Oh, I've got it!" Discord bit down on the lightbulb as though he was chomping on a tofurkey drumstick. "You're trying to tell me the humans got the better of you!" Discord smiled brightly, but his eyes were brighter; they had lit up just like the lightbulb.

Harbinger became flustered. "No, sir! I—"

"Well then what?" Discord roared, drawing out his words longer than necessary as he pounded the table incessantly. "This is my loud voice! This is my outdoor voice indoors!"

Outrage filled Harbinger's veins. Instead of shrinking back from this noise, he emitted a bestial snarl. "My cadre left me! They left me for dead, and fled home, incomplete!"

Discord smiled as though he'd just woken up from a nap. "Your team left you because of your own stupidity. That's why. That is why. That is the reason. That is why they left." He nodded a lot.

Harbinger dared not speak his mind. He knew the consequences if he did.

"Come, join me for a drink!" Discord was still acting cordial again. He stood up on his seat and clambered over the table, bustling about his chambers. He took a rather large glass goblet and began filling it with a smorgasbord of random sugary things one hesitates to call "food". He threw in different candies, poured in syrups and sodas, dolloped in scoops of ice cream and even tossed in a couple of wax lips. He then pulled a handheld fan seemingly out of nowhere and used it to blend the sweet concoction together. Halfway through this bizarre chemistry, he turned the fan on himself as though to cool off. When he'd finished, he whipped the goblet towards Harbinger in offering. Harbinger stared at the lumpy brew in disgust. He was certain he could see and hear something like a wind-up toy buzzing within.

"Er, no thank you, sir, I'm not—"

"Drink!" Discord insisted. "Chug, chug, chug!"

Harbinger did not argue. He took hold of rather large, colour-changing straw. "Thank you, sir."

"Go on," Discord bid him, only he stretched out the word "on" for about half a minute so that it sounded more like "Ahhhhhhnnnnnnnnnnnnn."

Harbinger gulped and took a sip. It took a bit of doing to suction that thick, sugary goop up through the straw and into his mouth. The instant it hit his tongue, his pupils dilated. Dragons hated the taste of sweet things. Harbinger had subsisted on the cold, hard, nutritional texture of gemstones for the past five hundred years. Tasting something so disgustingly tangy made his tongue shrink away in horror as the flavour stuck to every surface in his mouth. He tried to wipe the insufferable juicy sensation on the roof of his mouth, but still it remained. It made his teeth hurt and his gums tickle. The sensation was like ingesting fuzzy chemicals. Sweet tasted fake to him. He wanted to spit it out, but he swallowed down the noxious brew in fear of his leader.

"Please explain to me why you thought it to be a good idea to kill so many men?" asked Discord.

"I confirmed the box to be in their possession," replied Harbinger.

"I know that, silly. That's why I sent you. But that still doesn't answer my question!"

Harbinger felt confused. He had followed his instincts to the letter, yet he was being reprimanded to answer for his inordinance. He also felt confused by the horrid flavour still lingering on his palate. "Sir, they had weapons! You gave me a large cadre. Why, if not to attack?" He felt a kind of hiccup shake him.

"Oh, Hamburgers, I sent them with you because I knew you'd mess it all up! Unfortunately, we have a silent agreement with those simpering humans. We leave them alone, and they leave us alone!"

"But why?" asked Harbinger. "We needed that box they have!"

Discord seized Harbinger by the neck and slammed his body onto the top of the table. His claws pressed between Harbinger's back teeth from the exterior, forcing his jaws open so he could feed more of that overly-sweet slop to him. "There's a time and a place for sowing mayhem, but it won't be as jarring if the prey are already riled up! And speaking of this square-ish device, did you happen to retrieve it?"

Harbinger and Discord both shook their heads in unison. Harbinger blew bubbles into the potion before guzzling it down so he could eventually breathe again. "You know what you need to do now?" Discord asked him. Again Harbinger shook his head, so Discord told him. "You need to quack like a duck and fly south for the winter."

Back out in the lair, the human-form dragons could hear a boisterous noise from behind Discord's door. It sounded like someone was having a shouting fit of some kind, or maybe overcome with laughter. It had to be rather loud to penetrate the thick doors, but soon they burst open inwards. Harbinger was crouching, knees bent, his arms folded at the elbow and flapping like wings. He was quacking loudly like a particularly ornery duck, flapping his arms and waddling about at top speed. He ran up the slope of the uppermost level as everyone looked on, aghast. Quacking loudly, Harbinger leapt from the top ring, still beating his arms stupidly as he fell several stories and hit the stone ground below with a rumbling crash.

As he lay there, his body broken but repairing itself like so many bullet wounds, Kane stepped over to him. "You really fucked up this time," said Kane with a shake of his head. Harbinger looked up at Kane and said nothing in response. He dropped his chin and stared at the ground again. He knew he'd screwed up. He was living it.

Chapter Eleven.

Gaping maws. The general question of Daniel.

Galloping hooves banged against the door, and Daniel jolted as it was violently kicked. Pinkie Pie's voice roared from behind the framed barrier like a precocious child pursuing something stolen by an older sibling. "Let me in!"

"Go away!" returned Daniel, much in the way one deals with Jehova's Witnesses or Mormons. "Go away!" returned Daniel, much in the way one deals with Jehova's Witnesses or Mormons. He scanned the non-descript room to find a rocking chair placed in the centre of the room and an old chest of drawers placed taking up most of the wall to the left. He pulled on the end of the chest of drawers, though it was laden with junk. With great effort, he managed to nudge it.

"Right, I need to find a way out of here and quick!" said Daniel as he frantically searched. He could see no other doors, no windows, and no vents.

"Let me in, let me in, or I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow the darn door in!" It sounded as though Pinkie was hacking away at the door with a sharp implement like a carving knife. Her voice became deep and daemoniacal. "Let me in!"

Then everything fell silent. Pinkie had stopped. Daniel could feel his heart pumping a million miles an hour. He then heard the sound of hooves clopping away into the distance. Daniel gave a sigh of relief and began to catch his breath. He resumed his search for an alternate exit. That was when he heard the sound of creaking. Daniel turned to see the rocking chair slowly rocking. As his morbid curiosity drew him closer, the chair started to rock violently. Perhaps it was his military training to embrace conflict, but he couldn't rightly say why he continued to approach the preternatural phenomenon. **Then suddenly!** Pinkie Pie jumped out from under the empty space beneath the chair, brandishing a knife that gave off a polished shine like a silver smile. Daniel fell over backward as the pony pounced upon him with her full weight. She pushed the knife down, and though he gripped her fetlock, he wasn't sure he could combat the pressure of her equine strength indefinitely.

"You're mine!" roared Pinkie Pie as her blade drew closer to Daniel's chest.

"No, please," begged Daniel as he felt the tip of the blade press against his chest. He roared in pain when he felt the metal slip into his chest. He lifted his leg and kicked Pinkie in her soft gut. She shouted in anger as she bounced to the floor.

"You die now!" She laughed. Her body started to shrink itself down, but her head began to inflate like a balloon as though absorbing her torso and legs. Daniel crawled to the corner of the room in fear. Pretty soon, Pinkie's giant head filled nearly the entire room, pushing the rocking chair against the door. "Dinner time!" She giggled before opening her mouth. Her face started to peel away like cheap paint on a hot summer day. Beneath the fraying flesh was a hideous face, crimson as blood with gleaming jade eyes and nasty black markings. A strong force began to pull Daniel towards her mouth.

"No, please!" Daniel cried as he grabbed for the chest of drawers. He held on as tightly as he could as the invisible suction dragged him along the floor. The metal handles were cutting painfully into his fingers. "Help me, someone!" It was no use. Daniel lost his grip and was sucked into her mouth. Pinkie Pie had done it. She had made Daniel's worst nightmare come true. She had eaten him alive!

Daniel cried out in fear as he coasted down Pinkie Pie's wet tongue and fell through her oropharynx and her oesophagus. His petrifying fear was irrelevant considering the slimy, frictionless surfaces of the peristalsis that clutched and sank him into the nefarious depths below. The muscular equine throat was smothering him repeatedly, bringing his worst fears to life. The fear of being devoured alive had never been real for him until the first incidents of Equestrian invaders eating humans alive had been reported. The reality had become all too personal for him when his brother, James, had been killed. And when the first dragon had attacked Hainan and very nearly made a meal out of Daniel, the prospect had traumatized him to his very core, even during his restless spiel as the ponies' thrall.

Daniel's body careened through that sinewy passage, flinging left and right, moving faster with every second he wondered when he'd reach the bottom. At that thought, he felt the fleshy surface disappear from underneath him and he launched through dark space into a recess he could only assume was the pink beast's stomach. As soon as the wind rushed back into his lungs, he screamed, but it was a wheezing, high-pitched sound. His posterior collided with something semi-solid again, and he could hear the sizzling of acid.

Or was it the sifting of sand? Daniel's eyes burned from sunlight, and when they were able to focus, he found himself on a sandy beach where salty waves lapped around him. His breath was coming in and hour in synch with the sighing waves. He started to cough violently, and before long, blood came spewing out of his mouth. He blinked and shielded his eyes with his arm as he looked skyward to make sure that was really the bright sun beaming down on him. He heard a voice emanating from the sun; a familiar voice was calling for a nurse. Confusion set in, nurturing the panic that still drummed within his chest. He tried to move, but the damp sand adhered to his rear and legs. He was beginning to feel numb all over again.

"Nurse! Nurse, help!" called the familiar voice once again. He recognized the voice. It wasn't the sun at all, now that he thought about it. It was the voice of his mother. Daniel could not see anything but a long sandy beach met by water. He still couldn't stand, only sit there, and he swivelled his torso around to look up and down the endless span of beach in either direction.

"Help! Somebody help me!" The words came amidst the smacking of water. The voice that screamed them was high-pitched to the point of rasping. The sun blurred Daniel's vision for a moment, stinging his eyes with light, but after a second or two, he found the source of the plea: Someone was flailing around in the ocean, drowning. Throwing himself into action, Daniel forgot his immobility and dove into the murky water. He wasn't trained for swimming, but he performed his best imitation of an Olympic swimmer from television and lashed at the water with his arms and legs. In no time flat, he reached the floundering boy and dragged him back to the shore by sheer force of will.

Somewhere along the way, he realized the boy was himself. He threw his younger form onto his back on the dry sand, and sputtered and choked out water himself as though it had been him that was drowning. His lungs ached. Daniel looked around. There was only the sea behind him, and everything else in the world was sand stretching into infinity. Recognizing his younger self's enigmatic idiom from earlier, he posited a question. "Where are we?"

The younger Daniel looked around. He let out a disappointed scoff. "You're dreaming of the beach outside Sea Parks we went to when we were my age. It was the year Tom kept calling us 'Dan' after we got him to stop calling us 'Danny', so just think of me as Dan. We swam out too far and couldn't touch the bottom. James saved us before the lifeguard could reach us."

Those words made something inside of Daniel's head jump, as though his brain was trying to vacate his skull. "Wait, what did you just say?"

"Duh. Shaun Moulder was about to tell you earlier, but, well, you know the rest."

"Tell me what's going on." Daniel still could not get a grasp on the situation. He was certain that the other Daniel was speaking coherently, but every time he tried to listen, Daniel's words kept slipping past him at high velocity. Not his words. The other him. Dan's. Dammit. His brain just didn't want to listen. There was only himself and one other person here, and he was having difficulty keeping the two of them apart.

"You're not awake. Well, you're awake, but you're kinda not," said Dan as if he was talking in riddles. "It's time to get up now. It's time to sleep."

"What the heck are you talking about?" He had to censor himself from swearing in front of a child.

Dan sighed and sat up. "Okay, look. You're kind of in a coma."

"'Kind of'? That's impossible!"

"No, surviving a gunshot to the head was impossible. Well, almost."

"What does that have to do with anything?" For some reason, Daniel had lost the memory of being shot in the head. It had left him in that exact moment Dan had referenced it, much in the same way one loses sight of something moving in the corner of one's eye.

"Well, you kinda got shot in the head." Dan tapped himself in the side of the forehead.

"What? Who shot me?"

"Er, Tom." Dan's eyes shifted. His smirk danced.

"What? Like hell he would!"

"In all fairness, you did try to kill him." Dan nodded emphatically.

"What?" This was starting to become the general question of Daniel. He just shook his head; he couldn't even look at his younger self right now.

"Yeah. In fact, you became so instrumental in killing so many soldiers of the human army that he had no choice."

Daniel couldn't believe what he was hearing. How could he do that? Why would he try to kill his allies and closest friends? Before Daniel could ask the other questions ready to surf forth, he was interrupted by his mother's voice and that of another.

"Is he okay?" came the worried voice of Jenny Williams.

"Mum!" called Daniel as he looked around.

"Mum?" asked Dan with a confused expression. He behaved as though he couldn't hear the voice, but he believed Daniel heard it.

"Yes, don't you hear that?" Daniel paced around, leaving footprints on the beach as he looked up towards the sun in search of his mother's voice.

"Yes, but he won't be for long. The antidote needs to be given to him soon, or he will pass on." Daniel didn't recognize this other female voice.

"Antidote? What antidote?" asked Daniel, calling up to the deep blue sky. "Mum! Mum, where are you?" He stared skywards for a long moment as Dan squinted at him. Daniel cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted once more. "Mum!"

"She can't hear you!" shouted Dan over Daniel's cries. Daniel stared at Dan, who lowered his head and continued. "This is in your head." He was silent for a moment. "I hear Mum's voice all the time, since shortly after I was conceived. I remember everything we've forgotten, like being born dead. We were almost stillborn, but the doctors revived us. Mum birthed a corpse.".

"What? No, I am sure she is there," Daniel protested.

"She is. She just won't hear you," Dan explained.

"You're not making any sense!" Daniel was showing his impatience at all the complications. His brow knit with fury, and his fists clenched. He kicked up a heave of moist sand.

"I realize it's difficult to get a grip on things when you're in a dream, but you're in a coma," Dan explained. "What you're hearing is going on around you in the real world. I don't know how I can make it any simpler than that."

Daniel rubbed his forehead in anger. "It's not simple," he said. "Am I stuck here, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, for how long?"

"Well, from what you just heard, until they find an antidote. Or you die."

Daniel felt like punching the non-existent Dan. He wanted to hit his younger self. Was he ever this precocious? Dan's answers became blunter and less helpful as his questions grew more inquisitive.

"So what am I meant to do then?" Daniel felt like giving up. He took a seat on the hot sand and slouched there.

Dan shrugged. "You could fight it."

"Fight. Fight what?"

Dan sighed and took a seat beside Daniel. "Look., you've been injected with some serum. The pony obedience toxin. Our dad's been talking about it. It made the enemy have full control over you. If they said jump, you said how high. And then Tom shot you. It's the 'coping with your mind dying' thing that all the kids are raving about these days. Your unconscious mind is farrow ground to the 'poison', and now it's trying to cope with the only voice being your subconscious."

Daniel tried to wrap his mind around this convoluted explanation. "So, what am I fighting exactly?"

Dan let out a frustrated groan. "The same enemy that you've been fighting this whole entire time. They've nearly had you a couple of times. Whatever you do, you can't let them capture you!" said Shaun.

"Capture me? I thought this was a dream," said Daniel. "Aren't I just inside a hospital? I can't stop them in my sleep."

Dan pinched his forehead. "Oh, come on. Look, this is the poison." Dan stooped down and drew a circle in the sand with his finger. He then drew a square beside it. "And this is you. Now the circle, like I just said, represents the poison, but it also represents the controlled side of you. Whereas the square is the free side, as in you right here. Now if Pinkie Pie kills you, then your free side dies, and is consumed by the controlled side, making you the ponies' bitch."

Daniel frowned. "That has to be the worst explanation I have ever heard," he said. "Circles and squares? Geometry was never out strong point." They both said this last sentence in unison.

Dan slapped his own face and ran his palm down to his chin as he growled. "Okay, how about this. The poison is the beach. It's surrounding this ocean and sucking it all up, which is your mind, because it's free and can take you anywhere."

"I don't have a boat and I can't swim."

Again, Dan tried a new explanation. “You dreamt you were fighting ponies. They represent the ponies. The human army that you command represents you trying to fight the ponies. You need to fight the ponies on a more metaphorical level, or you’ll lose your mind.”

Daniel just gave Dan a long, blank stare. Dan spent a great deal of time trying repeatedly to convey the situation by increasingly futile allegories until he finally said, “Keep fighting the ponies in our head or I’ll shove sand down your mouth.” Technically, the time was all conceptual and occurring in the non-space of Daniel’s mind.

Daniel took his younger self’s frustration with a grain of salt. “Well, I mean, that is what I had planned to do anyway. Why are you making this so difficult?”

“I’m a figment of *your* subconscious. We’re really just arguing with ourself, so you tell me.”

Daniel grimaced. Was he always kind of a contrary brat? "So I take it we need weapons.”

"Yes, but they can be metaphorical. Conceptual.”

"Right. So where do we get some?" Daniel scratched his behind uselessly.

"Come on, man! It's your imagination. How would you make them appear?”

"Oh my god, just think them up! It’s not rocket science!”

"Seems more like brain surgery to me," Daniel joked as he climbed to his feet.

Dan shook his head and also climbed to his feet. "Right. Just close your eyes and think real hard for a way to stop the ponies once and for all. Show me what kind of a man we are."

Daniel closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He strained his mind to think up a place full of weapons. Around his feet, the sandy beach fused and the clear ocean froze, both turning into steel-reinforced walls and floors with rows and rows of shelves filled with every gun imaginable. There were handguns and revolvers and shotguns and riffles and assault weaponry and bazookas. Daniel opened his eyes and gave a smug grin. He was proud of what his human mind had designed.

“Mum wouldn’t have let us play with these when we were a kid,” Dan said.

Daniel shook his head in awe and looked over all the weapons. He then clapped his hands together. "Well, let’s lock and load.”

Part II: Seeds that Grew on Farrow Ground

Chapter Twelve.

Bravissimo, encore. Getting things off your mind. World of Wallcroft.

"All right men. And lady.” Wallcroft’s gaze settled on Becky. "I know this may seem rushed, and believe me, I know it is. But get your stuff, we’re loading up a boat to send you and five hundred other troops to Cuba. Now I know what you’re thinking, but don't worry, you will receive a refreshment course whilst we wait for the enemy to attack. Pack your bags. We move out in twelve minutes!"

"Ten minutes?" asked Eddie.

"But that's nothing. What about my mama? I won’t have time to tell her?" protested Philip.

"Don't worry about your mama. We will send her a letter letting her know. Plus you’ll be able to make calls to your loved one's from the ship," Wallcroft said.

"But sir, don't you think its rushing it a bit?" asked Nick, who had been hoping for a more leisurely war.

"Look, I know it’s a bit of a rush, but I am just the messenger. Now stop with all the damn questions, and go get packed." At Wallcroft’s command, Bravo Squad began to gather their supplies to leave the barracks, but Becky had one more question.

“Sir, why Cuba? A small island nation in a worldwide war? I’m all for helping the underdogs, but combat is generally about territory. About land. Why would the enemy be heading there? Surely Castro and his family aren’t a crucial threat to them.”

Wallcroft shook his head. “I can’t tell you anything about where this intel comes from. I’m sure you don’t intend to question our orders, either.”

Nick unzipped his duffel bag and shoved in four spare uniforms and two spare pairs of boots. *This is ridiculous,* thought Nick. *I just get back and I can't even see my friends.* Nick pulled out a piece of paper and a pen from the side pocket on his duffel bag and hastily began to write:

Hey, guys. Nick here. I just thought I would leave you this note considering I won’t be around to tell you I'm shipping out to Cuba. I know it's too soon, but you know orders are orders. Have a beer for me, yeah? And be safe. I would hate to come back and not be able to have a beer with you guys again. It feels like so long since we done that together, have a beer. After this war. I ain't going to be leaving. Peace out. Let’s have many beers together.

Nick placed the note outside of Delta Squad’s barracks for Logan and Tom. He dumped a brick onto it so it wouldn't blow away in the wind. He then took a deep breath.

"Oy, Nick!" came Wallcroft's voice from behind him.

Nick turned around and stood at attention. "Yes, sir?"

"Get your ass over here. There ain't no way in hell I'm letting you on the boat with hair like that!"

"Yes, sir!" replied Nick as he ran over to his sergeant.

Wallcroft led him across the yard to a small mobile hut. "In here," he said as he opened the door. Nick stepped in to see a barber using a broom to sweep hair into an enormous pile. He could’ve made a few pets from all that hair.

"Oh hey, take a seat, son.” The barber was in his late sixties and had thin white hair. Nick placed his duffel bag onto the floor and took a seat in the chair. "This shouldn't take too long. Name’s Blake!" The barber grabbed his shavers. The wrinkles on his face looked like extra sets of smiles.

"Nick. Nick Bronson.”

"Oh, your daddy used to work up the road a ways at Jimmy's Quick Fix, am I right?" Blake turned on the shavers, and their metallic buzzing forced Nick to speak louder.

"Yeah, that's him, alright.”

"Good fella he was. Shame about his accident. I'm real sorry about your loss." Blake tilted Nick's head forward and began to shave his long hair.

"It's fine. It was a long time ago now.” Nick tried to answer loudly and by moving his head as little as possible. It took some concentration.

"I don't mean to be digging up your past son. Just trying to make conversation.” The razors squealed as they tugged their way through Nick’s hairdo.

"No, honestly, it’s fine," Nick said in a dull tone.

Wallcroft was still waiting by the door, crossing his arms and tapping his foot. "How long is this gonna take, Blake? We got a boat to catch.”

"Don't rush me. It will be done in a moment.”

Nick looked up in the mirror. Half his head had been shaved whilst the other half remained long and half way down his face. He was beginning to look like a soldier again. He didn't know how he felt about that. Blake ran the shavers over Nick’s head again and again and again until there was nothing but stubble across his scalp. If his friends thought he appeared ridiculous before, he looked utterly bizarre now. His head kind of itched or ached from the rough shave, but at least it was done quickly.

"That just about does it." Blake put down the shavers and grabbed the broom.

"Thanks.” Nick stood up and brushed the excess hair off of his shirt.

"Come on, Nick, we haven't got long now.” Wallcroft checked his watch as he left the mobile. Nick grabbed his duffel bag and swung it over his shoulder. He was about to depart as well when he was stopped by Blake.

"Hey, you be careful out there. You don't want end up like your pa.”

"I will. Thanks for the concern.” Nick left the mobile and jogged to catch up with Wallcroft.

"So what was that whole business about your dad?" Wallcroft asked.

"Regrettably, He had an accident while testing out a car I fixed up," Nick replied bluntly.

"What happened?"

"It was my first fix up. I was only ten years old. I repaired—well, at least I thought I repaired the axle of a 1968 Pontiac Firebird Coupe. My dad was so proud, he tried it out himself. He got it up to a hundred and fifty miles per hour before the axle split apart and he spun off the road into a tree." Nick could feel his throat tightening up. "He died on impact."

"Oh. Sorry. I didn't mean to impose," Wallcroft said.

"So why did you?" asked Nick. Before Wallcroft could respond, Nick raced off towards the giant iron war ship which lay in the harbour bay.

Nick leaned upon the iron railings on the deck of an iron warship, watching the deep blue waves lapping around its wake. The year that had passed Eddie Guerra appeared as if from nowhere and offered him a smoke. Nick turned to look at him, but barely registered his presence except to accept, sliding a cigarette from the offered carton. Eddie lit it for him, and the pair inhaled the deadly smoke then gave a sigh of relief.

Eddie leaned over the railing of the ship and gazed out at the endless ocean. After a while, he spoke. "This is ridiculous, ain't it?"

Nick let out a grunt of affirmation, but was spurred to speak as if by a bee sting. "It is."

"We shouldn't have been shipped out here so soon. I didn't even get to say goodbye to my daughter," Eddie said.

Nick looked bewildered. "You have a daughter?" he asked.

"Yeah, you wanna see a picture?" Eddie reached into his top pocket. Nick forgot to say no, so Eddie handed him a photograph to look at. On the tiny glossy, a little Spanish girl with dark black curls was standing in front of a park, holding a toy bear.

Nick forced a smile and nodded. "She's beautiful." He thumbed the picture for a moment, then let go to indicate Eddie should take it back.

"Thanks. She's with my mama at the moment. God, I love that girl."

"Your mother? Why, where's her mother?"

"She died giving birth." Eddie pulled his fedora down low over his thick, black sunshades to hide his eyes. His head gave a little sideways tic.

Nick placed a strong hand upon Eddie's back for a second. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"No, it's fine. I made peace with that a long time ago."

The two men became silent, lost in their own private thoughts. Eddie was thinking about how dumb and selfish he'd been for signing up when he was all his daughter had left. Nick thought about his friends, and how they could no longer be there to help each other if everything went pear-shaped. They'd always been together since boot camp. What Johnson did wasn't right.

The silence was broken when Wallcroft called them. "Nick, Eddie, get your asses in the canteen. I got us a ten-minute-early entry. We don't want all the good shit getting eaten, now do we?"

"We will be right there," Eddie replied. To Nick, he said, "Let's go, then." Eddie flicked his cigarette into the ocean and a fish swam by, swallowed it, and choked to death. Nick lagged behind for a moment, gazing out over the reddish glow that bled out across the water from the setting sun. He, too, flicked his cigarette butt overboard, but it got caught in an updraft and flew through an open porthole into the kitchen where gumbo was cooking in a large vat. He then departed to join his squad which had piled around a table in the canteen.

"Man, this is good grub." Philip belched amongst shovelling copious hunks of chicken in between his rollicking, smacking lips.

"Yeah, it will get better when we reach Cuba. The food there is superb," explained Eddie. "The Moros y Cristianos and Arroz con Frijoles are to die for."

"When did you go Cuba?" asked Philip.

"I'm Cuban, you retard," replied Eddie. "Dumb prep." The squad began to laugh at Philip's boner.

"Oh, right," said Philip, embarrassed.

Becky gave Nick a jovial nudge. "So when did you finally get a sense that your hair did not look good up on your head there and needed cutting and being cut off and put on the floor where it could be swept away?"

"Hey, that was all Wallcroft. He took me to get it cut. All praise goes to him."

Wallcroft grunted. "Couldn't have that mop on your head blocking your line of sight, could I?"

"Mop? You don't know what you're talking about; that was pure style." Nick cracked a smile.

"Could we change the subject to something other than hair? I'm feeling a little emasculated over here." Eddie chuckled. Everyone shot him a querulous look.

"Look, on a serious note, guys, we are not long off reaching Cuba. Be careful, keep eyes on each other, and stay safe," Wallcroft told them.

The table went silent, then Philip said, "Man, you are a real killjoy, you know that?"

Shortly after dinner, Wallcroft brought a crate over and set it upon the table. "Now, men, we might be two days away from Cuba, but that doesn't mean we can't have fun now." He opened the create to reveal several bottles of beer, to which the squad cheered as though he'd just cancelled all homework for the rest of the year.

"Hell yeah, Wallcroft," said Eddie as he grabbed a few bottles and threw one to everyone.

The group fought over the one bottle which Philip wrenched away. He pried the cap off with his teeth. "Hell yeah! My favourite brand."

"This is the good shit, sir. How did you get this?" Nick twisted the cap off like a human being.

"I bought it before we left," Wallcroft said.

"Well thanks, sir," said Becky. "Nothing like loosening up a lazy trigger finger."

"Yeah, thanks, sergeant!" cheered the rest of the squad.

"Well men, let's get hammered! That's an order." The squad drank and partied long into the night like a convoy of uneducated inebriates living in a trailer park in the American Midwest. Someone broadcasted loud rave music over the intercom, and the crew manning the searchlights waved them around erratically. By the end of a long, harrowing night rife with fisticuffs, playful gunfire and driving a Humvee into the ocean, the only people left awake on the ship by proxy of blood poisoning were Nick and Becky. Philip had just drifted off into unconsciousness as Nick got around to finishing his last beer.

"I'm so drunk." Becky hiccupped between her words, and then let out a manly belch. She turned green and threw up in her mouth a little.

Philip woke up for a second. "Ah! The spiders! The spiders! I gotta bulk up or they'll get me!" He passed out again almost as quickly.

Ignoring his outburst, Nick grinned and stood up to offer Becky his hand. "Then I shall be the gentle man." Becky patted her smile to tamp down another heave then grabbed his arm. Nick lifted her into his arms and asked, "Which room is yours?"

"4B9. I think."

"Off we go to 4B9, then."

4B9 was not Becky's room, but this was just as well because Nick took five steps forward before passing out and dropping her on the floor. Becky sighed and got up on the fourth try. "So much for being a gentleman," she said as she staggered off for parts unknown. Out on the deck, Becky glanced off into the horizon. She saw a whale breach the surface of the water and spew from its blowhole. She thought it was the island of Cuba. Even if they'd been so close, what awaited them, they were not ready for.

Chapter Thirteen.

Charlie don't surf. The trailer park boys live. Painting by numbers. Pay attention to the rules.

Early that afternoon, Dmitry gathered the men and Zone-Tan of Charlie Squad around a wooden table in their barracks with a map of Moscow on it. "Gather 'round, men! We drew the short straw. We, along with six hundred-hundred other men have been chosen to stay here and defend Moscow."

"So we have to freeze our nuts off here while the others get sent to hot sandy beaches and shit like that." Irish was moaning aloud as per usual.

"It would seem that way," Dmitry said. No love lost there.

"I for one am glad to be defending my home," said Zone-Tan.

"Well, ain't you a fine little thing?" Tyrone said. He and Irish laughed.

"Silence your tongue or lose it, cis scum!" growled the angry, pale woman.

"Whoa, feisty!" Irish chuckled and averted his gaze. What a gentleman.

"Hey, calm down, guys. We need to stay focused. We will be setting up our patrol outside of the Ivory Inn. Here is the good part: We might not have to do any fighting."

There was an annoyed gasp around the room. "What do you mean, we might not be fighting?" Zone-Tan slammed her fist on the table, upsetting the map.

"We didn't sign up to sit around all day," said Tyrone.

"Hey, at least we are doing something. What is wrong with you people? Haven't you seen enough fighting already?" Dmitry asked. They all fell silent as they considered that maybe he was right. Perhaps in the past year, they'd all gotten a bit too used to the idea of the ponies being gone.

Then Ezio spoke. "With all due respect, sir, it's not about the fighting. It's about the honour."

Again the room was silent. Then Zone-Tan let out a laugh. "That's rich. A lesson in honour from a hired killer. How many despotic tyrants have you assassinated? There a lot going around?"

"Look, I know you're all eager to prove yourselves, but trust me. Coming home in one piece is a hell of a lot better than coming home in a body bag."

"Sir, I would rather die with honour than live as a coward," said Ezio.

"Yeah, I'm with the Italian," said Irish.

"Alright, alright, look. I'm not saying that we won't be fighting. I'm saying there will be a lot of time spent waiting around. On the plus side, there is more time for training."

"This is bullshit. I want to be reassigned to a new squad," protested Zone-Tan. "This is because I'm the only lesbian in the Human Resistance, isn't it?"

"Look, you're not getting reassigned to a new squad. We have an important role here, guys. We are defending the city. Now I don't want to hear any more. We are going on a training course."

Tyrone raised his hand and waited to be called on. "What will we be doing?"

"We will be having a game of paintball!"

"Really? With all due respect, sir, none of us is sixteen years old," said Ezio.

"Yeah, some of us are six-hundred," Zone-Tan remarked.

"It will keep you on edge! You ever been hit by a paintball when you weren't wearing armour?"

"Er, no?" said Irish. "But then I've never played in traffic and been hit by a car, either."

"Well, you're in for a nasty surprise," chuckled Dmitry. Dmitry then proceeded to the door and opened it. "Come on, guys, clear out!"

"All y'all men are getting it right in the nut sack," threatened Zone-Tan as she walked past Irish.

"Oh, great. First we get a shit placement, and now that psycho bitch is trying to permanently damage me." Irish sighed.

Once the squad cleared out Dmitry locked the door behind them. The fight was on! As they left the room, Tyrone said, "Hey, maybe we can ride dirt bikes, too, and listen to the Insane Clown Posse."

There are many things in life which are unexplained. Some of these are crucial questions we take for granted, such as "Why is there gravity?" Some are questions that may have simple answers such as "How do the children of monarch butterflies know how to return to the same tree every year?" or "Why do some deserts feature moving rocks?" but we're too busy focusing on other questions to answer them, such as "How can we sell more beer to the population?" Some are pertinent to current

events, such as “How did Equestrians create a wormhole from a metaphysical dimension to travel to our universe?” There are other questions for scientists to solve, such as, “Why is the corona of a sun hotter than its surface?” which even laypeople might theorize answers for, such as, “Perhaps gravity amasses the expanding particles of heat into a collective field.”

And yet, our entire supposed scientific prowess, however stunted with commercial-driven pursuits or dictatorial strain and totalitarian bias, we cannot answer the affinity that adolescents have for paintball, a pastime which simulates shooting other people as a game with all the subtlety of urinating in someone’s drink. In the heyday of humanity, a phenomenon known as “reality television” created many unimaginative programmes, including one show focusing on the extremely niche market of cake design.

In a single episode of this poorly conceived and forcibly contrived time-eater, a group of commercial artists sit in a windowless room and come up with two cakes: One to celebrate the wedding anniversary of a couple who were fans of a long-running British science fiction show, and another to cajole people into visiting a plot of land reserved for playing paintball. The milquetoast cake designers belaboured the erratic camera shots with insistence they had no idea what this science fiction creature they were trying to design was, and ended up doing very poor research unbefitting of people producing content in exchange for money. In spite of a profession of doodling in an artificially-lit enclosure, they professed no knowledge of the rogue, tank-like alien creature they modelled the cake after, which ended up lopsided with frosting that resembled the rotted shingles of a swamp shanty. The cake devoted to paintball consisted of polished cubes awkwardly stacked one on top of the other, and was more celebrated than the couple’s personal remembrance of their love. This is an example of what is known as “transparent bias”.

Charlie Squad stood in the middle of a frostbitten field, flattening the hard, grey grass beneath their boots. They had gathered around a large wooden crate. Two old, one-room cabins were situated across from one another on either side of the dry, mud-streaked field, both bearing a startling similarity. Dmitry explained to them the tenets of their exercise. "Right, guys, the four of you are going to break up into two teams of two. Your objective is to carry this crate through the door of your lovely government-sanctioned estate home. The crate is very heavy and will take two people to lift it. If you get hit with a paintball, you are down for five minutes before you can get back up. If both members of your team are down, it’s game over. You’ll find your gear in your home. Any questions?"

Three hands went up. A fourth was raised because Irish had two questions. Ezio kept both his arms crossed. Dmitry ignored Irish and pointed at Zone-Tan.

"What are the teams?" she asked, glowering at the men.

“That’s part of the fun,” said Dmitry. “Whichever two people grab the two same-coloured guns are on the same team. Part of the game is you working that out and deciding who your best ally is.”

Tyrone got called on next. “What’s in the box?” he asked. Irish put one of his arms down.

Dmitry waved a dismissive hand. “Do not worry about it. It could be anything you need to carry into your base.”

Irish tried to hold one arm with the other, straining harder to get noticed. Dmitry finally caved in. “I call dibs on green team,” he said.

“There’s only red versus blue,” Dmitry said. He then clapped his hands for attention, even though he already had theirs. "As the referee, I will decide who won and who is down. Alright, let’s do this!”

“Man, substitute Daniel is kind of fun!” Irish remarked. “We never got to play in the old army.”

“Daniel’s *dead,”* Tyrone reminded him with a scowl.

At the sound of Dmitry’s whistle, everybody flinched except for Ezio. Ezio leapt into the air and kicked off of Irish’s and Zone’s heads. “Parkour!” he bellowed at the top of his lungs. Soaring through the air, his long white cloak flapped behind him. His foot smashed down on the crate and kicked off of it, launching him into a fantastic spinning jump in the air. There were a few weedy trees here and there between the crate and one of the cabins. Irish, Tyrone and Zone-Tan took off after him in anger, but he kept kicking off of trees to the left and to the right, and his head start was too great a handicap. A footrace emerged between the three of them, and Tyrone and Zone squeezed Irish in between the pair of them, knocking him back. By the time the trio reached the cabin, Ezio emerged, dual-wielding red paint guns. He fired upon all three of them, aiming particularly for the face, and the three unarmed soldiers cried out in pain and slid into the ground.

“I win,” Ezio declared.

“No, you don’t.” Dmitry caught up with them, his hands on his hips. “Mr. Di Auditorium, you have missed the entire point of this exercise: Teamwork.”

“But I worked an entire team and a half to elimination,” Ezio said.

“Man, what the hell is wrong with you?” Tyrone complained. Fluorescent red pain dripped down from his forehead. “I think we should get the armour before we start.”

“Alright, alright, alright. We’ll get suited up and then take it again from the start. Put the guns back inside.” At Dmitry’s command, Charlie Squad donned apparel designed for willingly getting shot with paintballs, and they all marched back to the crate. This time, Irish, Tyrone and Zone gave Ezio a wide berth. Ezio tried to inch closer to them, but they inched further away. Dmitry sat in a lawn chair with a bottle of vodka on one arm and a glass in the other. “This time, I want a good, clean fight! Except for the whole mess of paint, of course.”

When Dmitry blew on the whistle again, Ezio ran off towards the red paint gun cabin in the same manner as before. Everyone else ran in the opposite direction, away from him. They panted and huffed, and Irish made sure there was a line of trees between himself and Zone, who was snorting and glaring at him. The three reached the cabin where Tyrone and Irish were first to arm themselves. “What? I wanted the green one!” Irish complained.

“Don’t you pay attention? Dmitry said there ain’t no green ones!” Tyrone said.

“What is this, the law of primogeniture?” Zone said. “I wanted one of the blue ones!”

Irish and Tyrone responded with a stoic barrage of blue paintballs. Zone made a kind of ape-like roar and was pushed out of the door. She rippled off her goggles in anger and threw them on the ground. Irish and Tyrone then engaged in battle with Ezio, who had only taken one paintball gun this time. A slew of gunfire graffitied the trees all around them, and the battle raged on for several minutes. Dmitry set down his foldable tanning mirror and glared at what he saw. Once five minutes had passed, Zone got up and started running after the men. She got about three feet before Tyrone reached back and shot her again. Irish scampered through the woods, hiding behind trees as he tried to creep around Ezio’s location. Ezio shot Tyrone several times in the chest of his armour, and Tyrone shot back at him.

“Not my clean white coat!” Ezio yelled.

The whistle blew again, and with both Ezio and Zone down, the match had ended. Everyone looked at Dmitry, who was red-faced with either rage or alcoholism. “Tyrone! You were struck! You’re supposed to be down!”

“But he only got my armour,” Tyrone said. “Can’t I still shoot him even if I’m knocked down?”

“No, you cannot!”

“Aw.”

“And secondly, how come none of you are goin’ for the mission?” Dmitry asked.

“The what now?” Irish looked around, just as confused as the rest of Charlie Squad.

“The crate! The crate! None of you are attempting to move the crate!” Dmitry stood and jabbed his arm viciously at the wooden box everyone had ignored.

“Yeah, but, all we have to do is shoot the others to win, you said. If both members of the other team are down, it’s game over,” Tyrone said in a nagging tone of voice.

Dmitry smacked his palm to his face, then took a deep swig of vodka. “New objectives. Nobody wins until their team brings the box into their base.”

“But it could be filled with radiation or a bomb or something,” Irish said.

“It’s filled with babies and medicine!” Dmitry shouted. He stalked back to his lawn chair, holding the cold glass container to his forehead and plotted inventing himself a migraine. When he returned to his lawn chair, he blew his whistle again.

“You and me, bro.” Tyrone bumped fists with Irish and they nodded at one another with the exact cordiality as two kids kept back in the same class a year. The duo pounced upon the crate at once and seized it from either end. They grunted and strained, but try as they might, they couldn’t get the box to budge. “Dude, you gotta push it in my direction! I’m the one doin’ the pullin’!”

“Oh.” Realizing their mistaken tug of war, Irish helped carry the box in the direction Tyrone guided them. Irish warned Tyrone when he was going to walk into a tree. There was just the little problem of being caught in Ezio’s and Zone-Tan’s pincer attack. The pair had darted off to opposite cabins and returned, shooting Irish and Tyrone up with paint until they dropped the crate in frustration.

“Aw, god dammit, this is useless!” Tyrone said.

“Dammit, Tyrone, you’re supposed to be on my side!” Zone-Tan said, holding a red paint gun.

“No, he’s supposed to be on *my* side,” Ezio said, holding a blue one.

Irish let out a “Hey!”

Dmitry’s growl rendered itself into a roar. “Alright, that’s it! Irish and Ezio, you go into the red base! Tyrone and Zone-Tan, you go into the blue base!” He then blew so hard on his whistle that after a minute, the implement flung out of his hand and dangled above his stomach.

Obediently, the two teams split off into their respective houses. "So what's our plan?" Irish asked Ezio as he adjusted his armour.

"I say we take out the negro first. Then we go for the sodomite, then the crate," suggested Ezio.

Irish stared at Ezio with a blank expression for a few seconds. "Okay? And, uh, by the way, if you refer to him as a ‘negro’ again, I think I will shoot you in the back myself.”

Ezio laughed and slipped the paint ball cartridge into the gun. “It is your lives that are always in my hands.”

Across the field in the opposite house, Zone-Tan and Tyrone were having a similar conversation. "So we got a plan, breeder?" asked Zone as she peeked her head out of the window.

"That crate’s not as heavy as I expected. I could probably manage it. How about you cover me from the window, Slacks, while I drag it back?"

"Pfft. You really think you can carry that on your own?"

"Not carry it. Drag it.”

"That’s gonna play merry hell with your lower back.” Zone wore a kind of smug grin.

"Nah, trust me. It’s a long, proud tradition of accruing worker’s comp. So, while we’re waitin’ for the match to start, how ‘bout we make some small talk? Dmitry’s kind of a jerk, so, you a Gillette blade or a kissin’ fish?”

“Huh?” Zone looked at him in total confusion, which kind of threw Tyrone off guard. Their conversation had to draw to a close just then because they could hear Dmitry shouting off in the distance.

“Ready! Set! Let the battle begin!” Dmitry had given up the whistle and fired a pistol skyward. A few minutes passed, but no one moved from their position.

"Are they going?" asked Irish.

"No. They’re waiting for us,” Ezio replied.

"Well, should we go?”

"Si. On the count of three.”

It must have been a long count, because Tyrone was getting antsy. “Right. I’m gonna make a break for it, so cover me! Don’t make scissors while I’m gone.”

Over by the window, Zone-Tan angled her brow. “Right. I got you covered.”

Tyrone took a deep breath, and he, Irish and Ezio all charged out of their doors at the same time.

“There’s Tyrone!” Irish shouted. “Hi, Tyrone!” He sprinted through the trees like a Gaelic sprite, firing off paintballs all the while. Tyrone could hear the whiff and smacks of paintballs in his vicinity. When he saw a nearby birch tree take a smear of blue, he shouted back to Zone-Tan for support. Zone lined up her shot and fired.

Irish screamed in pain as a round hit him directly in the nuts. His voice raised a couple of octaves as he collapsed to the ground in excruciating pain which rivalled giving birth without question. He felt as though a part of him had popped like a balloon. "Oh fuck! Oh shit! Why do we have no bollocks protection?" His mind reeled with the sensation inside that everything was twisted, delicate and wrong. He felt the pain of a helpless child being beaten, and the sensation imploded within his intimate region. All he wanted was to be damaged no more. His injury already throbbed with the cries of a burning sun, yet at the same time felt as icy as death. The incredible stinging coursed along his veins like a torturous autobahn.

Tyrone’s whole body shook with laughter at his dear friend’s physical anguish. He noticed that Ezio had drawn a bead on him. Where the hell was Zone? By the time Tyrone pointed and fired his weapon, he felt a hard crack against his left leg where he’d been shot. He managed to pelt Ezio twice in the chest. Both of them dropped to the ground.

"My, oh my. Ezio, Irish, you’re out, but because I am either loving this so much or just completely smashed by now, you play until one of you has the crate.” Dmitry toasted them. Tyrone sighed and crawled to the crate. He gripped the handles,

mostly stood up, and pulled it along the ground. It took all of his strength, but it was working. "Irish, your time's up, you can get up!" Dmitry called.

"No, I can't. Oh fuck!" Irish whimpered and languished onto his back.

"Get up!" ordered Ezio. "Get up or I will kill you." Tyrone was drawing nearer to his house.

"Oh fuck!" Irish grabbed his weapon rolled onto his back and aimed for Tyrone. He fired three times and hit Tyrone in the chest.

"Tyrone, you're down!" shouted Dmitry.

Zone-Tan grunted and fired her weapon at Irish. This time not only one, but two rounds slammed Irish in the crotch. "For fuck sake!" cried Irish.

Dmitry burst into laughter. "Ezio up!" Ezio grabbed his weapon and charged for Tyrone's and Zone-Tan's house. Zone-Tan fired and fired but missed. On his way past Tyrone, Ezio grabbed his weapon.

"Oh, you little shit!" shouted Tyrone as Ezio ran into the house.

"Tyrone up!" roared Dmitry. Tyrone climbed to his feet and ran into the house after Ezio. Zone-Tan spun round to fire at Ezio, but it was too late. Ezio shot her four times using two bullets from each gun. Tyrone charged at Ezio from behind and tackled him to the floor. The two guns slid towards Zone-Tan.

"Irish, quick! I need your help!" said Zone-Tan. Irish could hear the commotion but was too busy attending to his "dying twins" as he put it.

"Come on, Irish, you got to help your team!" roared Dmitry.

Tyrone quickly scrambled for one of the guns whilst Ezio grabbed Zone-Tan's. Ezio fired three quick rounds into Tyrone's back. "Fuck sake," Tyrone said. Ezio got up and ran down to the crate. He tried with all of his strength to push it, but it was useless.

"Irish, help me, quick!" said Ezio.

"Fuck you. I'm dying here!" Irish said.

"Come on, you pussy. We can do this!"

"Screw you! This hurts!"

"Tyrone, Zone-Tan, you're up!" Dmitry said once he wasn't laughing too hard.

"Oh, fuck!" Ezio spun around. Zone-Tan was the first down the stairs and in Ezio's line of sight. He managed to take her down again but was soon shot by Tyrone. "Oh for fuck sake! Irish, get him!" Ezio said. Irish gripped his weapon and was about to fire when Tyrone fired. This round hit Irish in the face.

"Oh, what the fuck? Oh shit, that hurts!" Irish was now in pain in more than one place. Tyrone laughed and pulled the crate.

"Looks like he has got it." Dmitry laughed as Tyrone pulled the crate through the door.

"God damn you, Irish!" Ezio climbed to his feet. Irish managed a weak obscenity in response.

"Fall in, squad!" Dmitry said.

Zone-Tan approached Irish and held out her hand. "Need a hand?"

"Yeah." Irish grabbed her hand, and she helped him up. "Thanks." Zone-Tan smiled and then kneed him in the crotch. "Oh, fuck!" Irish squealed.

"Alright, that's enough, Zone-Tan." Dmitry shook his head and chuckled. "You did good, guys. Well, except you, Irish. Your teammate needed you, and you left him. That was not good."

"I was hit in the balls. Repeatedly." Irish still had his head on the floor.

"Anyway, I just wanted to say I think you guys are gonna do well in battle. You all have good track records. Now let's get back to base. Once you have returned all your weapons and armour, you can leave and go pub if you want, but we need you back here bright and early tomorrow morning at 0500 hours. Dismissed!"

Tyrone help Irish up. "You okay, man?"

"No. I think I'm gonna throw up. Yes, yes I am." Irish turned his head and threw up on the dirt.

"Oh, man. Let's get you a drink. Maybe we can see the gang."

"Yes please, I could use with one after the day I have had. Better not see Logan though. That fucking prick!"

Tyrone screwed up his face. "What happened with you guys, man?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, it has to be something wrong. You two just seem to hate each other now."

"Just drop it, Tyrone. It was easy for you. You were the one who left. You don't get to come back and know everything." Irish stood up straight and tried to walk away, still limping.

Tyrone shook his head. "So is this what that's about? We got jobs. We made a living?"

"No! It's that you guys left, and you didn't even give a fuck about us. Me and Tom were sat here jobless for months. Tom has a kid, for fuck sake, but did you guys care? No, because you were done with the war and done with us!" shouted Irish in a rage.

Tyrone stood there, feeling bad. "Look, I didn't know it was that bad for you guys."

"No, because how could you? You were off making millions and shagging Hollywood starlets. Just leave me alone." Irish grunted as he limped off. His rage was growing worse. Tyrone hung back for a little while, once again speechless.

Chapter Fourteen.

It's never the same. The ringing in your ears. The night he didn't drink.

About twenty five minutes after mission briefing, the soldiers of Delta Squad sat around an empty ammo crate, talking of home and getting to know one another better, such as it was. "Wow, that's a fine piece of ass you got there." CJ laughed as he stuffed another microwaved burrito into his face. His hand stiffly gestured at a picture of Niko's wife, Kate.

"Shut your mouth!" Niko yanked the picture away from CJ.

Nonplussed, CJ addressed Logan. "What about you? Who you got praying that you return from this war?"

"No one," Logan said bluntly, as though letting out a cough.

"Come on, I'm sure there's somebody hoping Logan Walker makes it back home," Roebuck said.

"Nope! Just me and my friends, and we're all in this together." Logan nodded at Tom.

"Well what about you?" CJ asked Tom, making the words "about" and "you" sound like a sneeze.

Tom was silent for a while, and he drew in breath through his nose. "Well, I got—"

Tom's sentence was cut short by Raymond who was leaning against the doorway. "What the hell are you guys doing?"

"What you mean, 'what we doin'?' We's is all talkin' 'bout people we got waitin' at home for us," CJ said.

Raymond sneered. "Fucking look around! We are still at home, you fucktards!"

"Hey, calm it, soldier. We're just trying to get to know each other, so get involved or shut up! Either way, watch the potty mouth!" ordered Roebuck. Raymond grunted and looked away. Roebuck turned back to Tom. "You were saying?"

Tom hung his head and didn't look at the others. In a way, he was kind of glad that Raymond had interrupted him. He didn't like being reminded of the people he'd leave behind. "Oh, yeah. I got a girlfriend and little girl at home."

"You got a picture?" Niko slipped a cigarette between his lips and a hand down his pants.

"Er, yeah." Tom pulled out his iDroidBerry SmartPhone and scrolled up an image file of Bella holding Claire on it. He tossed the phone towards Niko.

Niko picked up the phone and stared closely at it, breathing deep through his nose. "Nice family you got there. Ona ima lice koje podsjeća svakog čovjeka ženu natrag kući."

"Mm. Thanks."

The picture was passed to Roebuck. "Hmm. I think I saw her at a pub here in Russia once. How old is your daughter?" he asked.

Eying his phone, Tom replied, “One year old, sir. My girlfriend goes to this place with my friends a lot.”

“See? We got things in common. Bella is beautiful.” Roebuck passed the picture to CJ.

“Damn! Your wife ain’t so bad, either!” CJ laughed between slurps of food, and then winked at the other men. They nodded in agreement.

As they passed the phone around, Tom looked at it and thought about the photo he’d printed out on a piece of paper in the previous incarnation of the war. He’d looked at that image a lot and called Bella back at home. “Yeah, can I have my phone back some time?” Tom asked. After a whole half a minute, CJ handed the picture back to Tom. He thumbed the image of Bella’s face, then shoved the phone back into his pocket.

“Okay, men, it’s time to get back in the saddle. We’re going to the firing range to let off some steam and see how you do,” explained Roebuck. The men nodded and climbed to their feet. Raymond towered over all of them even before he’d straightened up.

“Damn, what the fuck is yo mamma feedin’ you? You look like a goddamn Shrek on steroids!” CJ almost choked as he laughed and shoved the rest of his burrito into his mouth. Raymond let out a threatening growl.

“Okay, men, let’s get going,” ordered Roebuck when he noticed the potential shit-storm brewing. The men marched out of the barracks with Raymond the last out the door, where Roebuck stopped him and reached up to pat his shoulder. “Try not to fight with any more of your squad, okay?”

“Yes sir.” Raymond’s voice was a low growl as he pushed his way out of the barracks.

The firing range had targets set up at various distances to at least three hundred yards away. “Okay, Logan, you’re up first! Give it a shot, son,” said Roebuck.

Logan angled his brow at the peculiar choice for a term of endearment. “Sure thing, Dad,” he muttered under his breath as he slipped his thirty-round MAG into his M4A1.

“Take aim!” ordered Roebuck. He just loved to yell “take aim”. Logan lifted the riffle to his shoulder and looked down the sights. “Fire!” ordered Roebuck. The sound of six three-round bursts, one after the other, echoed through the air and disappeared within the span of a minute. The target directly one hundred yards in front of Logan shattered as the bullets struck it violently.

“Nice shooting,” said Roebuck, patting the grown adult Logan on the back.

“Thank you, sir,” replied Logan, managing to sound as chipper as possible despite the pandering treatment. The next in line was CJ.

“All right, CJ, let’s see what you can do.”

“Hell yeah! Watch this shit.” CJ finished off a hot dog as he lifted his Heavy MG to waist height.

“Take aim.”

“Already there, Sarge!”

“Fire.”

“Whoa yeah! Gimme them ducats!” CJ roared with enjoyment as he let out two hundred rounds. Only two hit his target. The men stifled their laughter. “Man, what the fuck? Sure, a brother can’t catch a break!” CJ screwed up his face upon realizing he’d not made good progress. “Fuck the bell curve, man!”

“See, CJ? That’s why we don’t go pulling a Rambo. Mr. Bellic, show us some good old-fashioned Russian shooting.”

“Yes, sir!” Niko lifted his AK47 and looked down the sights.

“Fire!”

Niko squeezed the trigger, and his rounds flew from the barrel. He fired all thirty bullets. Twenty seven hit the target in the chest.

“Wow, I guess organised crime is good for shooting!” joked Roebuck.

“Damn, now dat’s jus’ violent,” CJ remarked.

Niko flipped the fuck out. He began screaming at CJ. “I am not violent! Do not call me violent! I do not cause violence! I will spill more blood in your hot coffeepot fishbowl in one minute than you can in two hundred hours of play!”

CJ stared at this outburst as though he'd put his shirt on backwards. "Damn, you need to call your neurologist on refilling your prescription of chill pills."

For those of you playing along at home, it was now Tom's turn. "When you're ready, TTR," said Roebuck. Tom wasn't sure he cared for the acronym. He examined his Springfield riffle. It had been so long since he last held it. The last gun he could remember holding with the intent to fire was the one he'd used to shoot Daniel. Back then, he'd used a common handgun. If he'd used this sort of a gun at that close range, his head would have exploded like a watermelon. Tom could feel bile rising into his oesophagus. The wooden and cast iron frame of his weapon weighed heavier than he remembered. The scope reflected the sun's rays and different memories glimmered into Tom's head. He estimated he must have killed over seven hundred ponies with this riffle. He wasn't technically supposed to keep army-issued weapons, but rules were somewhat lax. This was his companion. This was his lifeline. It was like a second penis to him. Tom took a deep breath and lifted the riffle to his shoulder. The muscles in his arm tensed. He closed his left eye and narrowed his right one.

"Fire!"

Roebuck's command echoed through Tom's mind. It hung there like a choir of bells, ringing behind his ears and reverberating through his skull. Time melted away as Tom exhaled, and then squeezed his trigger. The riffle jolted as a single hollow point round flew from the barrel. The golden bullet spun through the air and ripped the head off of his target. Tom relaxed his muscles and let out a sigh of relief. The exploding sensation in his own head had abated.

Delta Squad piled back into the barracks shortly after their training session. "God dammit, get off me," CJ said. "Go use your own damn bed."

As soon as the members of Delta Squad collapsed into their respective beds to rest after their arduous training, Roebuck raised one foot onto a chair and said, "Right, gents, gather 'round!" Everyone but him groaned. "I know this seems sudden, but we're not the only squad doing this. Tomorrow at four PM, we move out. We'll be flying to Africa to take on Joseph Kony."

"Why Kony?" asked CJ, raising his arm, which had a bag of pork rinds in it.

"Because an unknown source has been tipping us off, and so far they haven't been wrong." When Roebuck explained this, the rest of the squad exchanged odd glances.

Logan raised his hand next. "Well, what exactly are we going to be doing?"

"I honestly don't know. I'm kind of expecting more orders to arrive, preferably soon. But for now, go home see your families. Just get out of our hair. Army dismissed."

The men flooded out of the barracks like ants marshalling a picnic raid. Some of the soldiers were gathering on short buses to transport them home, but Logan and Tom walked down the street from base together. "Well, well, looks like one more night at the Ivory Inn for me," said Logan.

Tom scuffed his feet along the thin snow of the sidewalk. "Yeah, I might join you on that one."

"What, are you not going home?" asked Logan surprised.

"I don't know." Tom kept walking while staring at the ground. Logan had stopped, but resumed walking to follow him. Tom shrugged. "I don't know if I can handle telling my family I will be leaving tomorrow. It just seems to break Bella's heart every time."

"Well, they're gonna find out eventually. Best to just tell them."

"Yeah, but I'd rather be slightly pissed when I do. Besides, they got the idea when I got re-drafted."

Niko crossed Tom and Logan's path, holding a piece of paper. "Hey, men, do you know anyone called Nick?"

Logan nodded. "Yeah, Nick Bronson. Why?"

"I don't know. I guess this is for you guys." Niko handed over the paper which Logan scanned.

"What does it say?" Tom asked once Niko had jogged off and jacked his way into a car.

"It's Nick." Logan furrowed his brow and folded the paper. "He's already shipped out."

"Damn, we didn't even get to have one last drink with him before he left."

"Yeah, but he wants us to have one on him."

"I was gonna do that anyway," Nick said.

"All right but I'm not letting you get too drunk. Just a little bit drunk for respects!"

"Deal."

The two of them arrived at the Ivory by a quarter to nine. By the time they emerged from its doors at a quarter to one, Logan was as hammered as a carpenter's workbench, but Tom had only drunk barley water all night. He'd wasted his whole evening thinking about how if he got drunk, he'd have to keep his "promise" to Logan and tell Bella about being deployed. He'd hoped and prayed for a reason to be called back, and now that it had come, he couldn't stop chiding himself for how stupid he was for wanting to recklessly throw his life away when there was a little girl depending upon him. If he'd been drinking alcohol, he'd probably be in a much better mood, and wouldn't have to worry about Claire's sleepy face shining up at him. Either way, he still dedicated his drinking to Nick, to the old Delta Squad, and most of all, to dear, departed Daniel.

At last Tom had realized the night was coming to a close, and he hadn't had a drop of booze. Logan gave him a disoriented wave before stumbling off into the dark streets. "In a bit, mate." Tom felt so distracted that his return wave was just as feeble. His boots dragged so heavily that it probably took him longer to walk home. In reality, the walk should have taken no more than five minutes, but Tom tried slowing his pace to make the journey last longer. Even still, the moment was always approaching, as he was always drawing closer to it, so when it came, he lamented that it was still too early. Like dental appointments, funerals, and the end of a long weekend, the end had come too soon for comfort, and the hindsight of precaution had become all too clear. Tom hadn't even had time to enjoy his walk, because every time he looked up to see which way he was walking, he thought about how he could've seen his house if he'd been looking down the scope of his riffle.

He was going to stop right there outside of his garden gate, but in spite of the starlit street's vacancy, he had the odd impression that he was being watched by his neighbours. Tom took a deep breath and quietly snuck inside, feeling like an intruder in his own house. Nobody came to greet him, given how late it was, and he correctly assumed that the others were asleep. He crept up the stairs as carefully as he could, though Bella's tyrannical snoring helped somewhat. First, Tom checked on Claire. The baby lay on her back, her pudgy arms stretched out like a dark, fleshy cactus, as tiny whispers of breath issued forth from her pursed lips. Tom couldn't help but smile. "Daddy's gonna kill a lot of ponies for you," he said. He touched two fingers to his lips and pressed them to her blanket.

Tom then slinked into Bella's room, nearly knocking her make-up accessories from the night stand on his side of the bed. He got as far as to lift up the blankets, but stopped himself. He had this tension creeping up the back of his neck that told him not to wake her up. He was too tired to have a row with her, which he'd come to expect if he came home this late. How was he ever going to get to sleep if he didn't get into bed beside her? He stood there for several minutes over her sleeping, drooling form as though she'd make some unconscious indication that she wouldn't be woken, but no such sign came.

Tom left the bedroom and slowly laid himself out on the comfier sofa. No matter how plush it was, no matter how tired he felt, he just couldn't get to sleep. His mind drifted on occasion to thoughts he forgot the instant they went on too long. His stomach began to boil and burn, and the house creaked and clicked and groaned as if it, too, was suffering from indigestion. When it was almost two in the morning, Tom stood up, his head raging with frustration at his inability to find sleep. As if to punish himself, he walked back outside, locking the door behind himself.

He was going to head back to the barracks and see if he couldn't doze off there, but he saw Daniel's house beside his own. The population wasn't exactly booming after the enslavement of humankind, and it was still vacant. Tom walked next door and tried his copy of Daniel's key in the lock, and found that it worked. The interior was much like the interior to Tom's own flat, although it appeared that Laura Vickers had absconded with all their knick-knacks, leaving behind only what she didn't want and didn't need. The waitress from the Ivory had been Daniel's girlfriend, but she too had had to move on in the wake of his death. Tom guessed from the dust imprints that the couple hadn't had too many pictures of one another yet, and he sighed as he gazed on the image of his lost friend. He turned these images face-down to avoid staring into the face of his guilt.

Tom was surprised to find a warm bottle of Alamo beer still in Daniel's fridge. He drank it as he headed upstairs and into the bedroom, which felt cold. He wrapped himself under the blankets of the bed and finally managed to sink himself into sleep.

Chapter Fifteen.

Goat masticator. Dining out. The Temptation of Spike.

Harbinger sat at am old wooden table. He held the leg of a mountain goat in his hand and mulled over it without really thinking much of it.

"Hey man, what's up?" asked Spike, a diminutive purple and green dragon who was seated beside Harbinger. Unlike his reptilian brethren, Spike had no need for a human disguise in this space. Harbinger turned to look at him. Spike had a huge smile on his face as he held the head of a goat.

"What makes you so happy?" asked Harbinger.

“Look, they gave me the head! I must be doing something good.” Spike chuckled excitedly. Harbinger shook his head as Spike pulled out one of the dead goat’s eyes.

“Yum yum!” He merrily threw the eyeball into his mouth and crushed it under his teeth. “Mm, juicy.”

Harbinger thudded the leg of goat down on the table like a drumstick and turned it over in his hand. “Don’t you ever get sick of eating goat?”

“I love it!” Spike grinned, his mouth full of meat. “Why do you ask?”

“Never mind.” Harbinger dropped the Leg of goat onto the plate. He was sick of goat. He wanted something fresh, something exciting. Humans. Yes, that was what he needed. What he wanted. What he craved. Harbinger turned to Spike and gave a sly smirk.

“What?” asked Spike when he finally noticed Harbinger’s menacing grin.

“Do you want me to show you something tastier than goat?” asked Harbinger.

“There’s something tastier than goat? No way!”

“Yes way. Follow me.” Harbinger stood up from the table and made his way to the exit. Spike grabbed the other eye of the goat and joined him, popping the sphere into his mouth.

Kane was still by the door. “Where do you think you’re going?” he asked as Harbinger reached for the handle.

“We want to get some fresh air. Why? You going to stop us?”

Kane ignored his sarcastic tone and let him proceed, but stopped Spike before he left. “Be careful, Spike. Don’t let him manipulate you into doing something stupid.” His third eyelid blinked.

“Come on, Spike.” Harbinger pulled him out of the door which Kane shut behind them.

Spike noticed Harbinger was holding two spare sets of nightingale armour. “When did you get them?” he asked curiously.

“When Kane was talking to you. What did he say anyway?”

“He just said be careful.” Spike gave a careless shrug.

“Hm. Okay, let’s get going then.” Harbinger began to crawl through the long, dark and dirty tunnel. Spike took a deep breath and joined him. He didn’t have to stoop so much due to his small stature, but his neck still ached by the time they reached the other side. There, Harbinger rested the two sets of spare armour next to the tunnel entrance. “We will leave them there for when we get back,” he explained.

“Alright. So where exactly is this food you speak of?” asked Spike. “Seems like kind of a long, cold walk.”

“Follow me. It isn’t too far.” Harbinger held his hand out and jumped off of the platform into a freefall. As his body mutated itself from one shape into an entirely different other, his pained squeal retched into a belching roar. Spike took a deep breath and jumped after him, landing upon the larger, winged dragon’s back.

After about half an hour of flying, Spike’s impatience had already surmounted to the point of complaint. “How much further is it now?”

“Just over this hilltop.” Harbinger glided down the slope of another mountain and came to a landing where the grade was more level than a sheer drop.

Spike hopped off of Harbinger’s back. “So where is it?”

“There.” Harbinger wore an evil grin as he pointed a massive razor claw towards a small, wooden hut, surrounded by snow and tucked into the bottom of a narrow valley.

Spike gasped. “But that’s a human hut. We aren’t supposed to attack humans.”

“Why not? They hunted us for years to the damn-near brink of extinction. Besides, wouldn’t that pony you’re infatuated with adore it if you slew her enemies? Rarity, was it?” Harbinger smiled at the ease with which he could push the naïve young dragon’s buttons. When one’s emotions are transparent, they are easy to coerce.

“I guess so. Besides, one won’t hurt, will it?” Spike rubbed the back of his head.

“Of course not. Let’s do this. Harbinger seized Spike in his front paws, then leapt from the mountainside, throwing open his wings to glide down towards the hut.

Inside the cabin was the portrait of a couple, one Mr Archibald Dracobait Bunker and his wife, Mrs Edith Reptofood Bunker. The two had lived a long and ornery civil union marriage to one another since meeting at a young atheist gathering event after non-church one summer weekend. They were late bloomers in terms of childrearing, and were elderly enough now that their "meathead" son (as Ronald had called him) had left home, although he'd waited until the Equestrian apocalypse had occurred to do so. Although initially a move by necessity, the Bunkers had used the aftermath of the pony holocaust to seize prime isolated real estate in the remote Ural Mountains, and brought much of their antiquated furniture with them to feel at home. Living on the outskirts of Communist Russia's collectivist policies kept them unprotected, but relatively out of range of the war's crosshairs.

Mr Bunker was halfway through watching TV in the living room of his snowy log cabin when the cable cut out. "You know, Stan, I learned something today," one of the characters had been saying on a particular programme which seemed unfit to die despite wearing out its premise decades ago. "Even though Cartman's killed again, bullying is just a form of social Darwinism, and people aren't entitled to not be verbally harangued." That was when the television clicked out.

"God damn it!" Archie crushed the can of Beer-brand beer in his pudgy fist, spilling sticky suds of fermented grain juice all over the arm of his ratty recliner.

Edith hobbled into the room. "Oh, Archie, what is it, dear?"

"Did I say you could speak? Button your face, woman! Get back to the washing. I want my plates so shiny I can see my face in them."

"Yes, darling." Edith hobbled back out of the room.

Archie struggled out of his seat. His fat belly weighed him down, but he just about managed it. "Probably those damn bears again." He checked the loading on the dual-barrelled shotgun he kept next to the TV remote. Archie slipped into his winter jacket and grabbed his hat. "I'll show those hebe bears! Messing with my damn cable when I'm trying to watch my poorly-veiled, mediocre porn on HBO. Who do they think they are?" Archie opened the door and stepped out into the snow, readying his faithful weapon. Harbinger watched the dumpy human struggling through the snow from around the back of the hut whilst Spike was left further up the mountain, overlooking the event.

"Alright, Winnie the Pooh, now you're gonna die! Damn bears, I swear I'm gonna..." His inane, hate-filled rambling trailed off as he gazed towards the broken satellite dish on the roof of his little house in the valley. Hiding beside the house like a St. Bernard mounting a Corgi, Harbinger's massive reptilian face grinned down at the rotund human who gave a jolt. Ron could feel a sharp pang run from his chest and arc outwards up his neck and along his left wrist. His breathing grew shallow as he struggled to choke out his wife's name. "Edie! Edie! Edith! Edith, your mother's come to visit!"

Harbinger took two steps forward which still rumbled, even muffled by the snow. Archie gaped stupidly for a while then turned to run but fell in the frigid white terrain. He bounced onto his back to face his pursuer. "It's a goddamn dinosaur! Eat hot lead, Barney!" He fired the two shots he'd loaded. The bullets slammed into Harbinger's leg with about as much effect as trying to reason with a Scientologist Fox News anchor who was a member of PETA.

Edith yelled something from inside the house in her wavering voice. "Oh, Archie! You gotta shoot at a chink the scales, just like Smaug!"

"Stifle yourself, Edith! I gotta shoot at a chink in the scales, just like Smaug!"

"Now that wasn't very nice!" Harbinger swooped his head down and locked Archie's leg between his gargantuan incisors.

"Oh, sweet non-existent lord, somebody please help me!" Archie cried. Harbinger turned and flew up to the mountain. Archie's arms dangled and flailed wildly as he screamed in his hoarse, overweight, middle-aged drinker's voice. He dropped his shotgun somewhere halfway up the mountain. The snow cushioned his fall when Harbinger dumped his body before Spike, who had been watching with excitement. "Please don't hurt me. You can take my wife, just please don't hurt me!" Archie tried a couple of times to stand as he begged, but fell back down every time.

"Are you sure about this?" Spike quirked an eyebrow. "He definitely looks too big for me to eat."

"I'm sure. Just eat him already! Hurry!" Harbinger stretched out his body to block in Archie.

"Oh no, please don't, please! I'm high in chostelerol!" Archie cried.

Spike lowered his head and frowned. "Sorry." They don't make a Hallmark card for that. Archie Bunker kept up his weak, repetitious pleading as Spike gripped his torso in his teeth and chewed on his marshmallow-y midsection. Archie hurt too much to get out a decent scream as he was devoured alive by the unpractised little dragon. This would be Spike's first ever kill,

and he definitely couldn't swallow a human down whole, so it took much biting and tugging to tear Archie apart, piece by piece. It took a long while for those beating, bloodied organs to finally shut down.

"My turn." Harbinger laughed cruelly as he lumbered back down to the hut. He leapt much of the way there and landed at the back of the abode where Edith had heard all the commotion and was on the phone to the police of the nearest town.

"Operator! Operator! My husband's done himself a mischief and gonna end up in hostipal!"

"Citizen, you are an unauthorized phone operator. Identify your designated residence. You will report yourself to Moscow immediately," complained the voice on the other end of the line.

Harbinger emitted a giddy chortle. After being lectured and tormented by Discord, he needed this. "I like my food cooked a little more!" He blew a wave of fire that ripped through the house like a firehose through a sheet of paper. Amidst the cacophonous conflagration, there was a high-pitched scream, and a second and a half later, Edith ran out into the snow, covered in flames.

"Oh, Archie! Help me! Help me!" She threw herself into a snow back which hissed with steam. Harbinger's eyes narrowed into a gleeful expression as he stomped over her, then plunged his snout into the snow and ravenously devoured the battered, burned woman alive.

After their voracious meal, Harbinger and Spike sat beside one another on the side of that majestic mountain and absorbed the glow of the bonfire that had once been a house. "Told you they taste better." Harbinger grinned.

Spike patted his grossly bulging belly. "Ooh. Guess you were right. And at first, I was worried they tasted a bit too much like Spam. When can we have more?"

Harbinger's eyes turned toward the horizon and toward Moscow. "Soon. I know a whole town full of good eats."

As they sat there, chewing their meat in the way a cow chews a cud, their potent metabolisms already digesting the deceased matter of their fresh kills, it happened that a goat bounded down the rocky, risen terrain as though navigating a loaf of raisin bread while it was baking. Spike wore a noticeable look of disgust on his face as he observed the animal. Taking notice, Harbinger asked him, "What's a matter?"

"That looks so unappetising now. I don't think I wanna go back to eating goat after trying human. I kinda full, but could we maybe go get some more?"

Harbinger let out a proud laugh, patting the smaller dragon on the back with the tip of his wing. "In the meantime, you'll have to put up with goat. We don't want our brothers to suspect."

"I mean, it's so much better than that old shit. Why don't we just eat them all?"

"Because Discord won't allow it." Harbinger let out another sigh, then tugged more meat from the hunk he had cooking over his fire.

"But why, though?" Spike whined. "I mean, has he really ever even gone so far as to even go want to taste it?"

"Yes, I'm certain he has, but there's a deeper reason as to why he doesn't want us eating humans."

"Why?" Spike asked, looking up at Harbinger with a doe-eyed frown.

"Discord used to disguise himself as a human long before he discovered the method for us to camouflage ourselves in the same manner. That was how he fell in love with a human woman. Paragon found out about their child and killed the mother in front of Discord. Discord flipped out and tore Paragon's head from his shoulders. I think her name was Christine, or something. Anyway, Discord promised her humans would not be touched by dragons ever again. He's our leader today in spite of being an impure dragon, in spite of denying us our staple diet, in spite of sullying our glorious reptilian forms with bumbling, ugly human guises, because he was the one to kill Paragon."

"Wait he fell in love with a human woman!" Spike was too disgusted to pay attention to the entire story, but naturally he honed in on that titbit.

"Shush! Keep it down. If he finds out I told you, he will kill me. And besides, I hear tell you fell in love with a pony." Harbinger let out a bemused snort.

"Yeah, but that's different. Ponies and dragons share a common home. Humans are evil. Besides, we don't get female dragons."

"We used to, but they were all killed by humans in an attempt to wipe us out." Harbinger averted his gaze from Spike and his disposition turned as ill-tempered as the man he'd just eaten.

"What, really?" Spike looked sceptical. "How did puny humans manage that? That seems like kind of a big deal. When did this happen? After I was born? But we didn't reach Earth until 2012. I think I would've heard about it by then. If the humans knew enough about our species to kill all of our females, wouldn't they know all about us and then there'd be no point to all this stealth? Also, I'm surprised there are so many dragons left if we can't procreate."

"Discord would never tolerate so many questions. I had a mate once," Harbinger said, desperately wheedling his way onto another subject.

"Wow, what did she look like?"

"She had the biggest, scariest teeth you had ever seen. And her fire gave of a angry red.[6] Man I loved that woman." Nostalgia crept its way into a smile across Harbinger's reptilian face.

"What happened to her?" asked Spike, ever the stellar example of tact.

"She was slain by the humans. They also burnt my unhatched children. Then they have the cheek to call us monsters!"

"Wow, the humans really are bad people, because you say so!"

"Yes, they are!"

Chapter Sixteen.

Suds and prolix. Public conduct.

Soap downed his sixth whisky shot. The cool, diuretic liquid ran down his throat, and he let out a gravelly sigh as it itched him. Soap had been in the Ivory Inn for nearly an hour now, drowning his sorrows in hopes that in his drunken state of mind, he would forget about Price. Forget about his death. But it wasn't working. The nagging sensation that it was his fault Price was dead sipped at him like a leech.

"Give me another." Soap grunted and tapped the bar.

"I think you have had enough," replied the concerned barkeep.

"I didn't ask for your opinion," growled Soap. "I asked for another whisky." The barkeeper gave a sigh of disappointment and filled the shot glass with whisky. Soap snatched the shot glass away and necked the cool liquid once again. "A pint of Black," ordered Soap as he stared into the empty shot glass with little concern to whether the other patrons wanted drinks as well.

"Sir, I really don't think that is wise," protested the keeper of the bar.

Soap slammed his fist on the bar, causing drinks even on the far end to rattle and spill. "Get me another pint of Black!" he bellowed, his whole body shaking and his arms rising in the air to flail wildly. The barkeeper shook his head and grabbed a pint glass.

The bar was almost empty. There was a group of three women to Soap's left, Laura Vickers somewhere behind him wearing an ill-fitting uniform, and a family with two small children to his right. Apart from that, the bar was empty because all the men had gone off to become soldiers. The barkeeper placed the pint in front of Soap. Soap grabbed the pint and began to neck it. He didn't stop gulping until the pint was half empty. He let out a raucous burp before resting the glass down on the bar. A few seconds passed after he heard the entrance swing open, and then a man sat down beside him.

"Never thought I would see the great Soap MacTavish wasting away in a place like this," said the man in a thick, familiar Russian accent.

Soap turned his head as little as possible to see Yuri. "Piss off," he hissed in greeting as he took another mouthful of his remaining half-pint.

"Do you remember how much you've had to drink?" asked Yuri.

"Nnnope."

"He has had seven whisky shots and four pints of Black, and it's all on his tab," the barkeep said.

Soap looked the barkeep in the eyes for the first time that night. "Shut your mouth before I give you a shot of my fist with a chaser of your teeth!"

"Okay, you have had enough." Yuri reached over to take Soap's glass away from him.

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[6] Sic.

“Get off me!” Soap shouted, screwing his face up into a garish mask of tormented emotion. The family to the right slowly got up and left the bar, leaving a generous tip and waving happily to the bartender. One of the young children complained they hadn’t finished their chaser yet.

“Come on, Soap, this isn’t you. You can’t do this to yourself. We all lost Price not just you, you know.” Yuri tried his best to stay calm as he placed a caring hand upon Soap’s shoulder.

Soap swatted Yuri’s arm away. “Don’t you dare talk about him. You don’t have the right! Weren’t you trying to kill yourself earlier?”

Yuri frowned. “He was my friend, too. Don’t worry about me. I’m feeling better now, and you will, too.”

“No he wasn’t! You’re already over it, you dirty Communist! Do us all a favour and finish killing yourself!”

Yuri let out a heavy sigh. He knew arguing with Soap was proving futile. He knew explaining that he wasn’t a Communist would be just as useless as his earlier flirtation with suicide. He gripped Soap’s shoulder a little more firmly this time. “It’s time for us to leave.”

“Get off me!” Soap roared again. He snatched Yuri’s arm away from himself and this time stood up, knocking his stool to the floor.

“Oh, what, you going to hit me now? Go ahead, if that’s what it will take to make you happy!” Yuri held his arms out. “I’ve been hurt by my friends before.”

Soap took up this invitation and swung his right fist around. Yuri didn’t think Soap really wished to hurt him, so he ducked and Soap’s fist flew over his head and into a wooden column holding up the roof. Soap let out a cry of pain and anger as he clutched his splinter-ridden hand.

“Mat! Soap, are you okay?” Yuri asked.

“Leave me alone!” Instead of helping Yuri to do so, Soap stomped closer and this time swung his left hand forward. Yuri ducked under the attack again and slammed his right hand into Soap’s stomach. Soap gasped for air and dropped to his knee. Yuri had winded him bad.

Yuri sputtered. Even though he’d wanted to knock some sense into Soap, he felt bad for inflicting pain. “Soap, I’m sorry, it was just instinct.” His apology withered uselessly.

“Just fuck off.” Soap grunted as he staggered to his feet and made his way for the doors.

Yuri let out a heavy sigh as he placed down a twenty pound note on the bar to pay for Soap’s drinks. He was surprised to find that Soap was already nowhere in sight by the time he left the Ivory. He quickly scanned the streets, but couldn’t see a sign of him. That’s when he heard an explosion in the distance, in the direction of the army base. Somewhere just beyond that he could see an orange glow and recognized it was fire. When he spotted a strange, black, bird-like object soaring above, his initial thought was that it was a dragon. *No that’s crazy. It couldn’t be, could it? Could they be back?* Yuri began to sprint towards the location.

Soap had been hiding behind a bin in the alleyway behind the Ivory Inn. He clutched his stomach, and his right hand hurt as the blood pulsed around it. His thoughts drifted to the recent events, each vivid memory of his life turning upside-down, pulsing into his mind’s eye as his hand throbbed in pain. As he felt his consciousness slipping away into a drunken stupor, the notion of how simple revenge would be came to him. He rested his head against the bin and crashed into slumber.

Chapter Seventeen.

Tailing dragons. It all goes downhill.

In his sleep, Captain Martin Walker, service tag MW329, was having a pleasant dream about running up a tower decorated in suburban kitsch alongside the Bunker family to escape from the enlarged, mutated suckerfish-squirrels that kept creeping in through the flap-door vents. He awoke before he opened his eyes, and his still-active mind drifted to the thoughts of the past half an hour. He’d been called to Johnson’s office, waited for two inefficacious guards to admit him, and then sat down in an uncomfortable chair.

"Captain Walker!” Johnson greeted him with a sleepy, patronizing smile nearly hidden amidst the stacks of paperwork that piled upon his desk.

"You asked to see me sir?" Martin took a seat on an uncomfortable chair across from him.

"No, you're just here by pure chance," Johnson said. "Of course I sent for you. Damn. Think I wanted to sit through you walkin' all the way down here because it was your imagination? Oh, hey, would you like a drink before I get started?" Johnson beamed as he lifted a four-year-old bottle of scotch onto the table along with two small glasses.

Martin furrowed his brow and widened his eyes in a consternated look. "No, thank you, *sir*. I never drink while *on duty."*

"Suit yourself." Johnson filled both glasses for himself. He smacked his lips, then got down to brass tacks, which is not to say that a capricious student had booby-trapped his chair in order to do him harm, but it is a phrase meaning "getting down to business," such as when uses a tack to display a poster they are convinced (typically wrongly, where posters are concerned) is important. "I need you to find and kill the man we captured. You remember him; the one that escaped from you." Johnson's smile seemed a touch more sardonic now as he guzzled another sip of scotch.

"You mean the man who turned into a giant monster and killed sixteen of our men?" asked Martin, already knowing the answer.

"No, I mean the other guys we had locked up in a secret maximum security facility that busted out. Of course I mean the goddamn monster. Those men shouldn't have been sent after him. They were rookies. I'm sure you and your squad are quite capable of taking out one man."

Martin sighed. He didn't like the sound of this operation one little bit. More than anything else in his life, more than replacing a remote-controlled toy helicopter that had crashed when he was fifteen, he wanted to ask, "Why were rookies guarding a secret maximum security facility in Siberia?" He didn't ask that question. Instead, he asked, "Is there any leads on where to find him?"

"Yep. There were reports of a house fire in the mountains five hundred miles from here. The owners, Archibald and Edith--I can't pronounce the last name--went missing. Large, odd footprints were found in the snow. I think this is to do with him" explained Johnson.

Martin was quiet for a beat. "Right. When do we move out?"

"I can have a escort vehicle pepped and ready in ten. Make sure you're ready."

"Is that all sir?" asked Martin with a dollop of hope.

"Yes, you can go now. I'm glad we had this little chat. Aren't you glad we had this little chat?" Johnson gestured to the door until Martin stood and gave a little salute. Then he interrupted his leaving. "Oh, Walker, one more thing. I have a guide set up to meet you. He's ex-Special Forces. Name's Mordecai, so show him respect."

Martin did not know whether he was meant to show this person respect because he was ex-Special Forces or because of his name, because he was certain that he himself was not generally a disrespectful person unless he was particularly stressed out, so he just said "Yes, sir" and left the room. Even as he daydreamed, the questions still rummaged through his mind like two nosy aunts conducting their spring cleaning, displacing things rather than reorganizing and throwing away, so that the whole joint ended up more cluttered than before. He tried to turn over to get comfortable in his seat again, then realized he was sitting next to the door on the chopper. That woke him up.

Martin opened his eyes and found the rest of the newly reassigned Task Force 143 sitting around a small crate on the chopper, playing Twenty-One and getting to know each other. Gaz and Yuri were among the group.

"You want another card?" Alphanso Adams was dealing the cards. Now he was respectful for an ass-kisser. He was non-white and could rap.

"Yeah, hit me!" It was a tired cliché, but hitting John Lugo was a very tempting offer. Though he could speak more than one language, he was a whiny little bleeding heart who fancied himself a smart aleck. He was identical in appearance to Gaz. He also already had three cards witch added up to twenty. "Come on, ace, come on, ace, I need you, baby!"

Adams handed one more card to Lugo. Lugo grasped the card and looked at it with undue hope. "Oh, fuck this game." He threw the cards onto the crate. The grown men laughed at the other man's failure. They stopped when they noticed Martin had awakened.

"Men, it's good to see you getting along." Martin looked at Lugo, whom the others were still snickering at.

"Sup, Walker?" said Adams. "Sup" is a word which sounds like an abbreviation for "supper", yet is a kind of slurred together version of "What's up?" that actually means "Hello." It's sort of like a far less personal, long-distance fist-bump.

"Good morning, Captain!" Gaz stood up and saluted the instant he felt a break in the dialogue.

"Cut that respectful shit out, Gaz. Just call me Walker."

Gaz went through a protracted apology and awkwardly referred to Martin by his last name. It was difficult for Gaz, who didn't have a proper last name.

"So when does our great leader reveal to us the details of our mission?" Lugo sounded sarcastic, so he was probably being sarcastic.

Martin sighed. "We gotta locate that man or thing that escaped us back in Siberia."

"I knew that was going to bite us in the ass. Right! Uh, do we have any leads?" asked Yuri.

"No, they waited all this time just to tell us to wander aimlessly around Russia. Of course they have a lead. We're headed to the Ural mountains."

"This bastard killed Price. I can't wait until we get old of him." Gaz wore a sinister sneer, but everyone looked foolish when the cards slipped off the crate and were whipped out of the open doors by the wind.

"Look, I know Price meant a lot to you. He did to all of us. But we got to keep focused. This guy is dangerous. He took down Price, Oleg and Griggs. You knew them, you knew what tough sons of bitches they were. We need to be careful," said Yuri. Gaz nodded. Yuri then turned to Jimmy Walsh, who was piloting the helicopter. With his identifiable red afro, he hadn't changed all that much in the past year. "By the by, it's good to see you again, friend!" said Yuri.

Walsh shouted over the sound of the propellers. "You too. Now make sure you're strapped in, we got a snowstorm up there. This is going to be a bumpy ride!"

After an hour, the helicopter was approaching the site of the Bunkers' house. The snowstorm was horrendous and made it hard to see. "How the hell are we going to find anything down there!" roared Adams over all the noise.

"We will find a way! We always do!" replied Martin as the helicopter came to a landing.

The men piled out, and Walsh began to lift off the ground again. "I got to keep moving to keep the engine from freezing. Call me for EVAC!" Walker responded with a thumbs-up, and Walsh disappeared into the gloomy white overhead.

"Walker, we got someone on the rocks!" roared Adams as he lifted his M60 up to his shoulder.

Martin turned to see a skinny-looking man wearing a blue and white hoodie with a Barret 50 CAL. on his back. "State your name, sir!" ordered Martin.

The man looked up at them. "Hey, dudes. I'm Mordecai. I am your tour guide!" replied the man with a joke and a little wave of his long fingers.

"Lower your weapon, Adams." Martin made his way to Mordecai then introduced himself. "I'm Martin Walker. You can call me Walker."

"Mordecai. You can call me Mordecai." Mordecai nodded a few times with a "hm-hm." "I'm like the park ranger around here, but don't tell my boss that."

"Okay, so, Mordecai, where is the cabin that burnt down?"

"Over that ridge. Tell your men to wrap up. It gets even colder down there." Mordecai chuckled.

Martin turned to the squad. "You heard the man. Wrap up warm. Looks like we need to go deeper into the storm." The squad had already been hiking through the deep snow for twenty minutes. They all had put on their ski masks, goggles and their big woolly coats, but still they were cold. "How much further?" shouted Martin over the noise of the storm.

"Not long now, dude. Five more minutes, if that," replied Mordecai.

"I'm freezing my nuts off here," Lugo said to Adams.

"Mate, you ain't got any for them to be frozen," Adams said as a funny joke at Lugo's expense. He was implying that Lugo lacked testicles, and that this claim disparaged his value as a living person by saying he was less masculine for it.

"Yeah, I think if you asked your sister, she might disagree."

"What the fuck did you just say?" Adams was upset about Lugo's sexually offensive remark.

"I teabagged your sister." Lugo laughed.

"Man, that ain't cool."

Everyone touched noses with Lugo. "Consider this your first official reprimand," Walker told him. "It's okay for him to sexually harass you in jest. It's not okay for you to retaliate in equal measure."

"How you holding up, Gaz?" asked Yuri.

"Good. Wish I had central heating in this coat."

"Yeah, you're not the only one. Fucking cold. My sister has central heating at her place."

"Does she? Oh, that's pretty sweet."

Mordecai shouted. "We are here!" Task Force 143 nearly collided into one another single-file.

Martin unbunched them and barked out orders. "Let's get a scan of the area. Lugo, Yuri, you two take the left flank, move around, look for any tracks he might have left. Adams, Gaz, you take right flank. I will go up front with Mordecai. If you find something, let us know on the radio. Okay, team move out!"

It was no secret that many people had fled to uninhabited regions in the wake of the pony holocaust in hopes of hiding forever from their Equestrian overlords, but each of them had been taking a gamble in shunning the protection of the Human Resistance. The Bunkers had lost that gamble. Their cabin looked like little more than a decrepit pallet about half the size of a little league baseball field with roasted wood jutting out here and there at tired angles. Posts and studs were dried a ghostly white through and through, and charred black at the ends where they'd been gnarled by the now-extinguished fire whose smell still lingered in the air. The soldiers stamped out smouldering fragments where they could, lamenting that they had not been stifled from all the snow that conveniently blanketed the terrain nearby.

What remained of the foundation hardly looked large enough to contain all the amenities of a dignified home, and little more remained now of the habitable furniture than blackened skeletons and melted frames. It appeared as though an entire second story had collapsed, and it was impossible to identify it had been a loft, making the division of separated rooms nigh indistinguishable. There was still a faint glow to the springs that filled Archie's favourite chair and the two beds that he and his wife slept in. Dinner on the oven had been burnt to a hunk of charcoal. An assortment of disgusting, unidentifiable smells mingled in the air, not the least of such the melted plastic of their television or smoked wood.

In all honesty, there wasn't much ground to cover to necessitate the use of their walkie-talkies. The squad split up into their designated pairs and set off on their flanks, but Mordecai was less confident. "Dude, your men need to be careful. What lurks in these mountains will give you nightmares for the rest of your lives."

"My men are trained professionals; they will be fine," Martin said.

"Yes. We shall see. Uhuh huh huh."

"Man, look at all this shit." Adams stepped over bits of burnt wood, using the nozzle of his weapon to knock aside leaning protrusions of wood. "Knowing our luck, this will turn out to be a gas leak with a bad ending."

"A 'Gaz leek'? Man, what the hell are you saying? No, if it was a gas leak, we'd find some sort of remains," Gaz said.

"Hey, man, who knows what are lurking in those mountains? Something could've had these guys for dinner, like a mountain lion or a bear."

"A bear? Bears are sweet. They're the symbol of mother Russia."

"You're certainly getting closer." Mordecai squinted his eyes ominously.

"So how long have you, Adams and Walker been working together?" Yuri asked festively.

"Going on six years now, I think. We had two others, but it didn't go too well for them." Lugo kicked aside some loose debris just in front of his boot. The heap suddenly collapsed along with the floor immediately beneath him, sucked away like a bathtub drain as the burnt wood defragmented into the hidden root cellar below.

Yuri managed to grab Lugo's arm, who had reacted just in time to half-jump away from the newfound gap with the one boot he'd kept on more solid ground. Both men stared into the inky void that gurgled with the noise of falling clutter, then Yuri said with rather a glib tone, "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, I'm over it. People are lost all the time in this war. I'll have time to grieve over them when the war is all done and finished." Like most people, Lugo ignored four millennia of recorded history and believed there could ever be an end to the warring.

Martin crouched down and examined the burnt wood, but it all looked like a jumbled mess of disintegrating junk to him now. Mordecai stepped up behind him and stared for a moment before asking, "Find anything?"

Martin shook his head, although he kept staring as though expecting something to just jump out at him from nothing.

"Doubt you will. You dudes should leave this alone. I know they toasted your guys, but you are going to lose a hell of a lot more if you keep this up. Your squad, your family, hell, maybe even what's left of the human race." Mordecai was being somewhat of a downer in his bid to be intimidating.

As Martin stood up, his spine cracked. "Look, if you know something, just spit it out. Like why do you keep referring to 'him' as 'they'?"

"What, man, you think there's only one of these dudes? Your guns are useless against dragons."

Martin screwed up his face. "Dragons? Don't be stupid. They are just myths and legends."

"A year ago, the human race was fighting talking cartoon ponies. You think dragons are far off?"

"Even if there were dragons, they would've been defeated a long time ago."

Mordecai raised one eyebrow. "And what authority makes you say that? You said they were myths. If you want to hear a legend, try this on your ears: All dragons are united under one ruler. In ancient times, that ruler's name was Paragon. Then Discord challenged his rule, saying that dragons shouldn't eat humans, and he killed Paragon to become the new leader of the dragons. If they're attacking humans from the Ural Mountains, someone else must be in charge."

The story bothered Martin, and for a good reason. "What in the hell are you talking about, and where did you get all this from?"

"When I left the special forces, I didn't stop knowing how to gather exposition."

"Yeah, well, we are better prepared now."

Mordecai groaned. "Uhh, dude. I said earlier, your guns won't do anything. To kill a dragon, you have to either cut their throat or burn them." Mordecai counted these options off on his long fingers. He missed a third method.

"Burn them? They're dragons. How does that make sense?" Martin asked.

Mordecai shrugged. "I dunno. Probably so dragons can fight other dragons."

"Yeah, well, with all due respect, I will believe it when I see it."

"Is that why you don't believe the reports from Hainan and New York? Dragons aren't soldiers. They're giant, flying, fire-breathing reptiles. They kind of become crucial to any battle they're in."

Adams interrupted their circular conversation. "Drag marks, sir. Snow hasn't completely covered them up." He pointed to the distance where they led.

"Gaz, Adams, check it out," Martin ordered. He was glad to be rid of Mordecai's doom talk.

Kane and two other of Discord's dragons had been sent out to collect more mountain goats. They had caught four so far, and were talking another that had got its tongue stuck to a tree. "Keep low," Kane whispered. They usually operated in snowstorms to avoid risking notice by the humans, but their scout had noticed the goats were swarming tonight. For added measure, they were using their human forms.

"Can't we just kill it already?" Dramo was the youngest of the three. His hobby was killing.

"No we must wait," replied Kane without pausing to take a breath.

"Just listen to Kane." Bismuth was the second eldest of the three, and kind of a suck-up.

Adams and Gaz had just crossed the bend of the mount when they discovered the three men in their dark, masked hoodies and form-fitting gear. "Shit, who are they?" asked Gaz with a touch of panic.

"Dunno. Think I'll radio this in." Adams turned on his radio. He liked playing with the radio. "Walker, this is Adams. Do you copy?"

The slight inclement weather had no effect on the radio, and Martin's voice came through just fine. "No, I always do my own work. What is it, Adams?"

"We got three tangos. We could use some back up, please."

"Okay, since you asked nicely. Hold your position."

When Adams finished talking to Martin, Gaz had the dumbest idea ever. "I think we should try to capture them."

"Are you crazy? Are you out of your mind? One of these guys took down three of yours, along with god knows how many of Markov's men." He couldn't remember Makarov's correct name.

"Yeah, that one got us by surprise. Now *we* have the element of surprise!"

A collective groan wracked Adams' whole body. "Come on. Our orders were to stay put. Don't do something dangerous and cliché."

Gaz shook his head. He knew he was right. "Know" is a word which describes the ability to possess factual information in one's mind for the purpose of rationalizing and acting upon it in an accordant manner. Unfortunately, many, many people constantly use the term "know" incorrectly, when in fact what they mean to say is "I think" or "I believe". This is called "lying" and is part of the collective human race's tedious penchant for bravado. "Suit yourself," Gaz said, ever wishing to deserve a swift and stupid death. "I'm going in!"

"Gaz, no, wait, please, stop, come back," Adams said to no great effect.

Gaz screamed at the top of his lungs until his voice hit a falsetto, waving his gun around like a police officer hunting someone's pet dog. "Freeze! Put your hands on your heads!" He boldly approached the three dragons (who were in their human forms still, as if that wasn't apparent). The mountain goat heard his spastic raging and ran off.

Kane turned around to glower at Gaz. "Aw, shit." Dramo and Bismuth followed suit. They regarded the gun as if it wasn't there, and mumbled to one another over what they should do. Dramo had the gall to ask if that was indeed a human, which Kane affirmed with amazing self-control at not pointing out what a ridiculous question that was. Before any of them could wise up to a plan of action such as, say, lying and pretending to be ordinary humans in fancy dress who go around collecting goats, Gaz shrieked again.

"Hands in the air, now!" He was certainly enjoying himself. The dragons uselessly continued to say "shit" a lot, and Bismuth and Dramo began jabbing one another in hopes of spurring on some action. Kane told the two spinach chins to hush up and comply with whatever Gaz said. Dramo was a little less quick on the draw, so Gaz screamed at them again like a child in a condom ad. "I said hands on head, now, now, now!" Actually, he'd said to put their hands in the air, but all present found the point moot.

Kane ordered Dramo to do as Gaz said. "Why?" was Dramo's slack-witted reply. "He can't hurt us with bullets." He was far more amused than Gaz was.

"It's called diffusing a situation. We're not supposed to kill humans."

"It's called self-defence if we kill him."

"Not when, as you *just* pointed out, you *simpering* cretin, they have no way of harming us."

"Can't we kill him just a little?"

"Last warning!" Gaz sounded ready to cry.

Adams sighed and kept back, opting instead to speak via radio. "Gaz, come on, just wait for Walker, alright?"

Gaz didn't want to listen to Adams. He wanted to be the man. "Do it now!" he whined at the three strangers.

"Oh, go fornicate yourself." Dramo whipped out a blade and hurled it through the air like a circus act that didn't pass OSHA standards inspections. It spun through the air and struck Gaz in the forehead.

"Gaz, no!" Adams wailed and opened fire. It seems he had a breaking point as well.

"Are you crazy?" Bismuth hissed at Dramo. "Are you out of your mind?"

Kane's frown sank lower and lower, though it couldn't be seen through his impractical mask. "You must be punished," he told Dramo. Dramo made some sort of perfunctory protest just before Kane, acting rather rash, sliced open his throat. Blood spurted out from the wound like explosive diarrhoea as Dramo's head tilted back behind his shoulders. They ignored the bullets Adams sent flying past them.

"You monster!" Bismuth roared as he grabbed Kane under his arms and hurled him with improbable leverage over his shoulder. He flung him off to the side where he stuck head-first up to his waist in the snow. Three (or maybe it was four) bullets struck Bismuth right in the shoulder. "Aw, that's it! Now I'm mad!" Bismuth's body untangled itself from within its disguise. First, his human façade bubbled and ripped apart his over-the-top BDSM uniform through sheer force. His mass stretched his human body into an unrecognizable shape, but soon all semblances of colouring and appearance had melted away like a quick fade, and standing there as though he always had been was a massive, horned grey dragon. His maw drew in breath as his eyes glowed at the humans, and energy sparkled within his maw in a display just like a plasma orb.

While he transformed, Martin and Mordecai had caught up, closely followed by Lugo and Yuri. "I told you to wait for me!" Martin said. "I would have done everything better!"

"Gaz went a few yards closer to them, and they killed him!" Adams tattled.

"What Gaz?" Yuri's eyes found Gaz lying in a Gaz-shaped hole in the blood-stained snow, his arms still clutching his weapon over his groin. "You bastard!" he cried as he opened fire on Bismuth.

"Dude, you gotta tell your men to cease fire! He is turning!" roared Mordecai.

"Stop shooting now!" Martin roared what Mordecai had roared at him.

No one listened. For a while, Adams and Yuri continued firing like disobedient teenagers begging for psychiatric treatment. By the time Bismuth had finished his metamorphosis, both of them were too stunned to keep it up. Then Bismuth let out an earth-shaking roar that put Mordecai and Martin to shame.

"What the fuck is that?" Lugo asked, as though never having been read a fairy tale before.

"Yeah, that's a dragon," Mordecai said with a shrug.

"A what?" Lugo asked, as if the word had never been spoken in the English language before.

"Oh, god dammit, it's exactly what it looks like! How do we kill it?" asked Martin.

"Well, unless you're packing a flame thrower, we don't!" Mordecai said. His voice sounded uneven and quieter, though it was clear he was still shouting.

"So what do we do?" Martin turned to see Mordecai was far behind them, running down the hill and yelling. He was not saying any actual words, but his meaning was evident. "Retreat!" Martin said. The men quickly turned around and made a run for it in the deep snow. Bismuth roared and stamped towards them, but he wasn't the only entity chasing Task Force 143. His mighty roar had shaken all the snow loose from the mountain, and a great wall of white was tumbling down upon them, reminding them never to take the powdery flakes of frozen precipitation for granted again.

Martin shouted into his radio, but it was difficult for Walsh to understand what was being said. All the yelling was understandably unintelligible, but he got the message. "Walsh, we need an EVAC, pronto!" Martin was screaming. It sounded as if he was bouncing up and down with much exertion.

"Roger that, I'm on my way!" Walsh flashed a thumbs-up to the radio and set a course.

Bismuth inhaled sharply, like a balloon being forced full of air until it would pop. Special bones clicked just above his mouth, and a channelled blast of electrical energy zoomed out at the squad. The impact was like a molten slug from a Sherman tank, and the resulting shockwave sent Task Force 143 hurtling off of their feet. Mordecai turned back and could see the avalanche pummelling its way down the mountainside, but still he went back and seized Martin's arm to help him up. Somehow, the squad picked themselves up and started running again. They tried to run even before they stood.

The unique shape of the mountain splint the wave of snow into two different directions, but still the dragon was fumbling after them like a playful St. Bernard. Martin and his men had reached their intended EVAC point, but Walsh was nowhere to be seen, so they stamped their feet and swore up and down until the helicopter lowered down to them, dangling a rope ladder like an invitation that hadn't quite been mailed out yet. The men swarmed upon it like ants to an ice cream cone that had been dropped on the ground, but they didn't have time to fight with one another over the seating arrangements. Once they'd all grabbed a hold, they screamed at Walsh to take off.

Bismuth stumbled in the snow that kept pounding the backs of his ankles. His eyes lit up half in amusement, half in frustration as his feeble prey took to the skies, and he unfurled those massive wings of his and launched himself free of the whiteness piling at his feet.

"Holy poopy shit, it can fly!" Lugo remarked.

Mordecai pressed his fingers to his forehead. "Ugh. I keep telling you dudes, it's a dragon."

Martin ordered Adams to take hold of the chopper's heavy machine gun, and the latter opened fire upon the reptile lofting about through the air behind him. Bismuth was sucking in another rush of air with which to propel his next attack on his breath when a second dragon came tackling into his side like a sociopathic rugby player (in other words, like a rugby player). The second dragon was Kane. Adams asked what the fuck happened as Kane dragged Bismuth down into the snowy obscura.

"Get us out of here!" ordered Martin.

"Thanks, chief, wouldn't've thought of that myself!" Walsh snapped.

"What about Gaz's body?" asked Yuri.

"Priorities, Yuri!" Martin shouted.

Yuri said a loud curse word and slammed his fist against the frame of the missing helicopter door. He stared down at the bustling white flurries below and soaked in the pity of his comrades. They felt pity for him, and for Gaz. But they also felt fear. Pity and fear. Fear of their new enemy: The dragons!

Chapter Eighteen.

I like the pope. The pope does dope.

Religion was a method by which people tried to get their children to behave in the simplest way possible: By telling them that a mystical sky wizard who was very wise and benevolent suffered for the sake of wisdom and benevolence, and that is why your father and I want you to not question us when we tell you to eat your vegetables and go to bed at a reasonable hour. Nutrition and eight hours of sleep are essential every day, but the quarrel of attrition between the limits of a parent's patience and a child's attention span have lasted for longer than living creatures have tried to put into simple metaphor the expected outcomes of the physical world around them. The mind is a fertile field for imagination, or at least it was in the days of hunting and gathering, but unfortunately things like war and technology have always gotten in the way as a sort of vicious cycle. A wiser (and hopefully more benevolent) scholar than me would be better suited to explaining how we got from there to the lofty, splendiferous castle that was the Vatican in the Holy Roman Empire. Not much of an empire, considering it's barely a blip on Italy's knee, this was where the pope, the leading political figure in the popular religion of Christianity, lived. Christianity's a funny scapegoat, in that they knew how to market their religion and therefore make it accessible, which people found more oppressive than the fact every restaurant you can visit has a superfluous list of alcoholic beverages available in comparison to sodas and juices. They even had televised specials in the old age, explaining the general gist, origin, and intentions of the holiday, offering it up even with a secular framework to share its sentiments with people from other religions. People even celebrated it ironically by acting extra grumpy when their lofty expectations were not met. It's certainly not the religion with the most members, especially when you consider the numerous factions that inhibit its cohesiveness, but as many of these things are lost to time, I can think of no better explanation for future generations to frame the next encounter humans had with the ponies than that which I have given here.

Pope John Paul II had returned to the Vatican in the year-long absence of the ponies, who had, like all other famous buildings and monuments, desecrated the place with vandalism and sacrilege. It is extremely rude to impose one's own ego onto another person's creative labours, and the Equestrians had been through the place like a stampede of screaming children throwing temper tantrums, urinating on artwork, burning books, and inserting their own likenesses over the images of religious figures. Even if you disagree with a book, it's more mature simply not to read it than to banish it from your country or set it on fire, whether it's by Edgar Guest or a school assignment. As for the other transgressions, the existential status of deified figures is debatable at best, but declaring yourself superior to even a hypothetical figure of universal omnipotence comes across as egotistical and hyperactive, especially if you resort to scatological practices to prove your point. Being the pope, religion was a bit closer to John Paul's heart than most, and he succumbed to weeping at the state the joint had been left in.

"He's not going to cry, is he? Geez, the old man's got Alzheimer's or something," said a man brandishing an iDroidBerry SmartPhone. He was maybe in his early thirties and wearing a t-shirt with a picture of three wolves howling at the moon. His slacks and trilby were nothing to write home about, and he was accompanied by a tallish man wielding a film camera. *His* t-shirt said "Fuck Cancer" on it, and he had a baseball cap crammed into his pocket.

"Do you mind? We've withstood your acerbic blasphemy, but now you're just being downright rude." The other two figures in this strange entourage were clad in black. The man who had just spoken was wearing the traditional black garb of a Catholic priest, and the woman beside him was clearly a nun, judging from her habit. The two men in t-shirts ignored them save for a grin.

The pope finished praying—a word which here means "muttering phrases under his breath and making hokey gestures to himself"—and stood. "That's quite alright, Father Barreiro. I don't require you and Sister Noe to protect me from name-calling." The pope was an exorbitantly old man—the word "exorbitantly" here means "very"—wearing a simple white robe with some decorative glittery gold-coloured bits and a matching zucchetto. When he stood, his knees and other joints creaked and cracked. Getting old is never pretty, and you should be so lucky. He turned to the hostile man with the phone and said, "You told me your name's Joshua, correct?"

Joshua rolled his eyes. "Yes, what of it?"

John Paul walked down the grand hallway, which was badly water-damaged by a slip'n'slide the ponies had installed. "The name Joshua means 'God is my saviour'. It was also the name of one of the spies Moses sent into Canaan."

The five entered a massive cathedral where the ceiling frescos had been ruined by smoke and the pews had been piled into the centre to create a massive bonfire. "Yeah, I get it, you think I'm spying on you or something, and that I'm persecuting you against the law or whatever. I've heard it all before. You do know Moses was Jewish, right? Not a Christian."

Sister Noe coughed as they approached the altar. “The New Testament is an extension of the Old. It’s just as important to us.”

Joshua craned his neck and looked around the dilapidated premises. “I’d say all that glitters is important to you. Why did you even come back here? Italy’s been evacuated. There’s nothing but scavengers. You’re endangering yourselves on a fool’s mission. Did you come here to talk to yourselves? To pretend a bunch of dead and fictional people can hear you?”

The pope stopped by a tabernacle—a word which refers to a locked case typically holding a religious artefact—and tutted. The door had been broken open rather than unlocked, and nothing was left inside. The priest and the nun both wanted to object and debate the two interviewers, but he raised his hand to calm them. Before he spoke again, he led them into a doorway situated in the wall behind the altar. Here there was a cramped but elegant corridor leading to where priests kept their vestiges and sanctified items. “We live in a world where people are very concerned about solidarity and protecting their loved ones, but they aren’t very concerned about their souls. It’s very easy when one fights with monsters to become a monster, but humanity mustn’t lose sight of its gifts for the sake of that. As for prayer, I don’t believe we are alone.”

“Yeah, well, we are alone, unless you mean those fucking ponies raping our world. I hate those vermin,” Joshua said.

Both Father Barreiro and Sister Noe glared at him. The nun in particular bustled herself up like a pair of male penguins protecting an egg. The pope just turned to give Joshua a disappointed look. After a beat, he said, “That’s exactly who I mean, actually. We’ve been followed since before we reached the gates.” This turned everyone’s angst into dread. The cameraman pointed his camera this way and that, and Joshua tried to mask his worry behind incredulity, but ponies weren’t a thing to joke about. He could only wish the pope was as wrong about this declaration as he believed him to be about his imaginary beings.

Three particular Equestrians were lingering behind the group of humans, taking their time to scribble moustaches on the statues that hadn’t been completely obliterated. “Cutie Mark Crusader Urban Muralists are go!” Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo chortled to themselves and tapped hooves, but the unicorn among them was quick to shush them. “We have to be very, very quiet!” Sweetie Belle screeched. “We’re hunting homo sapiens!”

Apple Bloom gasped. “I know! We can be Cutie Mark Crusader Espionage Operatives!” At these words, the three of them skulked around as low to the ground as they could get, breaking off into three separate directions. They still weren’t being as quiet as one ought to be if one’s intent is to sneak up on someone. Instead, they lapsed into songs which alerted the humans to their presence and scared the wits out of them.

We are the Cutie Mark Crusaders
On a quest to end the human race,
And we will never stop the hurting
As we jam bazookas in their face.
So jump up, make no sound
As we give the run around
If we work together,
We can put those humans in the ground.
Drifting off to sleep, don’t sleep while you are driving.
Drifting as you drive, let the joyous demon find you!

The humans were thrown into a panic. Even Joshua didn’t feel so snarky anymore. “What the hell do we do now?”

“We go downstairs, and we hurry,” said the pope, indicating a spiral staircase that led downwards.

Josh’s cameraman was not convinced, and even when he panicked, he still didn’t take the camera away from his face. “We gotta get outta here!” he screeched. “They’re comin’ right for us!” Instead of following them downstairs, he fled from the room, shouting, “You said you’d protect me, Joshua! You said I’d get better!” He couldn’t hear the others yelling for him to stop, that it was too late to go that way, but he didn’t listen. Father Barreiro volunteered to go and fetch him while the others headed beneath the Vatican. He found the cameraman out in the cathedral, but he also found ponies. The cameraman was shrieking and flailing his legs, holding on tight to his equipment as Scootaloo hoisted him higher and higher towards the ceiling.

Father Barreiro whipped a pistol out from his black jacket and aimed it at Sweetie Belle who was just standing there. “Vade retro, satanas! Put him down gently, or I put a slug through your face.”

Sweetie Belle lidded her eyes halfway. “That’s not a very Christian thing to do, Father, pointing a gun at a mare.” She watched as a statue came tumbling down from above, sending several hundred pounds of marble flattening Father Barreiro from above, and shattering into dozens of unidentifiable rocks while squishing him into an unidentifiable splatter of human remains.

Apple Bloom peered down from a balcony above and let out a “Woohoo! Railing kill!”

Sweetie Belle shook her head. “A railing kill is when someone dies over a railing, not when you knock something over a railing onto them.”

“Aw, are you sure? I think it’s fair.”

The cameraman didn’t think it was fair. Scootaloo had just about flown up to the ceiling when she griped about how heavy he was. “Geez, you humans weigh a ton! Especially you fat ones with the beards on your necks. Oh, right, why don’t I just drop you?” She let go of him, and he screamed in hysterics, filming the ground rushing up to meet him the entire way before his body smacked into the ground. The camera shattered into a bazillion pieces, as well as his skeleton, and he slumped there in a splat of his own blood, dead on the spot.

Deep within the bowels of the Vatican, Pope John Paul II, Sister Noe, and Joshua were fleeing for their lives amidst catacombs that doubled as a collection of ancient religious artefacts. “Don’t tell me we’re gonna hide in the ark of the covenant,” Joshua said. “That Indy Jones fridge stuff never works. Aliens, I get, but religion? That’s just retarded.”

Sister Noe started to lay into Joshua with a lecture about how extremely offensive it is to use the term “retarded” (although it did, once, have non-derogatory connotations, such as when something is flame-retardant), but this was neither the time nor the place, as they could hear the rattling of the stairs far behind them from the ponies’ descent. They knew it must have been the sound of hooves and the wicked peal of giggling. The nun caught herself in mid-sentence and said to the pope, “I’ll buy us some more time, your holiness.”

Pope John Paul II began to read her her last rites, a sort of religious ritual for those on the brink of death, which frustrated Joshua to no end. “We don’t have time for this! Open this damn door!” He kicked the door located in the calcified walls, then tried to open it himself. It wouldn’t budge unless he exerted quite a bit of effort, but through the power of desperation, he managed to force it open enough to slip his arm through. He threw himself at the door again, multiple times, until he and the pope could finally fit through.

“Good job, Joshua,” the pope said as he followed him inside. Joshua tried to kick the door shut behind them, but it proved even harder to budge in the opposite direction.

The nun, meanwhile, drew a ruler from beneath her robes and flicked it outwards, extending it into a yardstick as she prepared to face down the three ponies in that dank basement. Those evil, leering mares cackled as they approached her, step by step, announcing themselves as the “Cutie Mark Crusader Religious Crusaders!”

The pope and Joshua didn’t know what became of her. All they heard was a shortened shriek, and they pressed onwards. The pope was making surprising time for an elderly gentleman wearing a robe. The halls stopped being so ornate and pretty and became rockier and rougher. Joshua scowled at the graves of the dead that surrounded them, and the skulls that leered at them. It all looked appropriately morbid to lie under such radiant exteriors up above, and he saw no qualms from the pope about racing amidst the dead to escape Hell on Earth. Pretty soon, they were in a room that amounted to a rocky cavern with a big pit of light, murky water in the centre of the floor.

“Joshua, do you mind handing me a bottle? Preferably empty, if you please?” the pope asked.

“What, are you dying of thirst, you old geezer?” In spite of his rudeness, Joshua handed over a near-empty plastic water bottle which he’d filled with vodka. The pope emptied it out onto the stone floor, then filled it to the brim from the mineral bath.

“Whatever you do, young man, I need you to hold onto this. My life doesn’t matter, but you can escape if you go ahead through here, but take this with you, no matter the cost!” The pope waited for a response that didn’t come. Joshua only let out a disarming choke. His head wobbled as he tried to look down at himself, and his hands fumbled to grasp the end of a pointed horn sticking out from his stomach.

Sweetie Belle took a step back to withdraw her horn from Joshua’s body, and he fell to the ground like an accordion, first forward onto his knees, then backward. Scootaloo stepped in beside her, and Apple Bloom brandished a gun at the pope. “Alright, you old wizard, you’re coming with us!”

Chapter Nineteen.

Tattletale. Of the same blood. Over the hills is where we last saw them.

Straining from anger, Kane threw his dwindling strength against the doors to the dragon den. Having to crawl through that long, claustrophobic tunnel with Gaz’s body in tow was very nearly not worth the effort his loyalty decreed it was. He hated the stupid tunnel and the necessity of donning his constricting, offensive human disguise in order to squeeze through it. Now only did certain portions of this ugly shape not collide well with dirt and rock, particularly his knees, which were simply the worst, but there were times Gaz’s body weighed about as much as a soaking wet sack of potatoes, and Kane thought he

might lose a limb for the effort he had to tug him along with. He could barely stand once he entered the den and he had to slide Gaz's body along the ground before shutting the doors.

"Take this to Lord Discord, now!" Kane was glad to be relieved of Gaz's burden. He tried to stand up, but slipped on a suit of Nightingale armour and fall onto his back. Now his spine hurt, too.

Harbinger had rushed over from below, with Spike following on his heels as fast as his purple little legs could take him. Spike had no need for a disguise. "Brother, what happened?" Harbinger asked.

"Humans. Humans attacked us!"

"Where are Bismuth and Dramo?" Spike's instinct was to ask what Kane had done wrong, which said a lot about how difficult he was to get along with.

"Dead!" replied Kane bluntly, still gasping for breath, and having no concern for Spike's brown-nosing. Despite his injuries and dishevelled state, he headed to Discord's wacky chambers.

Harbinger was glad of the opportunity to disparage his enemies. "See? See what monsters they are? I told you! I told you so!"

"We should go burn down every village in the area!" Spike donned a firefighter helmet.

"Yeah, maybe we will." Harbinger had a dreamy look in his eyes.

Discord was very busy with office work at the time, but he wasn't the sort to lock his doors. When two dragons in human bodies and black armour marched in, carrying Gaz's dead body like a rolled-up towel between them, Discord was covered in yellow number two Ticonderoga pencils. He was chewing on a pencil. He had pencils jammed between each toe of his draconic foot. He was juggling a pencil between the fingers of his eagle claw, and trying to make another pencil look like rubber by waving it in his lion paw. He pinched another pencil between his upper lip and his nose which was difficult because the draconequus didn't have the face for it. He also had pencils sticking out of his ears. The two dragons had to clear away several isometric constructs and geodesic domes made entirely with pencils out of the way on his donut-shaped table so they could lay Gaz's body down like a fresh kill delivered to the butcher's market.

Discord look a long while to admit he noticed their delivery, and when Kane followed into the room, Discord placed both fists to his cheeks, sending all of his pencils flying away from his body in time to emit a prolonged, high-pitched gasp. He then folded his arms upon his table and adopted an immediately sardonic demeanour. "What happened this time? Play too rough with your chew toys?"

Kane didn't understand the second question, but he did answer the first while trying to catch his breath. "We were attacked by a group of humans. A gaggle. A flock. A murder. Whatever the word is. They had guns, and, and, one of them said things as if he knew how to kill us!"

Discord blew a few times on a slide whistle. "Where are Dramo and Bismuth?" It was eerie the way he knew the other two masked figures weren't them.

"They attacked the humans. I'm sorry, but I had to kill them both. Sorry! So, sorry, everyone."

Discord took time to think it through. It took him about a second, then he nodded. "It's okay, you did the right thing. In fact, because I don't have a brain the size of a walnut, I may even know *why* they were looking for us!"

The insult didn't register with Kane. "Why?" he asked, slowly.

Discord blew a sad note on his slide whistle, then tossed the annoying instrument somewhere over his shoulder. He nodded to the other two dragons, which was somehow a signal for them to depart from the room and close the doors behind themselves, then looked Kane in the eyes. "Your brother, Harbinger. He killed those crusty old biddies in that cabin. He's put us all at risk. We should probably seriously consider eliminating him." Discord smiled at the ceiling and drummed his claws against his chin.

Kane had objections to this. "Wait, what? Why? We can't just kill him!"

"Look I know he's your 'bro' and all, so don't think of it so much as 'killing', but 'alternating his lifestyle'. He did something that was wrong and put us all at risk. Do you *really* want to go back to the old days?" Discord gave a shudder of revulsion. He then became excited and jumped up onto his table, patting his knees repeatedly. "Do you? Do you want to be hunted? Well, do you? Do ya? Do ya, huh, huh, huh, huh?"

Kane felt perturbed. "We are stronger than them. We can take them on if it came to that." argued Kane.

“Oh, right, then tell me where all the female dragons are, Mr. I-Can’t-Even-Contraction-Right-Now.” Discord flicked Kane in the forehead. “You know we have an agreement not to eat up all the ponies’ food source, and you know there’s a reason for your wretched disguises. Their technology has gotten frightfully, albeit predictably more destructive than it used to be. Maybe their primitive projectile weaponry can’t penetrate our durable scales or your thick skulls, but they have devised sufficient methods, you know. They now control a sizeable means of weapons production.”

Kane did not need reminding of the finer details. He did not need telling about their bond with Equestria, their homeland, the great land-egg that birthed all dragons. He did not need to hear again the rumours of what happened in Hainan, and how some type of human aircraft had obliterated one of their kind. Kane took a deep breath similar to how the dragons launched their natural weapons, but this time he expelled something that, to him and his kind, was much more potent. “I am sorry, my lord. Harbinger is my brother. I shall take care of this broken promise.”

Discord patted Kane on the back, then went rooting around through his collections of junk for where he’d left that slide whistle. ”Atta boy. I’d help get you a new brother, honest I would, but, well, Hamburger did know what he was doing!”

“Harbinger.” Kane said the name more to himself than anything, then left the room. Again he said the name, but this time to address its owner. “Harbinger, we need to speak.”

"What is a matter, brother?" Harbinger and Spike were seated at a table near the giant glass column of magma. He was holding bits of meat over a candle on the table, deliberately letting it burn. "We haven't had much time to talk lately. I was thinking we could hunt together.”

Harbinger was not foolish enough to be swayed by this, but still he smiled a cold, reptilian smile at his elder sibling. “I didn’t think it went too well, given Discord’s taboo on eating long pig. I imagine the goats will have scattered.”

“The goats are simple creatures. Please, join me.”

Harbinger nodded and bid Kane to get a head start. He then muttered to Spike. “This bodes more ill than a cat with the mange.” Spike just looked at him with slightly more interest than in the goat he was presently noshing on, so Kane continued. “My brother and I haven’t spoken properly in years. Now he wishes to make good on a bungled hunt with me. What a peculiar time to feel familial.”

"I could follow you if you like," offered Spike. He did not hide that he wanted to tag along outdoors very well.

Harbinger shook his head. “No, Spike. This is a matter for two brothers to handle.”

“Spite” is a word which has been bandied about a lot, so I feel obligated to inform you what the word means. I am sure that if your reading comprehension has brought you this far, a minority of you may already be acquainted with this word, but it is better to be safe than sorry, so I will tell you now that it is not being used out of spite against you. Spite may sound like an herb with a sharp taste, perhaps a cross between anise and horseradish, but though I have read many a condiment label in hopes of finding a way out of this dilapidated hosiery supplier’s employee lounge, I have not found the likes stocked here, and anyway, if it were a spice, you would in all likelihood not wish to taste it. Spite is described as a surreptitious emotion of malicious intend that precedes a hostile act, typically passive aggressive in its nature. Intentionally providing a foul-tasting meal that will make your guest nauseous may be something you do out of spite. You may find me spiteful to transcribe the horrid details of this inhumane war to you, although I promise it is only my sorry lot in life. Despite the unpalatable horrors of this treachery and exploitation, my only crime is to share its contents with you in the hopes the truth be made known.

Despite Kane’s reservations, and despite Harbinger’s suspicions, and despite the mutual malaise that had poured itself between the otherworldly brothers like a sea of discontent, the pair found themselves marching through the snowy hillocks of the Ural Mountains. Harbinger walked in front by a foot or two, daring Kane to make a move that would tear down all of his inhibitions and give him cause to rant about everything he disagreed with about Kane’s loyalties. He respected his brother too much, and he also knew better than to grant him the excuse of self-defence. Kane could see several opportunities to strike a decisive blow and be done with Discord’s fiendish orders, but he let each one pass him by. He couldn’t think of his own sibling as a traitor. Dramo and Bismuth had only acted in what they believed to be their best interest. These two had been brothers for over seven centuries. Kane knew his brother too well in spite of the wedge between them, and he believed Discord would not throw around baseless accusations.

The avalanche had ceased, and in its place was a dead calm. That mountainside had been rendered a blank span of blue whiteness, like a fresh sheet of paper, or a blank slate. The sea they tread on was frozen, and they were the only two objects in all the world that either of them could see. A cold breeze swept across them both, neither of which the dragons cared for, as the chill clutched around their shoulders like a pair of ghastly, invisible arms, rendering them both for the moment immobile. It seemed to either of them that there was no choice to be made. They needed nothing more than to go through the motions of this charade and be done with it. But if there was no choice to be made, what prolonged this “inevitable” outcome?

Harbinger grew bored. He saw no challenge to keep silent such as when he was being tortured. The pride between dragons was too high stakes in comparison with teasing and escaping a few vile humans. "So where exactly are we going to look for the goats?" They had seen no goats thus far, and Harbinger wanted to remind Kane of the time that had passed since they went outside.

Kane didn't answer his needless question. Humans might take notice of a corral, so they just chased wild goats that wandered the mountainside. That was how they wound up in this mess. Even if the humans had come looking, there was a good chance they might never have found their den. The silence was not a moratorium for Harbinger's comments, however. "'Tis a pity the goats proved too formidable for Dramo and Bismuth. That's my interpretation of events, anyway."

Kane frowned at Harbinger's sour jibe. He knew he was being goaded, but allowing his comrades to be disrespected countermanded his instincts. "Dramo and Bismuth attacked and killed a human. I had to stop them before they hurt someone else."

Harbinger thought he ought to have kept his own temper in check, but he didn't miss a beat. He didn't even stop walking. "Would you kill me if I did such a thing?"

Kane tried to doubt that Harbinger knew of the true reason behind their excursion. "Of course not. You're my brother." A silver-bladed knife slid out from the sleeve of his armour and he gripped the hilt in his palm.

"Then how would you resolve your loyalties if Discord himself asked you to slay me?" Harbinger could not shake the humiliation he'd suffered at Discord's disapproval of his actions. He knew his own brother was too obedient for his own good.

Kane's reaction to Harbinger's spot-on guess was to let out a sigh like a bored teenager. "I would let you go. I'd tell him that you got the better of me."

Harbinger stopped walking. "Is that what's going to happen now, then? Just like I got the better of those humans in the desert and *didn't* get captured by them? Tortured?" At his brother's words, Kane could no longer covet the flimsy denial of his brother's ignorance. He knew Harbinger knew. He wasn't the idiot Lord Discord believed he was. Trying to defuse the situation now would have been pathetic, so he waited for Harbinger to keep saying what he wished to say. "Humans have been torturing me my entire existence. They hunted out kind, killed our young, and our wives. My own unhatched children burned! Your nieces and nephews!"

Harbinger rounded on Kane now, but still Kane did not strike. He could see the fires that took his brother's unborn still raging in his eyes. Harbinger let out a hiss and continued ranting while Kane's honour bound him to listen. "Now the humans thrive in our land whilst we hide away in a cave! We take that Equestrian enzyme to keep this shameful shape of their disgusting ape bodies! That's why I jumped at the chance to kill Makarov. I allowed them to capture me for the chance to slaughter more of them! My cabal abandoned me, just as you have all abandoned your species. You may have all forgotten what human flesh tasted like, but I never did, and I'm never going back to goat. I'm never going back to that putrid den. Real dragons would never live in such disgrace! None of you are dragons anymore, and no brother of mine will become a human!"

As Harbinger's speech became angrier with every word, Kane felt something. He felt fear, just from words alone. Words can be powerful upon a wise mind that knows how to receive them, and because of this, Kane could not disregard his kin's feelings. He felt their power. He felt the fear just then that he was losing his dragon-hood. He felt, because he knew, because to truly know something is to feel it, and that is why Kane felt then that he was under attack. That is why he reconciled his own conflicting emotions with the decision he made.

"I'm sorry, brother. You know I have to do this." Kane held up his silver knife. He let out a second sigh as if this was all so totally gauche.

Harbinger smirked as his eyes filled with tears. He hated himself for that. He felt as two-faced as his brother, turning deadly force on his own brother like this. "Let's make this as honourable as possible, then. We fight without weapons in the traditional dragon style, but we'll remain in your precious human form so as not to attract suspicion. The very earth quakes when two dragons do battle." He pulled his knife from out of his sleeve, as was standard in all suits of Nightingale armour, and threw it into the well-packed snow.

Kane followed suit, dropping his knife, but held up a hand. "You realize that neither of us can damage each other like this, right? We can't breathe fire in human form, and we can't cut each other's throats with our bare hands. It will take days to recover from a dragon's wounds. Wounds which will mean an anguished death."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Harbinger said. The two of them circled each other with one hand up, ready to block and attack. They looked like two homeless cats fighting for territory. They meowed at each other. Harbinger gave a sly grin before letting out a battle cry and leaping forward. "Ayayawayaya!" He thrust his right fist forward. Kane blocked with his left forearm and swung his right hand around to try and catch his brother with a right hook. Harbinger ducked under his brother's attack and slammed his left fist into Kane's ribs. Kane jolted back before pushing his left knee forward. His knee

slammed into Harbinger's face and sent him crashing to the ground backwards. Kane knelt down over Harbinger, then with his left hand, he grasped Harbinger's armour and began to repeatedly punch Harbinger in the face with his right hand. Harbinger's head jerked to the right. His left cheek split open and blood began to geyser out. Kane slammed his fist into Harbinger's face again and again and again. Then he threw his final blow down. Harbinger lay limp in the snow.

Kane was on the verge of sobbing as he readied his fist for another attack. “I’m sorry, brother. I’m sorry I hit you a whole bunch of times in the face. I’m sorry for killing you.”

Then suddenly! Kane was grabbed by the shoulder and thrown backwards into a rock. Harbinger pried open his eyes to see Spike standing there. He must have been eavesdropping to know who was whom. Harbinger hissed. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

"Saving you, stupid." Spike picked up Harbinger’s blade from the snow and stalked toward Kane.

"No! This is not your battle!" Harbinger tried to pick up his aching face. Spike ignored Harbinger and continued to where Kane was still resting against the rock. The back of his cranium, now bloodied, had collided with it, and he was feeling dizzy.

"Who’s a tough guy now?" Spike laughed and lunged forward with the blade. Kane rolled sideways and grabbed Spike’s stubby little arm. He squeezed the wrist until it broke with a loud snap. The young dragon wailed in pain and dropped the knife, stumbling in the opposite direction. He tried to soothe the excruciating pain in the snow, but it was no use. No amount of cold would numb this.

Kane knelt beside Spike and wrapped his left hand around the dragon child’s neck. “You should of[7] stayed out of this!” He squeezed. Within a couple seconds, he heard another loud snap. Spike’s dead body sank limply into the snow, his head rattling atop his shoulders like a broken toy. His spine had been utterly detached from his skull.

For the first few moments, staring at Spike’s dead body lying face-first in the snow, Kane felt fear at what he had done. He’d killed a child, and to prove what? That Equestrians were bound to these profanities as duty? That Discord’s preservation of the humans was honourable? Kane was glad he did not have time to reflect, and he stood ready to continue the battle with his brother. But Harbinger was gone! Where could he have gone! Then Kane noticed his brother’s armour lying in the snow. Kane looked up to see far in the distance a silhouette of a dragon flying away. Discord would not be pleased!!! Find out in the next exciting chapter of HvP! 3!

Chapter Twenty.

Original sin. Elm Street. Too precious for this world.

Sitting by Daniel’s side in his hospital room, Laura Vickers almost forgot how she had come to be here. She did not say a word in the silence that permeated her brain. She just sat staring at him in disbelief. The time was 8:45pm. She had lost track of when it was that Peter Williams had arrived at the apartment she’d moved into after being told that Daniel had been killed in action last year.

Now she wondered how much of what they’d told her had been true. He clearly wasn’t dead, even if he was in some bizarre vegetative state that called into question the nature of the human machine. He looked as though something had simply been switched off inside of him, but they wouldn’t hook a corpse up to all these machines. Had it been true that he’d been drugged into working for the ponies? Or maybe he hadn’t been drugged to do so? Had he even been killed in New York? She had lost her reason to believe in anything anymore. She had lost her reason to believe in him, and them. She didn’t even realize she had that; she’d given up when he’d been reported killed. She’d been allowed to believe in his death, and hearing he was alive but in this morbid state was like losing something twice when she’d only gained it once.

She’d lost those reasons because Peter had taken them away. Almost a year since she’d tried to move on with her life, General Williams had shown up at the door to her government-appointed housing and requested her presence for something urgent. Her suspicions had been aroused then, because the only relation she had to the military that was separate from the same dependence the rest of the human race shared was Daniel. Peter hadn’t said much, and he’d carried the authoritarian presence not to have to, and maybe that was why, as he had explained when she asked why the patriarch of the Williams family and leader of the Human Resistance came to visit her, the torch of leadership had been passed off to Avery Johnson. She wasn’t all that familiar with the inner workings of the military government because the dolphins don’t care how the owls fly, but when a man with military decorations and the command of thousands of armed soldiers demands your presence, you’re not with a shortage of reasons to comply.

[7] Sic.

Peter didn't smile the whole ride to St. Schaivo's Hospital. You wouldn't guess his son was dead or alive from his expression alone. He was such an emotionless man that it was hard not to feel things for him, and she did feel, even though it was hard to forget a man you spend two recent years with, and, as she explained to him, she'd known other men better and it had been Peter's idea all along to make a man out of Daniel and keep him from depending so much on his friends. Two years is a long time, but time passes, even when the human race faces imminent destruction. The world was in danger. She was one individual. Rude customers she knew how to deal with. Like the civilians of Moscow, they relied on the trained soldiers to bring tomorrow to them.

The other thing about Peter was he used his time wisely. She thought he might be an easy customer if not for the fact that he was clearly the sort of many who preferred his own liquor, and he was probably a rough tipper. He didn't keep her in suspense for very long about where they were headed. They sat in the back seat of a short limousine and he explained Daniel's situation to her in the gruff, quiet voice of a priest prescribing her penance. Daniel was alive, but in a coma. Tom had shot him and said the ponies had drugged him. The information was suspect, but in-depth medical examinations did prove the existence of the toxin. Combatting it was of the utmost importance. There was no telling if someone was under its influence. Such a situation, if not contained, could very well be the catalyst to wipe out the remainder of the human race. That was why her secrecy was essential. Laura had to agree with the creeping panic slowly rising within her like a baking loaf of bread that human civilization might destroy itself on this news before the ponies ever got a chance to use it. That is, if they believed it. Peter had a way of coming across as serious, however. He was not a joking man.

Even though she was afraid for her life now, even though she'd given Peter reasons why she was not the person closest to Daniel, and even though she did not had a shred of trust to bring in with her, she still felt a kind of rage at seeing this man in such a sorry state, unvisited by anyone but his father and a few doctors of his innermost sanctum. In spite of these things, Peter still believed that she was the best course of action, maybe, to snap his son out of his comatose state. She may have been a waitress at a sleazy pub, enabling the addictions of the weak and stupid, but she wasn't completely selfish. She sat there by Daniel's side and prayed for his well-being, even as inefficacious as her gestures were.

Eventually, Laura decided to remain quiet and lost herself deep in thought. She wondered what it would be like if Daniel had died. Would that have been better for him, to have escaped this interminable war? Or what if he'd never been shot? Would they still be together? Would they have kids by now, or would they only be expecting them? These thoughts continued to torture her for a while. Since he'd never died, did this mean she'd walked out on him when he might have needed someone the most? That one was the one that wounded her pride the most. How could she think that? Why would she?

In his mind, Daniel had littered the Ivory Inn with every kind of gun he could imagine, which consisted of a repertoire of his favourite Russian semi-automatic riffles. He was as ready as he would ever be for the ponies, but he needed just one more thing. He thought of that face he longed to see more than anyone else in the world. More than anything else. Of all the people he'd known, the one that shined through the strongest.

When he opened his eyes, Tom was standing behind the counter. He was dressed in his usual army fatigues and grinning like they were still in basic training, looking not unlike the heroic poster model for one of those delusional recruitment propaganda ads. In a flash, Daniel was reminded of the past few years he'd spent avenging his brother against his murderer, succumbing to the consequences of that act, and fighting the ponies alongside each of his comrades. He popped the caps off two bottles of beer and offered one to Daniel. "Cheers, mate."

"Cheers," said Daniel as he took the beer. He thumbed the neck of it and tried to guess the exact murky brown hue of the bottle.

Tom stood there, one hand on his full beer and the other rocking atop the counter. "Why aren't you drinking?"

"What's the point? I know this is not real. But yet it feels so real. It looks real. I remember every word on this bottle. But how?" asked Daniel as he examined the bottle.

Tom gave Daniel a queer look, then allowed himself a sip of his beer. He answered the easiest question. "I guess we do spend too much time in the pub, mate."

"No maybes about it." Daniel pushed his bottle aside at first, but then he grabbed it back.

"Drink up! It tastes good," Tom said. "It's fizzy and bitter. Oh, hello there, Danny-boy."

Daniel looked up at the irritating nickname, then realized that his younger self had shown up yet again. Dan was sitting there on the stool beside him, looking as grave as ever. He paid no mind to Tom. "In school, we were taught that alcohol impairs neurogenesis. You forgot that means the ability for the brain to generate new cells."

Daniel gave Dan a strange look, then raised the bottle to his lips. "Beer's good for you, kid."

"It'll give you a beer belly."

"Not me. Besides, it isn't real."

"A century ago, the United States lost faith in its citizens' ability to take care of themselves, and they criminalized the production of beer. That means it was outlawed. In retaliation, the people started up organized crime which has led to countless deaths. What sort of *innocent* substance would provoke such vindictive retaliation?"

Daniel screwed up his face. It was painful to listen to his younger self lecture. "You implied the ponies were attacking. Remind me again what happens if I lose."

Before he explained, Dan let out a lengthy sigh. "The pony obedience toxin is trying to command your unconscious body, which can't physically respond due to apoplexy. Whatever drug this is is designed to keep trying harder until it kills you. Your subconscious is impermeable, but it's the only semblance of your mind still active, and the greatest weapon you have in fighting off the poison. When you die in your sleep, ordinarily you wake up. When you die from being poisoned, you die."

Daniel could tell he was drooling. Dan's eyes glazed over in disgust. "It's like Freddy Krueger only it's Nightmare on Lenin Street."

Daniel emitted a breath of relief. "Well, that's comforting to know." He was being sarcastic.

"The battle's about to begin," Dan said. "You'd better say what you have to say now." With that, Dan metamorphosed into a Russian bear, slid off of the barstool, and left the pub on all fours.

Daniel watched all this in dumbfounded silence then said, "Man, I hate the subconscious."

"Yeah, that's why I drink all the time," Tom said cheerfully.

Daniel turned back around, spun too far, and grabbed onto the counter to right himself. He stared into his beer like it was a bottle of disgusting-tasting cherry medicine that he needed to take before going to bed so he could be well enough for school in the morning. "Logan. Irish. Tyrone. Nick. Becky. Jimmy. Even Shaun. Here's to you. And here's to John, Sam and Jared." He drank deep, then had a longing look around the pub.

"Do you remember the way Irish always used to chat us up at our table, even though we couldn't stand him since school?" Daniel asked Tom. "We never really tolerated him until we ended up in the same squad, but I suppose, in a way, he was one of us back then, even if we would not want to admit it now."

Daniel then looked over to a dartboard that hung on the wall. "And they took that down, after there was a brawl, but I remember Logan was the champion at it. He was good friends with Tyrone long before us, and though Tyrone tried and tried, he could not beat him. But Logan was so gracious with advice. I do not even remember how we started talking to Logan the first time."

Daniel turned his attention to the low, narrow stage set aside. "Right. Tyrone was performing, and we told Logan how good he was. We were worried Tyrone would not care what we thought, but Logan assured us he was very down-to-earth, and he was right. I thought Tyrone was some kind of celebrity then, but it turned out he was our friend as well.

"And do you remember how long Nick used to come here before we met him in person? I used to be pen pals with him, you know, back when the internet was still a thing. Apart from military correspondence. At least a week. He told me about his experiences in the war, and I told him he would be excellent for the Human Resistance army. For some reason I never thought about the North American coalitions or rebels, but he still joined up with us in the end. That was just before we lost the internet."

Daniel punctuated his reminiscence with a period of silence before addressing Tom again. "Before we go out there, there is something I need to tell you. Not because I do not believe I will win this battle, but because I cannot wait any longer. I forgive you for shooting me. You did what you had to do, and you did the right thing. If the roles were reversed, it would break me apart inside. And I'm sorry I betrayed you. I'm sorry I let down the squad. If I die, someone will replace me. The Human Resistance will fight on. But I could not bear it, even in death, if you do not believe that I forgive you."

Tom's features softened as he listened, and they dissolved into a smile. "Of course I believe you, Daniel." Of course he did. In Daniel's mind, Tom had already been forgiven. It was what he wanted more than anything if he was putting his life on the line, but it wasn't the same as telling him to his face. If anything confirmed he was living in a dream, it was this.

Still, it was easy to say these things to him here. Easy to say the things that soldiers feel for one another when they're facing death every day, and the only thing they can hold onto is the comrade they've been surviving with through it all. "And one more thing. I know that you lost your whole family, and I lost my brother, and everyone has lost me now, I suppose, but you are more than my best friend. You are like family to me. I—"

A loud sound like a roar or a blast shook every piece of glass in the Ivory. Daniel spilled his drink, but Tom clutched his in both hands just so he wouldn't spill a drop. He chugged the last of his beer down, then readied his M16. "What was that?"

Daniel asked, seizing his own AK-47. His intuition told him the Equestrians had arrived, and both he and Tom crouched at the front of the bar to gaze out the windows. “Is it Twilight?” Daniel asked.

It was not. And it was not Pinkie Pie, either. It had been quite some time since the siege on Frank’s cabin, roughly three years without knowing for sure how long he’d been asleep, but Daniel remembered Fluttershy at a glance. He remembered her name from intelligence reports and from the rumours among escaped slaves of her cruelty. He remembered the pegasus’s butter-yellow hide and feathers that belied a deceptive docility, and her long, flowing fuchsia mane and tail that she appeared to hide behind with a cloying sense of meekness.

The roar, Daniel confirmed, had been Dan the bear, who had engaged Fluttershy in combat. He rose up onto his hind legs, wiggling his snout around while unleashing a terrific bellow. Daniel wasn’t about to neglect this opportunity for time. "Quick, help me block the doors." He grabbed a table and dragged it over to the front door with Tom’s help. They rolled the round surface onto its side and attempted to jam the door handles, but it didn’t work quite as well as planned. Daniel grabbed a pool table instead. "Help me with this," he ordered as he grabbed the pool table. Tom swung his M16 over his shoulder and grabbed the opposite end of the pool table. Its legs scraped noisily along the wooden floor which had seen better days. “Flip it on the count of three.”

“One. Two, three.” The two men heaved the billiards table onto its side with a crash and shoved it against the door. The balls clattered loudly and rolled all along the floor where they followed the grooves in between the boards.

As this went on, Daniel had the chance to glance out the window. The sight wasn’t pretty. To his chagrin, Fluttershy was mauling the bear with her bare hooves. She had flown above him and kicked him in the spine with both hooves. She wrenched his right arm right out of its socket, dislocating it. She seized one of his legs and twisted it until it broke, and then commenced pummelling his back up and down. Then Daniel let out a gasp. The bear reared its mighty head back, baring its potent jaws in a futile attack. Somehow, Fluttershy grabbed its jaws and wrenched them apart so hard that they cracked and couldn’t shut again. The bear fell limp onto the street. To make sure she presided victory over the creature, Fluttershy snapped its neck like an encore. It was the most horrific thing Daniel had borne witness to in the entire war, and a distraught kind of rage sizzled inside of his head between his skull and his brain.

“Let’s get behind the bar for cover.” Tom smacked his lips as he eyed the liquor bottles. The pair of them leapt over the bar and held fast their weapons for dear life. For a time, there was naught but silence, and just when Daniel was about to ask Tom where the enemy was, the front doors shook with such a din that Daniel almost fell on his ass.

He remembered something else about that siege in the jungle. “Charger!” Tom hissed. At this invocation, the front doors exploded into a hail of wooden splinters, and they could hear the pool table sliding across the floor again. Sunlight streamed in through the gaping doorway, and the Ivory was filled with a cloud of sawdust. As Daniel struggled to get a visual, the first thing he saw was Tom being seized by his jacket by a giant hand.

"Run!" As Tom was pulled up over the bar by the Charger, he got a good look at the beast. Chargers were special types of burly, violent unicorn ponies, ostensibly mutated by Pinkie Pie to walk on their back hooves. Their front hooves were turned into hands, and their musculature was enhanced. They were also known for being more or less impervious to gunfire. Tom fired his weapon, but the effort was inefficacious. The Charger plucked the M16 right from his hands, then whipped Tom’s body clean through a wooden support post.

"Tom, no!” Daniel’s voice went hoarse from that yell, and he opened fire on the Charger without remorse. The bullets deflected improbably against the bipedal unicorn’s muscular, outstretched hand, which next grabbed Daniel's shirt and yanked him off of the floor. Daniel pulled out his Desert Eagle from the holster strapped to his right leg and fired at the Charger’s face. The behemoth pony wailed in pain and dropped Daniel, its entire body flinching when one lucky bullet struck it in its beady eye.

Landing on his side with a grunt, Daniel ignored the blearing pain in his elbow and reloaded his AK-47 as fast as he could. The Charger swung its enormous fist into Daniel’s body. He felt something pop inside of him, and he slid all the way over to crash into the wall. He couldn’t even curse. He rolled onto his back in agony and stared in horror at one of his lower ribs sticking out of his shirt. Blood had soaked his attire, and the Charger still stamped towards him. Daniel could barely move. Even breathing proved too painful for him, and he thought he had forgotten how.

"Run, Daniel!" Tom must have gotten to his feet, because he now jumped onto the Charger from behind and dug his knife into the back of its neck. The Charger wailed in pain and spun around in circles. Tom dug himself in and twisted the knife as the berserker ran towards the doors. Tom pulled out a grenade as the Berserker carried him out of the pub. A few seconds later, a loud bang went off, and bits of rubble and pony flew in through the doors and the shattered front windows. A needling tone filled Daniel’s ears that made them ache with an imaginary weight.

Daniel struggled to his feet. "Tom?" Daniel shouted as he limped towards the front door. He tried to brace himself, but there was no preparing for the shock ahead. It was only a dream, but he didn’t want to think Tom could die. Was that why the

Charger had run outside? Was his mind begging not to see? He couldn't fight away the idea of it, however. He had to see. There was no bracing himself, because the allure of the grisly truth had already hooked him since the notion first entered his mind. Outside there were thirty dead ponies and four casualties. The Charger and Tom covered every car, lamppost and pony around. The ponies were dancing in revelry.

Fluttershy stood at the other end of the street with a weepy expression. She wiped a strand of Tom's mangled flesh from her face and mane. "Oh. Oh, dear, this is my one good manecut. You're going to pay for that, Daniel!" Fluttershy picked up a switchblade knife, exactly the sort that overprotective fathers buy for their daughters in a combination of ignorant faith and questionable possessiveness. She suctioned the handle on her hoof and gave the thing a flick to unleash the blade; it must have been worn.

Daniel lurched away from the door and sought out the nearest form of cover. His pain was too severe to neglect, but if he so much as touched the jutting bone, his entire body would be consumed in inflammatory pain. Instead, he pressed his arm, which was beginning to feel numb, below his horrific wound where it did not good whatsoever. His other arm shook to the point where he couldn't aim his Desert Eagle straight. He felt himself throwing up, but nothing came out. When he looked down, blood was streaming from his abdomen as though Leigh Whannell[8] was getting a hard-on. Daniel had just grabbed his weapon when Fluttershy caught up with him, levitating with her wings.

Instead of stabbing him outright, Fluttershy grabbed Daniel by the shoulder and dragged him backwards, shoving him over the nearest table. Daniel's pained cry reached a mewling pitch as the table turned over underneath him. He tried to raise his Desert Eagle, but he felt cold. It was just a cold sensation running through the space between his stomach and chest, and it alone made him unable to fire. He felt helpless and worthless.

"Aw, does it hurt, Daniel? It sure hurt when Twilight killed me all because I failed to eliminate you, but you wouldn't know what that's like, would you? You don't concern yourself about how your friends feel, do you? You're just like Twilight was; all you gotta do is boss them around. What do you say to that?"

"Fuck you," Daniel grunted.

Fluttershy began to screech. "That wasn't nice, now was it?" She plunged her knife into Daniel's right shoulder, and he cried out in pain. "Killing you swiftly would be a kindness." Fluttershy pulled Daniel to his feet, twisted the blade, then ripped it out and kicked Daniel back into a wall. Daniel hit it with a grunt, keeled over forward, and slid to the floor. His ribs rattled inside of him like the legs of a dying centipede.

Fluttershy slowly trotted forward with a sappy smile on her face and stabbed Daniel in the chest. She stabbed him again and again. Daniel could only gasp as his vision blurred and turned red. He had failed. He was dead!

That aggravating tone returned, louder than ever. It pushed Laura out of her pensive repose, and she saw Daniel's dropping heart rate on the nearby monitor.[9] Laura stood up in panic, but wasn't absolutely certain she should call someone for the sake of all the cloak and dagger secrecy. Her instincts won out. "Doctor! Nurse! Someone! Help!" Predictably, there was no response, so she tried again to call out. "Somebody! Anybody!"

Then a female nurse came busting through the door. She was tall, blonde, and had a name tag reading "Dixie". "What's a matter?" asked Dixie.

"I don't know! Look!" Laura pointed to the monitor in a stupor.

Dixie dabbed her hands at the air as she bent forward to check the readings. "Okay, so his heart rate is drastically dropping." Dixie grabbed Daniel's hospital bed and dragged it out of the room. "We need a doctor!" she shouted while Laura scurried behind her in hysterics.

A suave-looking doctor in a flashy white coat spoke in a rich, booming voice. "What's the problem?" His nametag read "Doctor Stevens, Head of Surgery".

"His heart rate is dropping rapidly, Doctor! You're the only one who can help!" Dixie explained.

"Quick, Nurse Clemets! We need the defibrillators!" Dr Stevens grinned. He had shiny teeth.

"D'oh, I left them in the room. I'll go get them now!" True to her word, Dixie ran back into Daniel's room and wheeled out the defibrillator cart.

"Quick, we need them now!" called Dr Stevens. "His blood pressure is a bad number and his bippim is going down!"

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[8] The creator of torture porn franchise *Saw*.

[9] At the outset of the pony holocaust, much technology had been lost, and when medical equipment had been salvaged, much of how it had worked had to be remembered by fragmented television programmes.

Dixie ran down the corridor to where the others were. "Here!" She handed the defibrillators to Dr Stevens. The good doctor got quite the electric jolt from grabbing them the wrong way by accident.

"Okay, stand back, everybody. I may be a recovering alcoholic and my adopted daughter's in the clutches of her nefarious stepmother, but I'll be damned if I'm not gonna save this patient's life!" Dr Stevens turned the defibrillators off and then on again and made sure that they were definitely plugged in before rubbing them together and spitting on them for good luck.

"Clear!" he called as he placed the defibrillators on Daniel's chest. Dixie pressed some buttons and grinned. A strong burst of electricity shot through Daniel, but that was about it. "Fore! I mean, clear!" shouted Dr Stevens as he repeated the procedure. Daniel's body jolted from the shock but other than that remained lifeless. "Clear!" said Doctor Stevens a third time. Again, Daniel remained lifeless, so Dr Stevens placed his middle and index finger on Daniel's neck to feel for a pulse. There was none! Dr Stevens hung his head in disappointment, then checked his watch. He forgot at first that he wore it on his left arm. "Dammit all to Hell! What's the point of this job if you can't save them all every time? The time is 8:55pm. I'm calling it. Get his body down to the morgue. I'm sorry for your lots."

Laura immediately broke down into tears and dropped to her knees. Dixie tried to comfort her, but like trying to create a bugless video game, it was no use. Her hands just waved uselessly around Laura's shoulders. "Dixie, contact Mr. Williams," Dr Stevens ordered. Dixie nodded and Laura could hear her shoes clapping down the hallway as she left.

Laura had been left to grieve. As she waited for Peter to arrive and remind her not to divulge what she had seen to anyone, she thought about how none of Daniel's friends could be told the truth. As Peter had explained to her earlier, they were all off on very important missions for the good of the human race. So by an hour later, Laura had been dropped off by a military escort vehicle. She immediately made her way to the kitchen and grabbed a full bottle of scotch she'd "borrowed" from work. She thought it might have been nice to save it for when he awakened from his coma, but now that seemed stupid to believe. She grabbed some headache pills and some antidepressant pills and made her way upstairs.

She'd left all her pictures of her and Daniel at his place when she'd left, and she now tortured herself with her memories that ate away at her like a flesh-eating virus. She'd been drinking the scotch for nearly an hour now, and the bottle was nearly empty. The pain of her shocking, surreal evening felt too much for her to bear. Laura opened the headache tablets and poured five of them into her hand. Then she opened the antidepressant pills and took three of them. "I'm coming, Daniel," said Laura as she swallowed the pills. Then she quickly necked what was left of the bottle.

Laura grabbed one of Daniel's old jackets she'd taken which still smelt like him. She lied in bed and closed her eyes. The next day Laura Vickers body was found by two soldiers sent to see if she was okay. Her body was cold and they felt no pulse. She had passed away in the night. The soldiers contacted Peter, and shortly after, the body was collected.

Chapter Twenty-One.

When Onyx met Kony. Africa is not a country. Flight of the harbinger.

Luna and Onyx stood outside. Luna held one of the black box McGuffins. "YOU ARE READY, ARE YOU NOT?" she asked in her royal Canterlot voice.

"I am. Who is my target?"

Now, there's been a lot of bandying about with comparing people to a man named Adolf Hitler, and some people, I won't say who, take offense to that, as though the leader of the National Socialist party was the only man ever to commit barbaric acts of Orwellian[10] bloodshed and to aspire to actual freaking genocide of several ethnic demographics. But a high bar has been set high, just as a baby elephant is still an elephant. It becomes easy, then, to explain to the uninitiated the secret reason we've all overlooked for why such comparisons come about. Adolf Hitler sanctioned the enslavement, murder, and medical-fucking-experimentation on Jewish, homosexual, and black people, and pretty much anyone else he didn't like because he thought they were inferior to his whack job ideals. You'd think such actions would be too extreme to overlook in one's conscience, but regrettable though it is, there are some people (I won't name names) who have a tendency to vehemently harbour bigoted views and join in on supremacy groups. Miserably enough, people have grown indolent with repetition in the past century as if they've earned some shortcut in life's little lessons, and have started to question whether concentration camps weren't justifiable in some way to repair Germany's economy after World War I,[11] or if they even existed at all. When one examines the disputations of the indisputable facts, one wonders if it was worth it not to let the pony holocaust just eradicate our species outright.

[10] The term "Blairinistic" never caught on.
[11] You'd think they'd have learned their lesson from the first war.

I hope this gives you an inkling into the questionability of people fascinated enough in Nazi memorabilia to dub themselves aficionados to that subject. It's certainly not as pleasant as, say, the origin of the culinary toque which, while possibly wrapped in more apocrypha than folds in a chef's hat are still fascinating and more pleasant than hearing about all of the exploitative torture and senseless violence yet to come in this chapter and the countless beyond it.

To be more specific, the ones called Onyx and Luna were outside in Equestria, somewhere between the borders of Canterlot and the Everfree Forest. Luna pulled a picture out of her uniform's right breast pocket. Her uniform consisted of a brown Schutzstaffel[12] jacket and hat. Actually, she wore two hats so that the genocide could be doubled. One was askew atop the other, but both had shining visible skulls on the front that kind of gave the unmistakable impression that she was one of the bad guys. She had not two, but six red Hakenkreuz armbands distributed among her legs, making her look like an advertisement for an East Asian dining establishment. "THESE ARE YOUR TARGETS." The picture she showed Onyx was of the original Delta Squad posing for the camera just outside of the Ivory Inn. The men were either giving thumbs up or making goofy faces while holding their beers they weren't supposed to take outside and Irish was trying to give Nick bunny ears by holding two fingers behind his head to piss him off. Logan and Tom had been circled in red pen. Somepony had drawn little moustaches and glasses on the other four.

"Where am I being sent?" Ever eager for exposition, Onyx was a tall, burly biped who looked out of place in the ponies' land. He wore a snug, flapping latex jacket with many belted straps hanging loose from its opened middle. Beneath that he had a pair of rough denim pants with metallic patches here and there, particularly on both knees. He wore a faded t-shirt with an image so cracked in the wash as to be unrecognizable. His face was completely obscured by a burlap mask he had tied around his head with a strange red pattern like a bloodshot eye and rays of light sticking out from its top. Over the mask he wore a plastic visor with a long, shaded lens hanging underneath over where his eyes would have been showing otherwise. The top of his head had flaking, fleshy strands sprouting from it that resembles a freshly-shed haircut which had grown back just enough to be ruffled by a strong breeze. He wore padded brown work gloves and platform boots. None of these details were the most noticeable thing about him, the one thing that said the most about the figure called Onyx, and that was the gigantic zanbato strapped to his back. A zanbato is a funny-sounding foreign word for an impractically gigantic sword that's roughly twice the size as its wielder's body. A theorist named Sigmund Freud might have had something to say about it, but everything Freud ever said is a trite cliché, and he's since been surpassed by other theorists looking to have their names dropped constantly by people who are utterly incapable of having a conversation without turning it into an argument.

"A COUNTRY CALLED UGANDA, IN AFRICA. OUR MOLE ON THE INSIDE TOLD US ABOUT HOW YOUR TARGETS ARE GOING TO KILL OUR DEAR FRIEND, MY LITTLE KONY. MAKE SURE THAT DOESN'T HAPPEN."

"Yes, Ma'am." Onyx had a gravelly sort of voice with a touch of a bad Ghandi impression in it.

"IT IS DANGEROUS TO GO ALONE. KONY WILL PROVIDE YOU WITH WEAPONS AND WHATEVER ELSE YOU NEED. GOOD LUCK." Before Onyx could register what Luna had said, she wound up the handle on the side of the box. The box opened, creating a portal. Twinkling out a little tune, it popped open to reveal what could best be described as a swirling, negative vortex inexplicably attached to a spring.

The wormhole sputtered and invisible tongues of gravity lapped at Onyx's person. "Where will the cute mark crusade be stationed?" asked Onyx standing up close to the portal. He liked exposition a lot.

"NEVER YOU MIND WHERE THE CUTEY MARK CRUSADERS GO. THEY HAVE MISSIONS OF IMPORT ON OUR THREEFOLD ATTACK. ONCE FINISHED, THEY SHALL COME TO YOUR AID."

"Understoo—" Onyx was interrupted as Luna shoved him into the portal. He appeared to shrink as he was absorbed into the hasty contrivance, and the world appeared to warp around him as he was sucked from one place and out into another. Luna shut the box once he was gone.

When Onyx came to exist within the real world—our world—the sun beat down upon the Ugandan countryside like so many lashes with a branding iron. The light was blocked by Onyx's visor and his mask, and a similar precaution was taken by the three soldiers wearing hats that came to collect him. The man in the centre had a sweaty, bulbous face and when he got closer, he looked as if he were trying very hard to contain a laugh. The soldier on the left had hooks instead of feet, and the soldier on the right looked exactly like neither a bird nor a fish. He greeted them first once it was evident they were approaching him. "Is this Uganda?" he asked. "I'm looking for Uganda. It's in Africa, you know."

He must have been in Uganda, although they didn't say. He had this faint impression because of what they said instead. "Kony wishes to speak with you!" said the man in the centre.

[12] So called because shooting stuff was basically what they did.

Now, Onyx supposed these might be Kony's men come to escort him, but he couldn't quite shake the delicate stipulation that this was the sort of sentence they greeted anyone with in what they believed to be their territory. They wouldn't like him asking questions no matter what he asked, but that's what he carried the sword for. "Is that a good thing for you?"

The centre man sneered, and he had a pug-like bearing to begin with. All the sweaty lumps of a war-beaten, malnourished, but well-fed face showed more frowns than just the one on his lips. "My name is General Jumba Laya, second-in-command to the great prophet, Kony!" This particular research was quadruple-checked for accuracy.

"In that case, I'm looking forward to it," said Onyx in quite a stern tone. Just to reiterate, he was looking forward to meeting with Joseph Kony. Yep.

"Please come this way," said Jumba, who didn't sound at all pleased about it. He gave a loud sniff as Onyx passed him by, as if to gesture that Onyx smelled bad by his own aesthetic tastes. Kony's cronies led Onyx to a black jeep with all-wheel drive. The four of them piled into the vehicle as if taking a family outing, and Onyx was jammed up against an uncomfortable baby seat. Jumba ordered his soldier to take them to Kony in African.[13] The driver nodded and started up the vehicle. He flooded it a little at first, but then he got it running. He had a lead foot, and the engine let out such a roar that the vehicle nearly leapt over the terrain like one of the wild gazelle now fleeing the golden pasture. The tires kicked back a cloud of dust like a flatulent volcano and cut through the ragged terrain with sadistic abandon.

"So." Onyx thought he'd make conversation as they passed by a burning village. "What is it you guys do here?"

Jumba almost looked at him, then spoke out in a moping tone. "We take the villages, rape and kill the women, make the children kill their fathers and join our army. That sort of thing."

"Right. That's…productive." Onyx's voice adopted a snide tone of sarcasm.

Jumba laughed even though Onyx's quip was critical of him and not at all serious. "It is! It strikes fear into the children. Makes them know who is boss." He smiled the exact sort of smile a father shows at his son's little league game, as though what Onyx was doing by joining him was something very clever and honest instead of something very crude and unforgiveable.

"Or it makes them hell-bent on revenge."

The jeep ground to a halt and the passengers were almost thrown off the fronts of their seats. For some reason, Onyx's seatbelt did nothing, and he noticed nobody else wore them. Jumba stepped out of the vehicle and inhaled the smoke in the air as if he'd just taken his family on a camping trip in the woods. "We are here!" he said.

Onyx turned his head and frowned behind his mask at a house which was still presently burning. That was the first glance Onyx had of Joseph Kony. He looked like any ordinary man, really, with dark skin, conservative short hair, a thin moustache, and a kind of busy expression set upon the sad-looking wrinkles of his lower brow. He looked like any businessman looking for a cab on his way to work, coming out of the doors of the burning house, holding a screaming woman by her hair in one hand and her ten-year-old boy clutched in his other arm. He looked just like any other man.

Kony threw both of them to the ground and forcefully placed his silver-plated Python[14] in the child's hand. "Kill her!" Kony ordered in African. "Kill her NOW!" The child began to cry. People generally do not like the sound of crying. They find it an unpleasant noise, almost as bad as fingernails on a chalkboard or Justin Bieber singing. Kony is perhaps the worst person to dislike crying, as he would stoop to yelling at a child. "Do it!" roared Kony.

Onyx had gotten out of the car to stretch his legs, and followed Jumba as he approached Kony. Up close, he got a better view of Kony's face through his mask via means that have not been made readily apparent. Kony looked stressed. One could say he was perspiring, but then the heat had made everyone perspire even before the fire. Kony's brow had these peculiar winkles around an unfittingly sad expression that gave him an implacably angry countenance. He had small, suspicious eyes, and up close, the word "evil" came to Onyx's mind, even though he could not explain to himself what gave him such a notion. "Ey, boss!" Jumba greeted his boss. "What's the haps?"

"I'm Jesus. Give me that!" Kony snatched Jumba's AK-47 away like a greedy child. It is a peculiar thing for someone to identify himself as Jesus. The name Jesus as you may know is an inexplicably non-phonetic choice for an individual's name in Spanish-speaking nations, where the predominantly Christian population would imply this to be blasphemy. It is also the name of the main character in a book known as the Bible, which is a kind of sequel to another book known as the Torah, which is all about an all-powerful sky wizard with multiple personality disorder who took only one day off after creating all of everything. In the story, Jesus goes around helping people with magic tricks, befriending criminals and telling stories, so you

[13] An artificial language like Esperanto, African was devised to confound Equestrian invaders by sampling dialects from various African countries.

[14] I'm being informed that this is a type of gun, and not an actual serpent.

know he can't be all bad. After being nailed to a cross for the sake of a plot device, a particularly barbaric form of murder that the Equestrians have surprisingly not yet employed, he became something of a poster child for martyrdom, which is a much sought-after word meaning "suffering for the purpose of doing good" which is strange when you think that nothing good can come about from suffering for it, but makes more sense once you realize that nothing good comes without suffering. Many people have introduced themselves as Jesus, who promised readers he'd return to Earth, but given Kony's behaviour thus far, it is easy to rule him out as being a saviour of anything.

Kony cocked the assault riffle and put the barrel resting against the child's head, another thing that Jesus likely wouldn't have done in the same situation. "DO IT!" Like Queen Luna, he was using his Royal Canterlot voice.

The child's cries grew louder. The woman begged for mercy. Kony found it all very unconvincing, and Onyx was disturbed not only that Kony's face still looked like a man arguing with something as trivial as a vending machine that hasn't deployed a snack he paid for, but that nobody around him except the victims appeared disturbed.

"DO IT NOW!!!!!!!!!!!!"[15]

Onyx raised his hand. "Excuse me, sir, what is this meant to achieve?"

Jumba slapped Onyx's hand. "Don't question it, newfag! Trust me." Jumba apparently thought that trust was something you order or ask people to do, and not something you can only earn.

"DO IT OR I WILL KILL YOU AND HER!!!!!!!" Kony shouted, using many exclamation points. He pushed the barrel of the murder device harder against the child's head. The child kept sobbing, his face scrunched up in such a way that his tears smeared everywhere over his cheeks and nose and met down his chin.

A loud bang sent a chill down Onyx's back. The dead woman collapsed to the ground just like a sack of potatoes. Smoke slowly drifted out of the barrel of the Python just like the hole in the side of her chest. Her child had stopped crying, but his eyes had now flung open and he was gasping like a fish out of water. His life as he knew it had been obliterated by Kony's words to his hands, and in spite of it all, his life had been spared for the time being.

Kony laughed not unlike Jumba's earlier laugh, and he patted and rubbed the child's head as though he were his own son. "Take him away. He is a true killer!" Kony handed the AK-47 back to Jumba.

As Onyx only stood there and watched, he shook his head with a disapproving sigh, and placed one hand on his hip. His other waved in the air with a gesture of dismissal. "Well *this* is certainly going to be fun," he said, once more being sarcastic.

Sarcasm is a concept that proliferated to such an extent in the 1990s that many people believe it was invented then. Despite this, people born in the late 90s or after seem to have no concept of sarcasm or irony. Many things occurred in the 1990s, such as the mainstreaming of homosexuality and good television, which never continued into the twenty-first century, even though progress usually works in a forward direction. Though humanity had made many great strides as to understand that bigotry, murder and recreational drug use are unhealthy, facts which should have been taken for granted, the rise of the internet age brought with it the second-biggest relapse in human development since the Catholic church incited the medieval ages. When it is said that Onyx is being sarcastic, it means that he is deliberately overstating the opposite of what he believes, although his decision to protect a man such as Kony cast his ethical prerogatives into considerable doubt. If he had expected aiding and abetting a serial psychopath to be "fun", this was the understatement of the century.

Even less fun was having lunch with Jumba outside of Kony's mansion. Well, it was actually more of a seven story hospital than a house. The St. Germaine Hospital in Uganda had been built by a charity ten years ago, but Kony had taken it over, dubbed it his "Kony Island Dubstep Palace" (despite not being on an island), and claimed one of the head doctors' offices as his private boudoir. Lunch for Jumba was a cigarette. Lunch for Onyx was slightly more appetizing because his mask rendered eating out of the question. "So they say you killed a man with your bare hands when you were only seven," said Jumba as he placed a cigarette in between his lips. Jumba was something of a conversationalist. What that "something" was was up for debate.

"Who are 'they'?" Onyx was sharpening his gigantic katana with a gigantic piece of flint. He was making a classic mistake of misunderstanding a nonspecific pronoun.

"Well, you know, people. People tell a lot of stories about you. For instance, why you wear the mask." Jumba grinned, but couldn't quite disguise a laugh. Several others of Kony's cronies chortled out loud at something only they found funny.

"Really? Why do I wear the mask then?"[16]

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[15] The extraneous exclamation points here indicate that Kony was particularly upset.

[16] The original author wishes to emphasize that Onyx knows the real reason why he constantly wears a mask.

"They say your father abused you and your mother. They say he killed her and took a blade to your face." It is very ill manners to speak of personal matters with someone who has not given permission to discuss them and with whom you do not have an intimate rapport, just like it is also rude to spread rumours.

"Well that's unlikely, considering my parents died when I was four." Onyx gazed at his zanbato then holstered it on his back.

"Like I said, it's just stories," Jumba said, using a phrase which actually means nothing.

"They say Kony is a murdering psychopath with no respect for life who deserves to have a nuke dropped on his head," Onyx said. Jumba got up and started towards him, but he continued speaking, waving his blade around introspectively. "Yet I'm assigned here to protect his life. And as his protector, any threat against me is a threat against him." He pointed a hidden smile at Jumba who had sat back down and was glowering at him like a four-year-old who'd been denied a cookie. "Just stories."

Like an anthropomorphic Kool-Aid pitcher, Kony burst out through the front doors of the hospital building, roaring up a fit. He had a cigar in his mouth, a pair of combat boots with the laces tied together in one hand and a young girl in the other that he held onto by a tight grip on her hair. She had to have been no more than fifteen. She had sunken, tear-slicked eyes of limpid blue, and long, black hair with streaks of purple colouring and ginger showing at the tips. It was hard to tell from her dark make-up, but her left eye was swollen shut with a purple bruise. The girl was only wearing a check skirt, ripped fishnet stockings, and a loosened corset. She could hear her roots ripping in her scalp as she pleaded fruitlessly for mercy. "Please! Please, let me go!"

"You think you can disobey me!" Kony dragged the girl towards twenty-five of his guards that were lunching outside in the front yard. "You refuse to service me? Fine! I got plenty of other young girls to fill your place, but my boys here, they are going to think it's their fucking birthday! Some of them haven't seen a proper girl in months!"

"I'm sorry, please don't! Please, I beg you!" The young girl's cries continued much in this same manner without change or effect, but they did not continue for much longer.

"Have at her, boys!" ordered Kony as he threw the girl to the ground.

One of the guards, a very skinny man with incredibly fat arms and legs, put down his beer and gave a menacing grin. He unbuckled his belt and slowly approached the girl, licking his lips like a scene from a Japanese cartoon. "I'll have the honour of the first go!" he said, misusing the word "honour". The word "honour" means pretty much the exact opposite of the disgusting scene being portrayed here. I cannot even bear to write about the detestable crimes against humanity which Kony's cronies perpetrated here; crimes which need no writing down if you believe in ethics, just as there is no need for me to write how the crawling girl was seized by her leg like a suitcase of rolling luggage, and dragged into one of the lowly tents the guards slept in. There should be no need to describe the horrific cries that emanated from the tent, suggesting the cancerous deeds transpiring within. Kony was a man who did not tolerate crying, but this was the sort of crying he enjoyed. There is no other way to imagine a man who perpetuates these sorts of crimes than as pure evil, and to revel in and exploit them to his own gains is the most despicable facet of this sickening affair.

Onyx did not revel in them. He could hear the begging and the screaming, but they did not move him emotionally, one way or the other, just as he had been trained. One of the guards stood up with a mouthful of macaroni and cheese as Kony passed by him. "Sir, Makarov will be arriving shortly," he said after swallowing.

"Makarov? I forgot about that booger! What's it been, almost three months now since he was to make the exchange with Zakhaev? What was he doing all this time, eating de poo-poo?" Kony jutted his thumb out towards Onyx. "Jumba, take this killer here and three other men to the main road. Makarov is arriving soon, and we need to make sure no militia are there to stop him. Those damned Freedom Fighters will surely cause some trouble."

"Yes, sir!" Jumba grabbed his AK-47, then laughed at Onyx. "Come on, 'Killer'!" On the way to an old truck mounted with a heavy MG, Jumba whistled at a pair of guards: The same two men who had accompanied Onyx on his arrival in Uganda. He could have ordered a third at Kony's behest, but for whatever reason, he did not. The hook-footed man sat in the passenger's seat because he couldn't work the pedals, Jumba climbed into the driver's seat, and the fishy birdman took his place on the MG.

Onyx saw very little space left over for himself. "Where do I sit?"

Jumba started up the engine before shouting, "Sit behind the guy on the MG."

Onyx gritted his teeth and squeezed in next to the guard on the MG. His leg immediately felt numb, pinned in against the side of the truck's bed like that. Even though the ride was short, there was no shortage of discomfort. It took no more than ten minutes before they arrived on the "main road" as Kony had called it, and it was probably the best description for it. They drove along a drier, lighter portion of the dirt that carpeted the surrounding veldt where convoys had flattened it beneath their

tires. More dirt just flitted along the air in low clouds like a filthy fog, as if the earth was heaving a great, tired sigh from having so much ugliness upon it, but the dirt only drifted back down to where it had been again.

Jumba kept driving along the road at a slower speed. He didn't want to collide with Makarov's car when they found it. He was growing bored, so he decided to antagonize Onyx. "How you doing back there?" he asked after winding his window down. It takes an exceptional sort of individual to make a question of concern sound like a taunt.

"It is a bit cramped," Onyx had to admit.

"I was talking to the guard!" said Jumba. He almost didn't stifle his laughter.

"I am fine, sir! Trying to keep a look out!" The fishy birdman on the MG scratched at his flaking skin, then sniffled through his protruding proboscis. If he hadn't been distracted with responding, he might have noticed Makarov's escort car driving up the road just then. His higher vantage point could spot the other vehicle around the bend pulling over.

Jumba noticed soon enough himself, and saw Makarov's driver getting out. "What are you doing? Keep driving!" Jumba pulled his own car to a halt so he could enjoy yelling at another grown man.

"I thought you were taking over," replied Makarov's driver. Makarov was still in the car, looking annoyed at something or another. There was a long silence that followed this statement. Jumba's face locked up in enraged disbelief. The other driver and Jumba's two soldiers remained where they were. The hook-foot man blinked one eyelid, then the other. Onyx thought he could hear a fizzling sound and smell ozone burning in the air. Nobody seemed to know how to respond to what had been said for the longest time, and a quiet stupor overtook them all as they waited for someone else to rectify the awkward confusion.

"No! We are here to escort you!" Jumba replied angrily. If he wasn't laughing, he was angry. "What in the? What in the hell? What the hell? What the god damned hell? Why the hell would you? Why would you stop your getaway vehicle? What the ever-loving Christ shit are you thinking? You! You're! You're driving! The goddamn guy. To us. You drive him. All the way. You have to escort. We are *your* escort! You just drive Makarov and we guard your vehicle! Asshole!"

The driver looked shocked by Jumba's stuttering tirade. After swallowing his utter disbelief at his superior's lack of anger management, he got back into his car. "Okay, sorry!"

"God! Some people, hey." Jumba shook his head at the soldier seated on the MG for sympathy. The fishy bird-like man gave a non-committal shrug because he couldn't disagree with his boss, but he could empathize with being yelled at so irrationally. **Then suddenly!** A hail of bullets riddled the driver's body! Kony didn't have time to gloat at his interpretation of karma. There were five of the Freedom Fighters' militia hiding in the bushes. They knew Makarov was coming!

"Shit in the bushes!" cried Jumba as he jumped out of the car and used it as cover.

"Now, sir? But I don't have to go!" said the MG soldier. The Freedom Fighters opened fire on Jumba's car. The hook-footed guard in the passenger seat was struck in the head before he had time to check the insurance papers in the glove compartment. His brains splattered over the seats and the windshield like a water balloon filled with pink tapioca.

Jumba got a brilliant idea. "Return fire!" The guard on the MG started firing back at his enemies, but he only managed to gun down one of the Freedom Fighters before he himself was shot. The birdy fish-like man let out a choked bu-kawk before keeling over backwards and croaking on the spot.

"Shit!" cried Jumba, like an inefficacious mantra.

Onyx came to the conclusion that he simply had to do something about the situation, so he jumped out of the back of the car and walked towards the Freedom Fighters. He walked slower so as to try and emulate the slow motion effect seen in films lost before the Equestrian cataclysm. As improbable as Tom Cruise's continued career, he didn't get shot. A couple of shots flew past him before the militia members had to reload their weapons. Onyx drew his sword. He had smaller blades he could throw, but he wanted them to die by his sword. He came up close to the first enemy soldier and swung his sword across the man's hands, slicing them off. This would have been an incredibly difficult maneuverer with an ordinary katana, and it was even more difficult with Onyx's zanbato. The man reacted poorly to the gushing stumps that now occupied the ends of his arms, and he fell to the floor to simper. The second fighter cocked his weapon and was about to fire when Onyx stabbed him clean through the torso. The man's stomach ruptured as the blade popped out of his back, smeared with his half-digested lunch. The third and fourth guards opened fire, and Onyx kept the man's body on his sword as a shield. This tactic was not exactly the most respectful towards the human condition.

The third man stifled his panic and calmly walked backward whilst still firing on Onyx. Onyx placed his foot on the corpse's hip and kicked him off of his sword, sending the body tumbling onto the third guard. He lunged forward and sliced the fourth man's head in half sideways before stepping back and stabbing his sword down. The third fighter screamed before Onyx's blade entered his forehead and came out the back of his head. That was the plan, anyway, but his sword was so ridiculously huge that it would be more accurate to say he crushed the man's head with his blade. It would likely not be inaccurate to say

that Onyx was a violent person and probably had disturbing thoughts. As if to settle this speculation, Onyx showed no mercy to the first guard who was still screaming in pain. He left him there alive but dying slowly and painfully, which may or may not sound familiar to you by this point.

"Nice fighting." Even when giving a compliment, Jumba laughed as if it was a joke. If he received one, he'd probably say it was underestimated.

Onyx wisely ignored him, even if his self-restraint was usually put to poor use committing irredeemable acts of voluntarily killing and maiming people. He approached to open the back door of Makarov's car where Makarov sat in the back, smoking a cigarette with his one good arm. His other arm was still in a sling because of the wounds he sustained in Yemen. "That was quite the show," Makarov said as if he were congratulating his cigarette instead.

"We take this car!" said Onyx as he shut the back door and climbed into the passenger seat. Jumba took the driver's seat and started the engine. Between Onyx's antipathy and Jumba's bipolar disorder, it was difficult to gauge who was the bigger sociopath, but once they returned to the hospital, they were greeted by the man in charge of all these sociopaths: Joseph Kony himself.

"Makarov, it's good to finally meet you!" Kony said as though he were capable of being friends with anyone, ever.

"My thoughts are the same," replied Makarov, remembering a fishing trip the pair had taken once.

"Do you have the box?" asked Kony in the same tone of voice as if caring for another human's well-being, which was beyond his capabilities.

"Yes, but you do realise some of the resistance will be coming for this." Makarov pulled the box out of his coat pocket that he had taken from Yemen. Onyx recognized it as the same sort of box Luna had transported him here to Earth with.

"Don't worry! God Himself informs me an army of them are arriving by plane. We have the 'secure' location marked, and I have a little welcoming party there. Come, I'll tell you more about it inside." Kony patted Makarov on the back and led him indoors where he'd been watching and laughing at a television programme called Boondocks, which was a sort of Japanimation show popular with angsty, weeaboo tweens and confusingly originated from a newspaper comic, despite clearly not being on par for newspaper material, at one point not even being properly inked in, and looking and reading on the whole like the childish ramblings of a pasty, emo teenager with every dubbed episode of Death Note on tape and who once got yelled at by his mom to share his Easter candy with his little brother and was never the same since.

Onyx opted not to bore himself with the television box and its recorded materials from before the fall of telecommunications. After today's tiresome excursion, he felt his first week of working for this person would be a little easier now that he had actually shown Kony's cronies what he was capable of. Contrary to his hopes, his week was about to get worse, but such is employment.

Distance is time, and time was growing ever shorter. Depending upon your point of view, the Arabian Desert was either very far from Uganda, or not far enough, and it was here that Harbinger made his descent after fleeing from the Ural Mountains den. He had not known how far he had flown, or where to, and he did not realize his aimless flight had taken him back to Yemen. His mind was instead filled with regrets over Spike's death. Why hadn't Spike stayed put? Another questioned he asked himself was, "Why was he so stupid?" but this could have been directed at anybody, really. Kane. Himself. Anybody.

A gale from Harbinger's wings blew away the sand into the raging winds that surrounded him as he landed. He pawed at the shifting ground beneath himself, throwing away futile fistfuls of sand, only stopping when the dark ditch he had dug reminded him too much of a nest. Too much of his lost family. He couldn't really blame Kane, however, even if his own brother had betrayed him. Kane had always been loyal to whoever was in power. It was Discord who had driven him and his sibling apart.

He ceased dreaming about all the ways he might do Discord in, and remembered that others might come looking for him. He hated it, but he would need to abandon his dragon form for now. One more human on this planet would make no difference and render his escape that much easier. He tightened his body up, compressing himself into as small a shape as he could manage, like a rat flattening its skeleton to squeeze through a tight space. Harbinger deflated like a balloon with crackles of greenish energy flickering just beneath his scales, caressing like a sieve around his body. His scales appeared to camouflage themselves, or dissolve into human skin, and he now crouched buck naked in the desert, which is no place to be nude. Day was over and sunburn was no longer a threat, but the nights could get deathly frigid, and sand got into everywhere.

Harbinger couldn't just sit still. He didn't walk for long when he found the fort, but he used that time to lament over all the things the dragons had abandoned: Their true reptilian bodies, their dignity and their pride, their culture. Even he had forgotten it himself. They had banded together to fight off humans, spent their hordes of delicious gemstones to unite as one, and even he had forgotten the calling: His spirit quest that would beckon him when the time was right. The strange wanderlust that gripped a dragon's will and was the only thing which could rein them in. Young dragons felt the calling when they came of

age to strip off the bonds of their caretaking and find hordes for themselves. Dragons would feel the calling beckon them to new lands the way people visit exotic locales for vacation, but to dragons, these were significant, personal events. Harbinger's had ended in the tragedy of his family's deaths. Wise old dragons were said to feel the calling to great magic, and perhaps at the ends of their lives where they were said to be born anew one last time. Harbinger kind of hoped this might be one of those last times. He had no family left to lose now without Kane's redemption. Either way, he knew that the calling must be what brought him back to Yemen, back to the fort, where he recalled that Makarov had one of those devices.

The black box. Discord had one, he was certain of it, but there was no getting his claws on that one. That loot had to be his now; he saw it plain as night. Harbinger prowled around the fort in search of Makarov's blood so he could track that little cretin's scent. The decrepit place was now more crypt than military base, still littered with the bodies of Zakhaev and his men, but Harbinger paid no mind to the rotting, disgusting corpses. The only real notice he gave them was to rob one of them of its clothing to cover himself. He put on a desert camou shirt with matching trousers that had many pockets up and down the legs. Over that he wore a cheap, small pocketed vest and he finished off the ensemble with some beige, rubber-soled boots and a bowl-shaped helmet so he was totally rocking the military fashion. The old walls of the fort were riddled with bullets. Pieces of plaster lay on the floor. Harbinger could not take one step without stepping on a bullet case, and it almost reminded him of a treasure horde, albeit one with no worth to be found. "There has to be something here," Harbinger mumbled as he tried to replay the event over in his head. He remembered Makarov had been shot right in the confusion and in the shoulder.

Harbinger then made his way to the chair Makarov had been sitting in when he was making the trade with Zakhaev. The chair was lying on the floor, and smeared across its back was Makarov's blood. Harbinger gave a sly grin and scraped a bit of dried blood off of the chair with his long fingernails, then gave it a lick. A sudden flash of events played through Harbinger's head like a zoetrope showing what Makarov had done after he had been shot. He escaped from some other humans, some soldiers, then wandered in the desert and welcomed some pony contacts and been spotted by a jet plane. The events continued to play out like sport highlights until they reached present day. Harbinger could "see" Makarov resting in the guest room of Kony's mansion on the second of four floors, in the third room to the right of the stairs.

Harbinger followed the taste of the blood until he reached the mansion at two in the morning, which is most certainly too early to receive visitors. It had only taken him four hours to get there. Kony had guards patrolling the inside and the outside of the mansion. Harbinger would need a disguise if he was going to get in with no questions asked. Wishing he'd had a suit of crazy, BDSM Nightingale armour with him, he hid behind a crate for twenty minutes, watching the guards and realizing how very important ergonomic lumbar support really is. If you ever really want to know how incredibly goddamned painful your back can get, try taking off the back of your chair and sitting on that for a while. You'll be amazed how incredible the pain will be, even if your back hardly seems to touch the rear.

Eventually he caught a break, as one might do if they finally replace their old office chair and use the old one for a footrest or a cat bed instead. One of the guards had broken away from his routing to urinate on the floor in the corner of a hallway where the stained linoleum tiling had all but peeled away. There was a potted plant nearby that had grown taller than the ceiling would allow and was sporting long, curly vines that crept along the walls and floor, but he didn't use it. As the light spattering masked his footfalls with white (yellow?) noise, Harbinger crept up behind him and snapped his neck. It is a shame to die during such a relieving moment, but Harbinger was one of many shameless figures in this lengthy war. The crack of the guard's neck was a fairly quiet one, and drew no unwarranted attention.

The guard had been a part of the Special Forces that was made up of a private military company that Kony had hired, and as far as the paperwork was concerned, he still was. There weren't really things like companies after the Equestrians had abolished the economy and decimated the human race, but what few corporations remained hadn't honestly changed all that much. Harbinger might have grown to love shopping at army surplus stores, but now he settled for donning himself in the dead man's garb, replacing the fatigues of Zakhaev's men for a navy blue jumpsuit with a matching black bulletproof vest around it, black boots, and a black ski mask. *The perfect disguise*, Harbinger thought. It was a size too small, so it clung to his beefy body like a hug from an old relative, but he wouldn't be here long.

The mansion-slash-hospital was quiet, and the passing guards were uninterested in questioning him. For now, his infiltration was going swimmingly. "Slash" is a reference to the forward slash or "foreslash" character on a standard computer or electronic video screen typewriter keyboard which isn't really supposed to conjoin unrelated words into unorthodox compounds, but it is the most concise description of the Kony Island Dubstep Palace (which isn't even on an island). It is worth noting, however, that Kony was the sort of man to commit these dastardly deeds I dare not repeat, and then turn a place meant to help people into a private domain to fuel his egotistical avarice, because as Harbinger drew nearer to Makarov's room, his blood-sense was clouded with the scents of those he had not tasted. In the end, Harbinger found Makarov's door with unsettling ease. He hadn't needed to walk far, and there were very few guards patrolling this section of the hospital. The lull in security only piqued his paranoia, and he triple checked to ensure nobody was in sight.

Makarov was sleeping within his room, tucked underneath several flimsy hospital blankets, but also thick animal skins. He snored like a little princess. He did not awake when the doorknob slowly turned with a few awkward rattles. He did not

awake when the door swivelled open and Harbinger poked his masked face in to peer around. He did awake just in time to see the tall “mercenary” creeping into his room and taking hold of the small black box with the crank on its side.

"You! What are you doing here? That is not yours!" Makarov sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. Perhaps he was a bit too sleepy to remember all of the crimes *he* had committed. "Get out now, or I will have Kony take your head!" He was trying to be as threatening as one possibly can when they are only wearing a vest and a pair of boxer shorts.

Harbinger froze and lowered his head like a child being shamed for taking the last cookie. He knew now Makarov had to die. "You could of[17] just shut your mouth, and maybe you would have lived to see daybreak." Harbinger decided that the most dramatic thing he could do then was to first peel his balaclava up off of his face, and then turn around slowly, but not too slowly. Makarov gave an angry start as he recognized the face of the man who had killed so many of Zakhaev’s and his soldiers. Without hesitation, he let out the hue and cry as loud as humanly possible.

Meanwhile. Onyx lay curled up in the foetal position on a tattered old mattress in the room across from Makarov. He still wore his leather jacket which had been drawn skin-tight around himself. He even kept his mask on, and his sword rested next to him almost like a dog sleeping at the foot of your bed. He did not dream. When he slept, his body shut down to the point where it was like dying for him every time he closed his eyes for the night. However, he liked this: The quietude of nothingness brought him an odd comfort where it would bring unsettling emotions to others. This was Onyx's time to rest. Time to himself where he was not slaughtering innocents or maiming soldiers. This was utter bliss to him.

His peaceful “slumber” was interrupted by the harrowing squeal of Makarov coming from across the hall. Onyx was on his feet within three tenths of a second, thanks to his oddly profound nature, and was sprinting across the hall and barging into Makarov's room. Here, Makarov was curled up in the far corner, cowering away while his assailant towered over him. Makarov caught a glimpse of Onyx and jumped at the opportunity to distract his attacker’s gaze from him. "Onyx, help me, pretty please!"

Harbinger spun around to meet the one called Onyx, and now the two of them stood inches apart: Two legends that were highly trained in the art of hand to hand combat, each exceptional individual with their own special advantages. Onyx had his quick, catlike reflexes and skill with an oversized blade. Harbinger had his godlike strength and his paralysing blades. Neither of the men said anything to one another. Onyx tilted his head to the left, then the right. His neck let out a crack as he did this. It was obvious he intended to fight.

Harbinger let out a chuckle. "Believe me. You want to leave now!"

"Believe me, I don't. What I want is to remove your head," responded Onyx.

"You always tell strangers about your weird hobbies? Come on then, human. Let's see what you got."

Onyx’s cocky smile remained under his mask, so Harbinger couldn’t detect his confidence. Onyx swung his huge blade upwards, scraping it against the floor with a diagonal angle. Harbinger ducked out of the way and took a step to the left. "That it?" he asked with a cocky tone.

"Just a warm up,” Onyx grumbled. He swung his zanbato three times at lightning speed. The first sliced open Harbinger's cheek, the second his right arm, and the third removed Harbinger's right earlobe. Harbinger roared before letting out another ill-fitting chuckle. Onyx watched as Harbinger's earlobe grew back then and there.

"Now that was good, I'll give you that, but now it's my turn!" Without hesitation, Harbinger lunged forward, his draconic paws bursting through the place where his human hands were. Onyx swung his blade down in an attempt to stop him, but Harbinger wrapped his long, scaly fingers around Onyx's wrist and held his sword away at arm’s length. His free hand formed a fist and slammed into Onyx’s throat. Onyx staggered back and was given no time to recover. Harbinger swung his leg around and kicked his sword out of his hand which thudded against the wall. When he kicked again, Onyx reacted. He wrapped one of his arms around Harbinger's leg to stop him using it, and then pulled him forward into his other fist. He socked Harbinger right in the lower abdomen and sent him crashing back.

Onyx danced on his toes in anticipation of Harbinger's next move as the latter climbed back to his feet. "I see you are better trained than most humans I have fought, but this will not help you. Not one little bit,” said Harbinger. Then he shot forward, throwing his fists around with a “one-two” combo. Onyx blocked each incoming shot with his forearms and waited for his opening. Harbinger realized his predictable chain, so he tried quite the sly tactic: He swung *both* his fists at the *same* time. Still Onyx saw this coming and blocked both shots with his forearms. This was his opening; he pushed his forearms outwards, forcing Harbinger’s arms open wide. Onyx kicked up with his left boot, striking Harbinger in the chest. Harbinger staggered back, and Onyx jabbed him twice in the face with his left fist. He swung around and caught him in the temple with his right.

[17] Sic.

Onyx next spun around on his left leg with his right one outstretched. This is what is called a “roundhouse kick”. As Onyx’s right leg came around, Harbinger caught it with his right hand on Onyx’s inner thigh and his left on his outer shin. Harbinger pushed down on his shin and up on his right one, snapping Onyx’s leg with his beastly claws. Onyx fell to the floor. There, he reached for one of his injections from inside of his suit, but Harbinger kicked it out of his hand. He hoisted him back up by the collar of his suit and the back of his pants. "Up you go!" shouted Harbinger as he threw Onyx upwards. His head cracked open the plenum ceiling, and he hung there for a split second, twiddling his legs, before crashing back down to the floor.

Once again Harbinger grabbed him, wrapping his arm around his neck. He ran Onyx across the room, banging his head into the walls like Nicholas Cage’s beloved pachinko machine. Once Onyx went limp, Harbinger released him and turned to Makarov. "Well I enjoyed that. How about you?"

Makarov now started to break down into tears. Harbinger seized the black box in both paws and grinned at Makarov. "Hey, shush now, Macaroni, don't cry! I'm only going to beat you to death with this."

Onyx couldn’t even choke up the wad of blood caught in his throat. His skull felt cool and warm at the same time, and the top was numb. Blood was soaking in underneath his mask and there was a painful buzzing sensation building up within his brain. His fingers fumbled with one of his syringes, but he managed to throw his chest onto the needle. In a flash, the buzzing went away, and there was only a funny feeling in his cranium as it moulded itself back into its usual shape. "Enjoy this!" he roared before jumping up and dropkicking Harbinger in the back with both legs.

Harbinger flew forward and went crashing through hospital window where he plummeted three stories. Onyx didn’t even look at Makarov. He still had to catch his breath, and he still had some aches and pains that were only now receding. He clutched his arm over his lower abdomen and Onyx grabbed his sword from the floor, dragging its weighty blade along as he gazed out the window. He looked, but Harbinger was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter Twenty-Two.

Kane reports Spike’s death. When cats and dogs get along.

Kane dragged Spike’s body through the dark tunnel which led to the dragons’ lair. He was scared of what Discord might do to him for his failure. Would he even believe that Kane had tried to kill his own brother? Or would he assume that Kane let his brother go, and that poor Spike had witnessed it all, and that is why Kane killed him? These thoughts delayed Kane from entering. Maybe he should run. No! He could not be a coward! He must live up to his draconic heritage and face the full life consequences of his failure. He should definitely accept his punishment, whatever it might be.

Kane took a deep breath and knocked on the giant door. A guard’s voice growled through from the other side. “What’s the password?”

“Swordfish.” Once the door opened for him, Kane carried Spike’s dirtied body into the hall.

"Oh, now what?" the guard asked as Kane quickly dressed himself.

"He attacked me, tried to kill me. I had to take him out." Kane, the burly grown man, held up the broken body of the tiny little purple dragon. Ignoring the sceptical looks he received, Kane brought Spike’s body over to Discord’s door. Overhead hung a large sign which read “Disco Research & Development”. He took a deep breath once more before entering.

The interior of Discord’s office had been strung up in clotheslines carrying mismatched clothing no dragon in the lair would wear. There was a girl’s school uniform patterned in Burberry check. There was a paisley muumuu, and the sort of high-necked, tight furred jacket that tough valley girls wore to go clubbing. There was a Victorian wedding dress and a scarf longer than a city bus and a vinyl trench coat. There was an unconvincing dragon costume and a suit of medieval armour that had been flattened and a gentleman’s swimming suit and tie. There were many other garments of apparel, cloaks of adornment, wardrobes of specific function, and clothing of various fashionable dress. In the thick of it all, Discord was wearing a handkerchief atop his hair, busily ironing clothes with a whistling kettle while he gabbed on and on to some person ostensibly named “Diane”.

“Oh, I *know*, Diane, I know! So he went on camera and exercised by lifting up two broken cardboard boxes of soda! By the third lift, he was panting and sweating like a parched slab of pork that had been left in the sun for a week. Oh, I simply couldn’t believe it what he’d done this time, Diane. And we’ve been going through coffee just like mad. Why, my boys can’t get enough of it. You must send me the recipe on a little eight by five index card. You’ll have to excuse me, one of the dears just came in carrying another corpse. Ta!”

Kane strolled in, not wanting to interrupt the conversation while he dumped Spike’s body onto the toroidal table. He thought Diane to be a strange name, however, so when Discord ended his conversation, Kane just had to ask who she was.

“It’s the name of my tape recorder, obviously. Now who’ve you gotten killed? I don’t get why you keep dragging dead things onto *my* good table.”

Kane found it hard to bring himself to answer Discord’s question, so he just waited a beat for Discord to take a second look at Spike. Discord grimaced over his shoulder at something that wasn’t there and said, “Yeesh, and I thought *I* lacked subtlety.” He held out one claw towards Spike. “What the hell is this?”

Kane swallowed as if to clear his throat of grief before responding. "Harbinger must have known what you ordered me to do and had Spike follow us. When I had Harbinger at the end of my blade, Spike jumped me. My brother fled whilst I killed Spike." Kane was not sure he hid his fear all that well.

Discord stared at Kane without speaking. He blinked once before asking, “What are you talking about, Zane?”

“It’s Kane, sir. You ordered me to kill Harbinger? You said he was a traitor to our cause.”

Discord didn’t pay attention at first. He was flicking something unseen off of Spike’s belly. “So, Spike, eat any good books lately? Oh, right, you got dead a whole lot to make a point.” He did a slow double-take, then frowned at Kane. He leaned on the table, not looking to see that his paw was squeezing down on Spike’s belly. The dead dragon child let out a squeak and his tongue pushed out from his mouth. His glossy eyes stared in two different directions. "I am starting to question your loyalty, Billy Zane. Does it truly belong to me, or is it to your brother?"

"You, sir." Kane took no time to think, which was a good thing, because otherwise he might appear suspicious. He couldn’t even take time to think about that. If he took the time to think about taking the time to think, then he might appear to be hesitating, but the fact that Discord would even ask such a thing started a growth of resentment towards his master in the pit of his stomach.

"Really? It doesn't seem like that from where I'm standing, buster.” Discord drummed his claws on Spike’s rigor mortis torso.

"Sir, please. I underestimated my brother's cunning. That will not happen again."

"No it won’t. I am demoting you to food gatherer until I can trust you. Now leave my sight." Discord waved his paw in the air as if he was too busy to give him a proper good-bye, let alone remember that Kane had just spent the night hunting goats several times.

Kane did not argue, but now he was no longer scared. Now he was pissed. Kane had just tried to kill his own brother for Discord, and what is his reward? A demotion! Just where did Discord get off treating him like this just because he failed to carry out an important mission? He deserved better. He knew himself to be entitled, but for now he had to swallow his pride and grit his teeth. "Yes, sir.”

Little did the dragons suspect that they were soon to receive visitors. Jimmy Walsh didn’t suspect to be paying a visit, either, but when he radioed ahead to HRHQ, Avery Johnson ordered them to investigate further. Mordecai was in agreement with him, and the Task Force 143 members were more or less unanimous. “This may be our only chance to track down the dragons,” he said. It was also a good chance, because in the wake of the avalanche, the peak of the mountain was blanketed in a calm snow, and Kane had left tracks from where he had fought with Harbinger and dragged Spike’s body back with him. The other benefit the snow granted them, once they had departed from the helicopter, was the ability to walk up the snowy slopes to the platform leading into the tunnel. There were clear signs that Kane had burned away the snow burying the entrance with his fire. As Walker led his men onto all fours inside the long, winding tunnel, Mordecai said, “Man, I ain’t goin’ in there,” and turned away to disappear down the mountain, never to be heard from again.

The first time someone hears a song, it always seems to play for a lot longer than the subsequent times you listen to it. The first time you bite an apple, it tastes fresher and quickly starts to spoil. When Task Force 143 first entered the tunnel, they were brimming with an adventurous spirit and a thirst for vengeance for Gaz’s death. As the passage wound on, they began to question the sensibility of this feat, and wondered if this long, worm-like egress did not finish in some manner of dead end or a venomous snake pit. Eventually they came upon the cramped little antechamber that barely fit the lot of them. They didn’t know what else to do about the door, but before they could knock, they heard a voice hissing from the other side of it. “Password?”

The men stared dumbfounded at each other, mouthing wordless ideas like goldfish. “Uh, we don’t know it,” Lugo said honestly.

An impatient sigh followed. “Who are you, Crackle’s cousin? You know the password is ‘swordfish’.”

The members of Task Force 143 looked at one another, and Walker wasn’t too taken aback to try speaking. “Swordfish?” he asked. He cleared his throat and spoke more clearly. “Swordfish.” He nodded at the door, then at the others. As the door creaked open, he ordered his men to keep their knitted snow masks on, just in case they could be recognized. They were amazed to see the cavernous habitat of the dragons. They were surprised at the reverent calm that dominated the place.

They had expected to be done for, but nobody was even around to point a gun at them. They'd expected to see dragons flying about, shooting flames, fighting one another. All they saw were regular humanoids, walking here and there along the bridges and rims of the open catacomb. They surmised these were dragons in their disguises as they had witnessed outside, but counting how many of them there were was even more unsettling. Rumours had said that hundreds of men had died in Hainan because of a dragon attack. Rumours they now had to believe were true, and not just misinformed stories designed to frighten young cadets and antagonize older soldiers. Inside the den, they could count several dozen "people" walking about, and there were caverns that led off to chambers unseen.

"Brought your own threads, huh?" the door guard asked them. "Clever. I get sick of these fashions." They were a little intimidated by the figure shrouded in the black mask and hood and the matching body armour, and were more than a little puzzled at how easily they'd been permitted to enter. The four of them huddled together to whisper to one another, hoping they wouldn't be heard with all this silence.

"Gosh," Yuri said. "This is the second-biggest dragon den I've ever seen."

"What's goin' on here?" Lugo hissed.

"Probably just want you see," Adams suggested. "They must think we're one of them."

"Wait, where's Mordecai gone?" asked Walker.

"Him? Oh, he left before we even got in here," Yuri said.

"Huh. Okay. Split up. Lugo and Adams, you go that way. I got this sneaking feeling about what it'd be like if the four of us got surrounded, you know?"

The quartet split up, making sure not to sneak around waving their guns. They straightened up and tried to blend in with the dragons as they marched their separate ways, but it was a bit difficult to walk with such purpose when they had no idea where they were going. Shaking the look of being lost is very difficult because the look of being lost is the same exact look as when you're just looking around an unfamiliar place.

"How the hell are we gonna find this one guy in this viper nest?" Walker asked.

"One guy, sir? If these are all dragons, they're all the enemy," Yuri replied. "Bet somethin's goin' on in that big room down there, though." He tried to point very surreptitiously at the enormous mismatched doors leading into Discord's chamber. He couldn't believe he was daring to point them out given how intimidated their appearances made him feel.

"Adams, what are we doing exactly?" asked Lugo. "Besides feeding out asses to a bunch of lizards."

"Waiting for Walker's orders." Adams was too tense to be impatient with Lugo. He kept an eye on Walker and Yuri on the opposite end of the chamber for any sort of sign.

"I don't like this one bit." Lugo got nudged by a passing dragon who took no notice of him.

"Just relax. Stay calm. Don't bring any unnecessary attention to yourself."

"Easier said than done. The sooner we get out of here, the better."

Yuri and Walker began to edge their way around the corner wall and into the short corridor leading to Discord's office. "Do we go in?" whispered Yuri.

"No, not yet. We shall wait." replied Walker.

"For what?" Yuri checked to see if anyone was looking at him before he leant against the door and tried to listen in on Kane's and Discord's conversation. The doors were obviously thick from the look of them, and he pulled his head away, shaking it to indicate his eavesdropping was fruitless.

"What the hell are they doing?" Adams was still watching the other pair.

"I don't know, but they better hurry!" said Lugo. Another passing dragon bumped shoulders with Lugo. The dragon had been licking his lips, and in both hands he'd been carrying a big bowl of soup made with goat eyes. Because of his carelessness, he dropped the bowl, spilling his soup all over the floor.

"What the fuck are you doing?" The dragon snarled like caravan trash throwing a spoiled tantrum.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bump into you." Lugo tried to avoid eye contact, and smartly neglected to mention that the dragon had bumped into him.

"Yeah, well, sorry ain't gonna cut it!" The hall was quiet before, but at the dragon's tard raging, a hush fell over the place. The other dragons turned to stare.

"Adams, what do I do?" Lugo tried to keep an eye on the seething dragon, ignoring the fact he could hear him.

"Follow me. We will try to leave." Adams also was ignoring this fact. The two infiltrators started to scurry away until Lugo was pushed to the ground by the upset dragon.

"Where do you think you're going?" The dragon ripped Lugo's snow mask off of his head. A group of dragons had gathered around like moths to a flame to witness the awkward encounter, and they gasped at what they saw.

"A hoo-mon!" one of them said.

"We don't want no humans!"

"What do humans eat, anyway?"

"Cheese bagels."

"Fairies!"

"They eat themselves!"

"Look at its clothes."

"What do we do with it?"

"I say we eat it!"

Adams grabbed Lugo by the arm and dragged him to his feet, before taking out one of his incendiary grenades. "Stay the fuck back!" He bid his men to stick close behind him, and they did, each one keeping an eye on a different direction. The dragons just stepped aside, continuing to gawk at them.

"Shit, what are they doing?" asked Yuri. The dragons were just standing around, staring at them in confident confusion.

Walker had no time to answer his question; the door to Discord's room swung open, and the draconequus himself stood there, outflanking Kane at his side. Walker stared at the chimera of mishmash features and felt one innate reaction, one primal instinct that hardcoded itself into some locked region of his brain. His foot was already jutting out, kicking Discord in his noodle-y midsection. Discord's minions gasped as he went cartwheeling backwards into a tire-shape. He righted himself into a handstand and smirked up at Walker. "Why, you brute," Discord said with a smirk. "Do I look like an apple tree to you?"

Walker clenched his grenade. "You think this is funny? You killed four good men, you bastards!"

"Four? That many?" Discord shrugged to Kane after standing up and dusting himself off. "I didn't think humans could count that high. Let's be honest, they're not much smarter than your average zebra."

"One more smart-mouthed remark and I blow this place to kingdom come!"

"I wouldn't recommend that," Discord said. "You see, I, the indispensable Discord, forbid the murder of humans many centuries ago, and you'd end up killing yourselves alongside just maiming a few of my humourless reptilian companions here. As for your avenging bloodlust, trust me when I saw that the actual culprits have been dealt with."

"Trust you? Why should I?" Walker felt the temptation to take the risk growing with every word the snide monster before him uttered.

"Of course, you don't have to, but I wonder, what is your plan of action here? You'll blow me to smithereens with your little bomb? And then what? I've got a whole army around me all slavering for a taste of your flesh should my rule come to its grisly end, and what do you have? Four unappetizing humans scalp-deep in my den. You don't need to be a billionth the genius I am to gamble the outcome."

"We just came for our friend's body," Yuri said. "We don't leave men behind if we can help it."

"Really? You come all this way for a body? Understandable, given the one you've got," Discord said. Yuri was looking especially mad, so Discord rolled his eyes. "Okay, I tell you what. I'll give you the body, and you can leave." Discord mimicked a walking motion with two fingers and smiled an irksome smile. His eyes looked very shiny as though he spotted something he wanted only a foot from his nose.

"That easy, huh?" Walker didn't need to make his scepticism apparent.

"Yes it is," Discord said matter-of-factly. "I have said so and so it shall be. One snap of my claws and these dragons can devour you or wave you adieu."

Walker didn't expect there to be another opportunity for conversation. He wanted to sum up the bravery of the human race in one epithet, but at the same time, his mind was questioning everything about this encounter. "You realize after we finish with the ponies, we'll be coming back for you, you know."

"The 'ponies' you say?" Discord held an antique ear trumpet to his ear as if he needed to listen closely. "Funny you mention that. Last I heard, the ponies all retreated back home to Equestria after their stunning victory over you. Well, I mean, why shouldn't they?"

Walker could see the dragons looking at one another, and wondered what they could be thinking. He thumbed the pin of his grenade. "They overreached themselves. They returned to whatever hell they came from to regroup. They've already been sighted returning."

Discord smiled and shook his shoulders with a purring laughter. "And what of us dragons? You tell me we're next after you take your sweet time vanquishing your invaders. Where are all those reports of your battles against us in the past year?"

This time, Walker kept silent. Discord didn't expect a response, so he kept speaking. "I'll tell you. The ponies and my kind hail from the same world, and we may be cut from the same cloth, but in terms of bedfellows, we're fighting over the blankets. Say, do you boys have a manager I could speak to? I imagine he'd love hearing all about different ways to vivisect ponies. That's a complicated word which here means 'inflicting pain'."

"What is he even saying? I don't get that," Lugo said. The others nodded in confusion at Discord's obfuscating vernacular. Thankfully, one of them was an intermediate graduate and could understand some of his polysyllabic lexicon.

"You want to work with us?" Adams asked. "Like hell!" When he looked around, the other dragons still had them boxed in by just a few feet.

"We even brought a dish to pass. Kane, go to the pile and get their friend's body. Everyone else, go ahead and give them some room, why don't you?" Discord had but to give this order, and Kane and the other dragons obeyed. There was an awkward bout of silence as Kane stepped off to fetch Gaz's body. Discord folded his paws and teetered on his feet, then asked, "Chilly weather we're having, isn't it? But clear, for the most part, after those terrible rainstorms last year."

Walker glared. "Yes, Discord, we know about the Equestrian weather manipulation from last year. We lost hundreds of men in New York."

Discord snapped his fingers. The noise clicked loudly in the vacuous chamber, answered only by the crumbling of a few miniscule rocks on the ceiling and his own voice. "Oh, yes! I remember that now. Tragic, really, but war is war."

Kane returned, placing Gaz's body into Lugo's and Adams' arms. Task Force 143 backed away warily all the way to the exit, and then began the arduous process of towing Gaz's body as they crawled through the long, winding tunnel to the outside. They bumped his head a few times on a stalactite or two, because Lugo didn't remember that stalactites stick down from the ceiling, and stalagmites stick up from the ground.

Once they were well on their way, Discord bid Kane to follow him. "Where are we going?" Kane wanted to know. He shouldn't have asked, but he was feeling very nervous.

"To follow them, of course! I just wanted to give them a good head start." Discord's lissom frame had no issue getting through the tunnel, and didn't even require a human disguise. Kane had so many questions now for his leader, but he couldn't voice a single one of them in case they carried through the tunnels and revealed his private thoughts to the humans far up ahead. He wanted to ask why they would ally themselves with humans. He wanted to ask why they would turn on their fellow Equestrians. He wanted to ask why they were permitting these intruders to live after learning the location of their home. He realized that some of these were Harbinger's questions, and a lump of guilt formed in his throat, blocking their escape.

Jimmy Walsh had found a convenient place to set the chopper down and was lunching on a toasted sandwich of mixed ham and chicken salad, cooked onions and melted cheese. He threw the sandwich down on the dashboard, clipped on his seatbelt, and set his hands at ten and two once he checked his side view mirrors. When he checked his rear view mirror, he frowned. "Whoa, what the hell? Would anyone mind telling the pilot what the hell that thing is?" He was referring, of course, to Discord, who had piled into the back seat of the helicopter along with Task Force 143. He had politely attached his seatbelt and was waiting with bated breath for lift-off.

"Discord's the leader of the dragons. He insists on coming with us. He and his friend are unarmed, so we're taking them prisoner," Walker said. Walsh was okay with this, though he didn't quite trust the monstrous figure and his gaunt companion. It came as a surprise to Johnson when he radioed in with the details of their willing captives, and it was difficult to find the helipad for the mass of armed soldiers at the end of their journey. Along the way, Kane was clearly not enjoying the slow, uneasy process of riding a flying vehicle, but Discord was far more impressed.

"I must say, I admire the excellence of your species' ingenuity skills. To make a machine that enables you tree-dwelling bipeds to fly is simply marvellous. Tell me, how do you get the top to turn around, but not the bottom?" Discord asked.

"Heh, yeah, that's great," said Jimmy. "What say we play the quiet game the whole rest of the way?"

"We have no time for games," Kane said. "Take us to your leader."

"Hush up, Bane. There's always time for games." Discord chuckled.

Apart from the heavily-armed escort, there was little pomp and circumstance about their arrival. A man approached the front of the welcoming committee and threw them a large white towel, ordering Discord to put this on. He threw it over his head as requested, then said, "Boo, I'm a ghost!" Nobody but him laughed. He and Kane had both been handcuffed and manacled, but neither of them worried about not being able to break these cuffs. Kane tried to keep close to Discord, glaring and baring his teeth at the humans like a wild creature that had been captured for a zoo. He had a sickly sensation he was being led to just such ends, and had heard that humans performed unorthodox tortures on other species, from euthanasia to castration. He thought he could transform and escape with Discord at any moment, but without knowing his master's end game, he couldn't see fit how to serve him.

"Ramirez, roll out the red carpet." Avery Johnson was standing at the far end of the HQ roof, hands on his hips and a big, steaming stogie between his teeth that had been flavoured with vodka. Once the task force had marched Discord across the roof to him, he pulled the towel off of Discord's head. This may have seemed pointless, but very little planning ahead had gone into this meeting. Nobody even knew if they were capturing an enemy or meeting with a foreign dignitary, not that much of either went on anymore. Discord proudly held out his arms in a sort of "ta-da" moment. As Johnson took a disgusted look at the vivid, freakish draconequus in all his cartoonish glory, he puffed on his cigar and said, "Goddamn, you're one ugly son of a bitch."

"Aw, you're just saying that," Discord quipped. Johnson blew a puff of vaporized tobacco into his face, causing him to sputter and choke. "And I thought dragons had foul breath!"

Johnson stuck the cigar back between his lips to kiss on and turned to lead Task Force 143 to a briefing room. "Don't discriminate my lifestyle choices," he said. The towel was affixed over Discord's face again, and the next time it was removed, Discord found they had stuck him into a cramped little room around a table, across from Kane who was sulking and alongside the task force and several armed guards. Johnson leaned over the head of the table, puffing furiously even though the room had poor ventilation and the plenum ceiling was stained a putrid yellow. Standing behind him was Andrew Grant, who asked, "So, Mr. Discord, for the record, please elaborate on the nature of your surrender."

"Ooh, I love records? Do we have a Victrola? Let's flip on They Might be Giants and crank up the rpm, shall we?" Discord folded his claws behind his head and kicked his feet up on the table. "I've been looking forward to being debriefed for a long time, except that I don't wear briefs, but I've anticipated a few of your queries for your benefit. Ahem. Firstly, those dragons sighted in Hainan and New York were not affiliates of my cabal, I've forbidden my legions from eating humans, the one who ate the Bunkers was a traitor, and we feel that fire-breathing reptiles would provide a lot of help to your organization in eradicating ponies." Discord beamed like a lighthouse, especially at Kane's gaping expression.

Johnson's cigar fell out of his mouth, and he said, quietly, "You seem to know a lot about a lot of things."

"Just one of the perks of being a centuries-old, power-mad despot. Say, whatever happened to that young man's body? You know, the *other* one with the hat. The dragons that killed him have also been killed."

As Discord nodded at Kane, Yuri flew into a rage. He pounded the table, because it seemed like the thing to do. "Sir, you can't honestly be humouring these cold-blooded killers! He doesn't even care that he killed Gaz!"

Johnson scowled and removed his shades. "Walker! This is the third time today I've had to ask that nobody pounds my table. Report your squad for debriefing so we can corroborate Mr. Discord's little story."

A split second later, Task Force 143 found themselves standing in a windowless hallway with a loud heating grid up above. "What the heck is Johnson thinking? Even if that hideous creature wants to turn coat, he could show a little more respect about it," Yuri said. "That was my experience back in the Soviet-Afghan war."

Walker was going to slam his hand onto Yuri's shoulder, but what he said made him place it gently on his chest. "Uh. You know that was back in the fifties, don't you? Look, Johnson's been in a state since taking over the army after Daniel Williams' death. He needs a little bit of coping without the Williams in charge is all."

"What about Colonel Peter?" Adams asked.

Walker didn't know the ins and outs of the minds of the upper echelon, so he ordered Adams to bring Yuri somewhere to calm him down. Now that things had quieted down, they were all feeling the searing pain of another burnt out soul lost to their inefficacious cause. He knew they'd have to hurry along with debriefing before they could truly grieve. In the meantime, he chased away the hopes inside him that this Discord character, as hideous-looking as he was, would prove a boon to the human resistance. Maybe the Equestrian forces were still crippled from overreaching themselves, and they wouldn't need the help of the dragons anymore. Perhaps the human race really had been made stronger over the past five years, and neutralizing the draconian threat would be a simpler task than they were worrying about. Walker laughed. These thoughts cheered him up on his way to his debriefing not because he believed them, but because they struck his sense of humour. The interview was a simple matter of reporting everything that had happened, as they usually were, and by the time he and his team members found themselves back outside of Johnson's meeting room due to their overwhelming curiosity, the negotiations had already finished. Perhaps some of those hopes were coming true after all.

Andrew was parting from Johnson's company to return to work. Johnson greeted the task force in the company of Discord and Kane, who had been unchained. "Walker, just the man I wanted to see." Johnson looked a lot more cheerful without the cigar and the shades. "Go find Jimmy Walsh. I want 143 to escort Discord and Kane back to their home."

"Sir?" Yuri and Lugo were hesitant. Even Walker felt unease at this hasty alliance, but he didn't press the issue.

"With all due respect, Junior, Jane and I will be fine."

"It's Kane," said Kane, much annoyed.

"Please don't call me 'Junior'." Johnson frowned, but quickly smiled again. "And anyway, I gotta tell you, the human race isn't quite ready for whatever you are, a dragon, walking freely along the streets of Moscow. If you like, you can think of this as protecting an investment."

"An investment! Is that all you see us as?" Kane asked.

Discord placed a paw on Kane's shoulder. "Relax, Lame, Johnson meant the world by it." Once Johnson had departed for his office, Discord threw his arms around Lugo and Adams. "Well, boys, another chopper ride, is it? I'm looking forward to this! We can stay up late, sing 'Row, Row, Row, Row Your Boat' and talk about girls!"

Lugo and Adams shrugged Discord off. "Man, you stay the *hell* away from our women," Adams scolded him.

Discord shook with laughter. "Relax. Doing it with humans would be like doing it with a dog." He swaggered proudly off down in the wrong direction until Walker told him the helipad was the other way.

The return trip to the Ural Mountain den was rife with a silence almost half as awkward as a teenager, and it was Lugo who broke the silence. "So, uh, about this alarming alliance. What do you plan to do once we've eradicated the pony race? Just go back to your caves and stay there?"

"No, actually. We plan to annex their lands," Kane said, sounding droll. Discord wagged his tail end and leaned over to look out the window.

"We've beaten them back before. If we had your help, we could exterminate them all," said Walker.

"Yes, yes yes yes," said Discord. "All in good time. But until then, we can only sit and wait for them."

"I take it Sergeant Major Johnson worked out the details of how to get in contact with you? He's our acting leader."

Discord pried his face away from the window to frown, leaving a smudge. "Who's your actual leader? I was hoping to meet with her."

"Daniel Williams was killed almost a year ago. *He* was the leader of our army, and a fine soldier."

Walsh sighed. "He was a good man. I served under his command in China."

"Well *this* is the most depressing chopper ride I have ever had the displeasure of being on," said Lugo.

Kane tutted. "You humans and your emotions," he said smugly.

"Kane, show some respect," Discord said.

After a while further, Walsh showed some concern. "We should be here by now," he said. "But look." The chopper circled around the area where the dragons' mountain had been. Instead what the men saw resembled a chocolate cake that someone had hurled with great force onto the floor. They were certain from their instruments that they were in the right place, but the mountain appeared to have collapsed in on itself, and had lost its wintry covering. There was still white surrounding a vast tract of the upturned land, but all the space within had been scored black. Smoke still rumbled from various points on the

massive mound as though numerous fires still fumed below. Silvery, glittering streaks poured out in every direction like tears to newfound voids of dark blue ponds into where the melted snow had poured.

Walsh finally found a decent location to land the chopper in the valley, and the task force along with Discord and Kane undertook an uneasy hike up the mountainside. Fearing that danger still lurked in the vicinity, Walker ordered Yuri and Lugo to guard the helicopter with Walsh. This was still a considerable climb as the earth was not as flattened as it had appeared from up above. The entrance platform was found lying half-buried at a rakish tilt upon the land, its support cables having snapped. There wasn't much left of the entrance itself, and the door at the end of the tunnel was utterly unfindable. Kane's look of furious horror was one of the few clues in sight that hinted anything might have once been here. He let out such a roar that might well have caused another avalanche if there were any snow left on the ground.

Discord understood what this rage telegraphed and warned Walker. "Strap in for some draconic ire. Just be glad it's not you he's about to tear up."

The humans didn't like it, but they watched as Kane's body blew apart like a warped soufflé, stretching and bending at grotesque angles until he had unfolded himself into his true draconic shape. Kane dug through the earth with his enormous front claws, forcing Walker and Adams to draw a wide berth on his activities. Walker alerted the others via radio not to be alarmed, and they watched from near and far as the dirt flew high. Kane dug furiously, and it wasn't long at all before evidence of the dragons' den emerged. When he questioned what it was he was seeing, he once more metamorphosed into his human form, gathering up the tattered but wearable remains of his uniform to put back on.

Discord stepped over the iron door and pointed out some greyish, powdery marbling in the dirt. "Ash," he said. "The dragons have all been killed." The glass column that had once been filled with magma as the glowing centrepiece of the lair was shattered, forming black veins of hard igneous rock.

"Whoever did this will pay!" Kane slobbered.

Discord was quiet for a long time as he padded over what was now little more than a mass gravesite. When he noticed Kane had been calling his name, his voice filled with angry tears, he spoke. "They've all been incinerated," the draconequus said.

"What do we do?" Kane asked, clenching the dirt in his fists. Walker and Adams could only look on, feeling neither concern nor relief. Even though they had been standing within this den, discovering the dragons maybe half a day ago, they felt unable to attach themselves to the situation. They could sense but not quite grasp the deep-seated worries over what could have done this to dragons, and doubted whether their volatile new allies would really be as much help as expected. Walker considered how convenient it was that another potential enemy had been so swiftly eliminated, but he did not know what conclusions to draw yet.

"We avenge our brothers," Discord replied. His mismatched paws clutched Kane's cheeks, forcing that doubtful expression to gaze into his eyes. "Your brother is behind this, along with the ponies. You tried and failed to kill him on my orders. Of course he would join our enemy and seek revenge! You have an ultimatum, my dear Kane. Either join me and the humans in taking down the ponies, as well as your brother, once and for all, or you are against us and against me. Not much of a decision, really, is it?"

Kane felt those doubts rise to the surface, the same doubts Harbinger had instilled within him, but they all filtered back down beneath a blanket of ash. Between the clear, white snow and the smouldering black ashes, his choice was self-evident. "I'm with you, my lord."

Chapter Twenty-Three.

His third goodbye. The welcome wagon.

Awaking to the alarm on his iDroidBerry™ SmartPhone™, Tom had set the insipid little device to vibrate so he didn't wake Bella. Leaving it on the hard, wooden end table beside the downstairs couch produced enough of a rattle to break him out of his drunken slumber. The time was 6:45am in the morning. He let out a tired groan, but had to force himself to his feet because Delta Squad's plane was leaving in one hour. He'd only just gotten his job back a few months ago, and already he longed to quit. Not seriously, but it's human nature to be thinking about something one wants whenever one doesn't have it, like a cat waiting to be let through a door. Tom grabbed his duffel bag and shoved some spare uniforms and boots inside. Unlike Bravo Squad, Delta Squad was wearing their own uniforms.

Tom next moved into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Whilst he waited for the water to warm up in the hopes the government wouldn't shut it off, he grabbed his toothbrush, some toothpaste and his razor. He didn't know if he was coming back, let alone when. He thought hard, trying to remember what else he might need and hesitantly fingered the floss in case other ideas might come to mind. He grabbed some toothpicks, but thought better, because he could just take some matches

instead. He passed off on cotton swabs and opted for a pack of tissues, then grabbed a second. He thought about other things he might need, throwing in a pack of wet wipes just in case.

Tom stripped down out of his hammer-and-sickle print boxers and stepped under the tepid shower water. He allowed himself almost a full-length shower, knowing it was the last time for a while he could hygienically care for himself before full-time military service. He stayed in for fifteen minutes, long enough to soap and lather and wash, and almost long enough to let his mind wander. He was glad for the cold water when that happened, and he stepped out to dry himself off and redress. He wandered into the kitchen for breakfast, slipping two pieces of rye bread into the toaster. Then he had to wait. His mind was cruel; it wandered off without his consent, and reminded him of the same questions he'd been trying to answer for the past three months. Some questions are hard to answer. Some questions, it's hard to find the right answer. Other questions, it's hard to accept the answer. Asking himself if it was right to do this, to go off to war and leave his daughter and girlfriend behind, was the last kind of question.

Tom weighed the pros and cons of war. War had taken many fathers before him, and would continue taking more after him. It took his own, and his father's father, and so on, kind of like that secondary character from that movie where Tom Hanks gets statutory raped and digitally inserted into stock footage. On the plus side, he got paid. That money would help support his family. If he died, would it really be so bad? Really, no, wait, think about this for a second. According to the government propaganda, his family would receive weekly payments for his service. He'd die a hero, along with all the countless other men, women, and admittedly, in some extreme cases, children.

The toast shot out of the toaster and ricocheted against the ceiling by design. Tom managed to catch it before it bounced onto the floor, and he took out a knife and buttered it. He really layered it on, just like moulding cake frosting. Despite being only a butter knife, the object felt "right" in his hand, as though he were meant to wield a weapon. He was meant to fight. Or maybe he just wasn't a morning person. Tom sprinkled cinnamon sugar onto his toast then ate it over the course of the next twenty minutes. This time, he caved in to the navel-gazing and thought of the good times in his life. Aside from Claire's birth, there weren't really too many specifics. His friendship with Daniel had been the longest-lasting high point of his life. It was the people, not the events, which mattered to him the most. Even when the war came, the good times of buying drinks for his friends continued, but with every new battle, every new opponent, he worried he was gambling with their lives.

Losing Daniel was more than hard enough, and he wondered how long the rest of them could go on like this before another one of them died, and they lost all taste for their friendship, like a tainted soup. What would be the point in being hurt thrice? As Tom smeared the breadcrumbs on his fingertips, he thought that he might like to go next, to be the sacrifice for their camaraderie, so the others would never feel hurt again.

Tom had a few minutes to spare, so he wandered upstairs to where his little girl was still sleeping. "Goodbye, Claire Bear," he whispered, giving her a kiss on the forehead. He paused, then decided to get saying goodbye to Bella over with, but she too was asleep. In this position, even with all her makeup on, he could see the sagging lines on her face that forever set themselves into a stony grimace, as if she was dreaming about yelling at him for one thing or another.

The commissary was out of camouflage paint, so Tom stopped by the Forever 21 (he didn't have time to stop by the Commu-Mart) and picked up various green lipsticks. When he arrived on base, CJ and Roebuck greeted him.

"Sup, Tom?" CJ held out his hand and Tom shook it.

"You ready, marine?" asked Roebuck.

"Ready as I'll ever be. Where's everyone else?" asked Tom.

"They will be here soon." Roebuck offered the other two men a cigarette, but they refused.

While he stuck the cancer stick between his lips and lit it, Niko strolled up off the sidewalk and pointed up the street, shouting "Yellow car!" A taxi decorated in flames pulled up at the gates to the base. Logan stepped out with a classically attractive brunette. He gave her a kiss and she smiled. He gave her a pat on the ass and she glared at him. He didn't notice it, because he was already jogging over to Delta Squad.

Roebuck nodded at him. "Marine."

"Sergeant."

"So who was that then?" Tom gazed at the departing vehicle.

Logan shrugged. "Fuck if I know."

"Oh, we got a playa, damn, dawg!" CJ laughed as he touched knuckles with Logan in a sign of respect.

The men gave a good laugh. "Hello, pretty ladies!" Niko joked as he walked over with his hands held out.

CJ kissed his fingers clean as he polished off a peanut butter and jelly bagel sandwich. “Looks like all my little homeys are finally here!”

“Stop being so peppy this early in the morning,” Niko said, deflating his fellowship.

CJ was silent a moment, staring at Niko as though he’d just spoiled a week-long vacation on Monday. “Damn. I used to wonder what straight bustas could be, but now you showed me.”

“Come on, marines. Plane leaves in ten minutes. Let’s get going,” Roebuck said.

"What about weapons? Ammunition?" asked Niko.

"We will be supplied with all that once we land," replied Roebuck.

The men joked as they made their way to the airbase, except for Tom who kept his head down and sulked with his thoughts. "Hey mate, what's up?" asked Logan, slapping him on the back.

Tom mumbled, “Nothing, I’m fine,” without pause, and without sounding convincing.

"C’mon, I know you, you like to share your feelings. What's a matter?"[18]

"Drop it, Logan." Tom’s voice became hoarse as it wheezed around a cold lump in his throat. Logan obeyed his friend’s command and skipped ahead to joke with the rest of Delta Squad. Tom resented their laughing. Apart from Logan, they weren’t *his* Delta Squad. After five minutes of walking and telling jokes to each other, they reached a standard passenger carrier plane that you would go on if you wanted to go abroad. It smelled funny, as if the crap hadn’t been washed off the food carts in a long time. At least they wouldn’t be held on the runway for eleven hours of duress, because as the military, they could be very intimidating. Plus, with flight restricted as it was during wartime and reconstruction, there was only a slim chance that their luggage of sensitive military miscellanea would get lost or stolen by airport staff.

"Sit in pairs, men," Roebuck said to his six soldiers as they climbed some stairs to the plane.

A blond air hostess stood in the main doorway greeting every soldier as they passed. “Hello, gentlemen. I’m Roseby Anyothername, and I’m a ‘flight attendant’, not a ‘stewardess’.” As Tom passed by, she added, “Good luck!”

Though she was not speaking to Tom specifically, he still replied. “Thanks, I have a feeling I’m going to need it.”

The aisle of the plane was so narrow that his hips bounced off of every row of seat like a pinball machine. He had to hover his arms above the backs of the seats like he was treading water. Logan had grabbed a window seat up ahead and was beckoning Tom to sit beside him. Tom placed his bag in the overhead compartment and sat. He wasn’t looking forward to a talkative Logan, who asked, “So, you ready to tell me what’s been bothering ya?”

"I said drop it,” Tom whined.

Now, there were plenty of empty seats on the plane for several good reasons: A, a vast majority of the human race was dead thanks to the ponies, which made it difficult for the airlines to overbook the flight. Two, the survivors preferred to keep in hiding to avoid the gruesome fate that befell their loved ones. Q, the airline industry had raised prices sky-high to make ends meet with very few customers, and so only the fabulously wealthy or those with military clout got to ride leisure. And with all these empty seats on the plane, a mother and her child chose to sit, out of all the available rows, right behind Tom and Logan. The child didn’t even wait for the engines to fire up before jamming the back of Tom’s seat with his cleated shoes. “Jeffrey, stop that,” his mother said once, to no avail.

"Okay, but listen, mate, we been through a lot of fucking shit together. Too much pain-in-the-arse crap if you ask me. You can tell me anything, and I’ll listen.” Logan smiled and reclined his seat back on the mother. He tossed his hat onto his face as if he was going to nap, but instead he grabbed the headphones to listen to the in-flight movie: *SST: Death Flight*.

The seatbelt sign appeared on the display panel. Tom clipped his seat belt and put a piece of chewing gum in his mouth to prevent his ears from popping when the plane took off, which is an old wives’ tale relating to air pressure. The plane rolled along the runway, and there was a moment Tom wasn’t sure the hulking machine really would muster the lift beneath its wings to take off. He batted away the unspoken remembrance of his first flight during the mission to Berlin, when ponies had knocked his plane out of the sky, and Delta Squad, *his* Delta Squad, had stuffed themselves into a Humvee to survive the plummet to Earth. Jeffrey’s kicks wandered higher up along his seat, which was even more of a reminder of being in a horrific plane crash than having experienced one, and he wished he’d been allowed to bring a grenade as carry-on luggage. “Stop kicking my seat, kid, or I’m gonna feed you to the first Langoliers we meet!”

[18] Sic.

Jeffrey managed to shut up once his mom dosed him with Ritalin to keep him from hearing such un-Christian remarks, and not long after they'd been in the air, Tom dozed off. Even later, he was drifting in and out of consciousness. His dreams were disturbed, and yet slumber pulled him back into that realm of happier times, drinking at the Ivory with Daniel and fighting ponies with him. The bell for the intercom dinged. "This is your pilot, Captain Henry Crabbe speaking. This standard message is just to let you all know we've got beautiful skies, a little turbulence, and happy little clouds. Until we land, your priority is to sit back and enjoy some great scenery."

His message continued in this manner, so Logan nudged Tom awake. "Did Johnson chew your ear off about reinstatement? Havin' to be reprimanded is always a bitch, but that's over now. You've got yourself a job again, and it's not like anybody thinks you're a traitor or nothin'."

The intercom dinged again after the pilot reminded everyone not to smoke in the oxygen-rich environment. Tom thought about feigning sleep, but he could feel Jeffrey carving the back of his seat with a ballpoint pen. "I know they don't think that," he said. He was aware Logan knew that much, and was only luring him into speaking by saying something ridiculous. He was worried about being driven to talk by this underhanded tactic, but Logan pulled an about face on him.

"You know what, Tom? Forget about tellin' me anything. Howzabout I pour out what's been on my mind to you, eh? All you gotta do is lend me your ear." Logan held his hands maybe a couple of feet apart. "I got this bowie knife back in luggage. I use it instead of my military-issue machete, 'cause it's sort of a good luck charm. I've had it ever since I was a kid, and I've taken excellent care of it all these years. It's been a lot of years, too.

"Way back in the fifties, the word 'abbos' wasn't offensive. It was just an abbreviation for the aboriginals, like Aussie for Australian, or Brit for British. As a kid, it seemed efficient and practical, so it didn't dawn on me that it took on a derogatory connotation at some point. Funny how that happens, y'know? Must've first picked it up from some swagman or what have you. Can't figure how my parents never caught me.

"My childhood friends were aboriginals of the outback. One of the last few of the era. My parents ran this school for them as part of the Peace Corps or something like that. I had no idea what separated them from me, but I did everything with them. Went everywhere. Learned to play their games. Tried to teach 'em the football, even though I only really knew about it from magazines I got. There was a group of 'em. I remember the leader was tall and skinny and very serious looking.

"And we had this other friend, chubby, always lookin' over his shoulder. He was always takin' things that didn't belong to him, though. Not sure why. Thinkin' back, maybe he had kleptomania or somethin'. He always had to take things, hold 'em. Chickens, baubles, books neither of us could read. Not really stealin', 'cause that makes it sound malicious. We usually helped sneak 'em all back to their rightful owners.

"One day, he stole this machete from a poacher. Mean cuss. Scars all over his face. He was on the warpath, ready to kill whoever found his dagger, even if the bloke had only picked it off the ground where he dropped it and tried to return it to the lost and found. 'Hey, abbo!' I said to my friend. 'You can't be stealin' that! You're gonna get in trouble!' When I saw how scared he was, I wanted to carry his burden, so I hid it for him. Never gave it back, 'cause the poacher came by, cussin' and makin' threats, and that was the first time I heard the word 'abbo' as an obscenity. I realized then what had sprang from my lips, and that was the day I learned what it means to feel sorry for something. Took me 'til I was damn near fourteen. Even though I helped someone, I couldn't feel good about it, but I know I did the right thing, and that's what counts."

Logan spared Tom the obligation of thinking up a response by donning his headphones and dozing off. Tom spent a miserable flight juggling his attention to belay the burdens of his mind. When the magazines ran dry (which was almost an instant, being rife with ads and no valid content), he opted to eavesdrop on what his squad mates were arguing about a few rows ahead. It was a little difficult to hear them over the sound of Jeffrey hawking loogies at the back of his seat. CJ had gotten up out of his seat and was shuffling his way down the aisle before Roebuck stopped him. "Hey, where do you think you're going?"

"I need to pee, man. I been drinkin' slushees the whole ride." CJ grabbed his bulging gut which was poking out under his fatigues. His afro had grown out so much his helmet was sitting on top of his hair, rather than his skull.

"Hold it in. We'll be landing soon," Roebuck said. CJ gave him a disbelieving look. The bathroom was just a few rows away. Out the window, they were still miles above land, soaring amidst the clouds. His doubt showed no signs of diminishing. "Johnson, sit down!"

CJ found it hard to shimmy back to his seat while doing the "full bladder" walk. It is unlikely that the intrinsic properties of the human bladder will change between the time these words are written and the time you read them, but there is an indispensable adage that provides us a moratorium on the topic of biological needs: When you gotta go, you gotta go. A "moratorium" is the final say on something, which is the complete opposite of the closing of an online forum where the topic has not been fully discussed, the issue has not been resolved, and future generations have yet to stumble upon the topic and communicate their empirical experiences in accordance with the indivisible freedom of speech as ratified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Equestrians believe there is a moratorium on human rights in the adage "Humans have no

rights", but in the necessity of emptying one's bladder, that particular moratorium simply means that we are entirely at the mercy of biology, and it is foolish, even egotistical, to demand there to be some pressing matter that will defy the laws of nature.

"Man, that's just bullshit," CJ muttered quietly to himself once he had sat back down. Tom noticed this because he said it in English rather than Russian.

Niko was unfamiliar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. "You are one whiny black man." He also hadn't heard of a man named Martin Luther King Jr., or that puberty comes to an end.

CJ took offense to this, which was the normal response. He graciously offered Niko an opportunity to recant. "What did you say?"

"I said you remind me of Batman." Niko grinned when he lied.

"Oh, well that's okay, then!"

Niko said something infantile and repulsive I don't feel like transcribing, but it was pretty similar to his above vindictive remarks.

"Oh, I heard that one!" CJ snapped. "You think you're a joker, huh? Well then the Batman's gonna whup you on your ass! And this is my mask!" CJ pulled out a pair of Groucho Marx gag glasses he had in his pocket and put them on. They were basically false glasses with a false nose and moustache. Niko look repulsed and confused because his feeble mind had no idea who comedians from the early decades of film were, but it shut him the hell up.

As is typically the case with inadequate authority, Roebuck only heard CJ defending himself. "Cut it out back there!"

"Man, he be calling me all types of shit. All are racist!"

Niko decided to be pedantic. "You say, 'he is calling me all types of shit. All of them racist.' God, I'm Russian and I speak better English than you." Niko was actually wrong on multiple counts. He was wrong to think bigoted remarks are entertaining. His correction of CJ's lazy vernacular was wrong. He was wrong about being Russian. There is so much wrong about Niko Bellic and about Carl Johnson that I have long since given up trying to wrap my head around it and choose instead to ignore them, just as you should, too.

Tom wisely opted to ignore them and their unsolicited existence, instead looking through the window past Logan. Their argument infuriated him. In the old Delta Squad, *his* Delta Squad, they never subjected themselves to such crass arguments, except to rib on Irish. Tom decided as soon as they had a moment, after they landed and had gotten settled in, he'd give them a stern talking to about how a squad was supposed to behave. Right now, he only tossed about a few enraged reactions in his head, but once he came up with the words to say, he'd tell them what brotherhood was about, or something like that.

He could see another plane out the window, full of soldiers and flying at a lower altitude. An object slid up into its right wing and rocked the other vehicle with an explosion. The plane he was on shuddered from the shockwave, worse than any turbulence he'd ever felt. He felt as if the entire plane was rolling around him, yet he was still stuck upright in his seat. There were yells and whoops and a terrible sound as if the whole plane was coming apart at the seams. Tom's first thought was to promise never to fly again in his life. His second thought was aloud—"What in the fuck?"

A red light began to flash inside of the plane, along with a terrible klaxon like querulous horns. The captain's voice could just be heard over it. "This is your captain speaking. We have been hit by debris and our left engine is down. I am going to try and land this thing."

Logan naturally had been awoken by the tremors, and the rest of Delta Squad couldn't keep quiet. "Oh man, we gonna die!" CJ said.

"Good God, I got to die next to you!" Niko said even louder.

"Men keep it together!" Roebuck's orders, for whatever reason, were falling a bit flat at the time.

The plane began to nose dive down towards the ad hoc African air base, not that Tom could see it. What Tom could see was a civilian pinned against the left wall. What he could hear were the screams of grown men and women, and the voice of Jeffrey screaming bloody murder even though he couldn't see the child's screwed-up face. In the air base below were a couple hundred of Kony's men armed with rockets, explosives, heavy MGs and some snipers. The plane drew closer and closer to the ground. The captain managed to pull up just enough to slow it down so it wouldn't explode on impact. Unfortunately, it was going to be a crash landing, just like in airport school. The plane crashed down through one of the hangars and began to Aileron roll. The men jerked backwards and forwards. Some hit their heads hard enough against the wall or the seat in front to knock themselves unconscious or even kill themselves.

In that time when the plane was crashing along the ground, showering sparks and streaming plumes of vile, black smoke, Tom lost all sense of consciousness. The entire machine was rattling something fierce, like nothing he could relate to, and though he was aware of this sensation, his brain could not comprehend the ferocious shaking that rendered the world around him in a deafening blur of confusion. His mind cried out to die and spare him the horrific experience altogether, but the rattling abated over time, leaving him hanging from his seat, the belt digging into his ribs and pelvis. The plane had landed upside down, through means he was as of yet unaware.

The ordeal hadn't quit, however. One of Kony's generals was shouting outside in a deep, booming voice. "Finish them!" Thirty men armed with AK47s and a couple with heavy MGs rushed into the vanquished hangar bay.

"Tatu!"

"Mbili!"

"Moja!"

Tom couldn't understand the cries, but everyone went silent. He was expecting something to happen, but nothing did. He thought he could hear angry muttering outside. He wanted to take the time to fight his splitting aches and escape, but as soon as he had that thought, the shouting resumed.

"Een!"

"Twee!"

"Drie!"

Bullets flew through the plane, striking most of the people inside. The thirty men didn't stop until they had each used up one ammo magazine each. Logan groaned. He, too, was hanging upside down by his seatbelt, like many of the other passengers. Some lay on what used to be the ceiling of the plane, their seatbelts not having survived the trauma for one reason or another. "Ugh. Tom. Tom, are you okay?" Logan had been asking the question all day, and again Tom did not answer. He just hung there with his eyes closed. Logan's arm ached with stabbing pain as he reached over to feel his neck for a pulse. There was one. "Thank God." He grabbed a fist around Tom's shirt and shook him as best he could. He thought his arm might come out of its socket. His head was bleeding and he felt dizzy. "Wake up! Come on, buddy, I need you in this one. Tom, wake up, you bastard!"

Tom winced and slowly opened his eyes. Logan braced himself to slap Tom across the face. It wasn't easy. Tom gasped. "Oh shit, my head hurts! So does my face!"

The noises of explosions and gunfire continued outside as more allied planes were shot down. "Thank fuck you're finally awake. We need to get out of here!" Logan said.

"We need to get down first," said Tom. Logan pulled himself up using his upper body strength and undid his seatbelt. He fell and crashed into the underside of the luggage compartment, which was now the floor. "Oh! Oh, fuck, that hurt." For a second, he made a sound not unlike crying, but he took his time about getting to his feet. "Hold on, I'll help ya down, mate." Logan was still on his knees, but Tom was already undoing his belt. He landed at Logan's feet and immediately regretted his impatience. It took him even longer to suck down the pain and get onto all fours.

"What now?" Tom asked, choking. The cabin was filling with thin smoke. Something was burning, and that was terrible. He was aware of this, but his head was so muddled he just couldn't move quickly.

"Let's see who's alive, and quick." Logan made his way through the plane and found, to his horror, that Raymond and Roebuck were both dead. Their bodies had been riddled with bullets. The horrified expressions on their faces were no different than those of the civilian passengers. "Shit. Roebuck and that asshole, Raymond, are dead." He reached up and took their dog tags.

Tom managed to fumble around the seats, his head throbbing as he tried to remember what he was looking for. He found Niko suspended from his seat with his eyes closed. He looked to be at peace. "That Serbian bigot's dead, too," Tom said.

Niko's eyes flung open like ravelling window shades. He let out a hoarse roar and then a hunk of matted blood expelled from his throat and fell to the surface below with a splat. "Dah! Now I know what it feels like to cross Ukrainian Russian sympathizers! Do not let the looters touch my stuff!" Niko unclipped his seatbelt, but clung to it so tightly that he almost got himself turned right-side up before hitting the floor. Instead, he fell onto his hip with a clatter.

"You alright, man? How many fingers am I holding up?" Tom asked.

Niko flipped him the bird because he was well-hard. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Not cool, man. I just wanna know if you even remember who you are."

“I am a Croatian fuckbot. Now get out of my way, you ape.”

“Guys, we gotta beat cheeks,” Logan said. “The entire front of the plane is a pancake. Nobody’s alive up there. Not long before the whole tin can bursts into flames. Just grab what you can and go.”

The three of them still had shaky legs, but they hustled single-file back down the narrow aisle of the plane. Bodies hung down around them like freakish Christmas lights. They happened upon a survivor, a man with ruffled brown hair and a powder-blue shirt beneath his flak vest and opened army jacket. He was trembling something awful and still hanging in his seat. As the men approached to help him, he was stuttering. “I’m Jason Brody, with the Human Resistance. Tell my cat the lasagne’s in the—“ Before he could finish, he expired with a gurgle. His glassy eyes remained opened. They noticed that he had been shot three times; twice in the neck and once in the head. Tom snagged his tags as if obsessed, and tried to shut Jason’s eyes, but gravity made them swing open again. Niko shoved past him to hurry out the plane, ignoring the pounding coming from the bathroom.

Logan and Tom gave him a glare and then tried to open the bathroom door. Logan whipped out the knife he had told Tom about and had retrieved from the back of the “underhead” luggage compartment. “You smuggled that on board?” Tom asked.

Logan appeared confused by Tom’s surprise. “I’m in the army.” They forced the bathroom open and found CJ crouching on his head, covered in piss and blue water. They laughed at first, reminded of a time their friend Irish had been trapped in an outhouse, but then they saw the blood.

CJ had taken a shot in the belly. “Oh, my stomach! Help me, please! You got to help me." Tears of fear came running down his cheeks.

“Don’t worry, mate. We’ll get you out of there. Tom, help me carry him. CJ, I need you to be quiet as you can. There may be hostiles still out there.”

“They are leaving,” Niko said. “They won’t stick around when this thing explodes.”

“Explodes!” CJ shouted.

“Help me turn him over,” Logan said. “Count to three, we pick him up.”

"Okay, three, two. One!"

“Any of the other squads make it?” CJ asked, gasping for breath as he hung on Logan’s and Tom’s shoulders.

“Doesn’t look like it, but we didn’t know them very well anyway,” Niko said.

"What are we going to do?" asked Tom. “CJ’s bleeding pretty bad here.”

Logan instructed Tom to hold his hand on CJ’s wound and set him down on the floor. He did so, though he was squeamish about his fingers going inside of CJ’s body. Logan whipped out his machete again and cut loose the seatbelt from the seat beside Jason Brody’s corpse. He returned and tied it around CJ’s wound, although CJ’s stomach had grown so large by this point that he almost didn’t have enough length. Logan wrapped the belt over CJ's body, then pulled it as hard as he could. CJ groaned in pain as the belt put heavy pressure on his wound.

"Right, let’s get him back up." Logan and Tom crouched on either side of CJ, throwing his arms over their shoulders. "Okay, we lift him to his feet on the count of three. Three, two, one!”

"Oh fuck, it hurts!"

Logan peered out the windows and saw Kony’s men milling around outside at a great distance. “Can’t go that way,” he told Niko who took a moment to pull himself away from that door. Out the other side, Logan got a more interesting view of the dilapidated structure around them: The plane appeared to have turned sideways, and they were facing a large, metallic wall. If they could get out the emergency door, perhaps they could sneak out that side. Logan signalled to Niko with several nods to open it for them, but either he didn’t understand what he wanted him to do, or he was being belligerent for no good reason. He eventually consented like a child stamping his feet not to do his chores, and he wrenched the emergency door open.

Logan and Tom dragged CJ out of the plane. “What now?” asked Tom.

"I don't know, find a car,” Logan said.

"Yeah, then what? Drive around aimlessly until we run into more trouble. Just ditch CJ. He is wasted already,” Niko said.

"I ain’t wasted, man! You’re wasted!” CJ said.

"Shut up, the both of you. You'll be fine soon as we find a proper medic." Logan ushered Tom to a fire exit at the corner up ahead. It wasn't easy carrying CJ's grotesque weight.

"Where are the Freedom Fighters?" Tom asked. "Why haven't they shown up?"

"Dead," Niko said. "Dead, dead, dead. It is ridiculous to find a medic. Just drop him or kill him."

CJ was thankful the pain made it easy to ignore Niko. "Who're the Freedom Fighters?" he asked.

"The freedom fighters. The guys who are helping us whilst we are here. You know, the guys led by Sam Childers and Dingo Raver," Logan explained. "We were briefed on this. God knows how long it could take them to reach us."

Tom tried to pull the fire escape door with his free hand, but it didn't budge. "This won't open. What the hell?" Logan looked at it incredulously, then the three shuffled over so he could grab the door instead. He, too, tried to get a good grip and pull, but to no avail. "Wait, I got it," Tom said. "It's a push door." The three men nodded, and Tom tried to kick the door's bar handle in to open, but it didn't budge either. He tried a second time with the same results. After a second, he said, "It's locked."

"It's locked?" Logan asked.

"Man, who the hell locks a fire exit?" CJ asked.

"Let me do it. I have to do everything for you alpha males." Niko wedged his way in between them and the door and began to dismantle the devices with practiced hands and convenient tools.

"Yeah, whatever, 'Fuckbot'," Tom said. At any rate, the door clicked open from whatever it was Niko did with the hinges and the handle, and the four men hurried their way outdoors. Just as Niko was whining once more that hope was weak and nobody was coming to their rescue, Logan and Tom caught sight of a hundred or so jeeps driving towards the airbase in a cloud of beige dust. Each was armed with a heavy MG and carried at least three men. The soldiers on the MGs began to open fire on Kony's men, who had been drawn into battle and away from the flaming wreckage. The four survivors of Delta Squad hoped that some of Kony's men hadn't quite cleared the hangar yet, because of what happened next. In the nick of time, the quartet donned their sunshades to protect themselves from the reflected optic blast from the passenger jet's volcanic explosion behind them as they strolled in slow motion away from the scene.

This moment would prove a turning point in the exchange between Kony's men and the Freedom Fighters. A few of Kony's men were indifferent to being incinerated and fought to the bitter end, but Childers' Freedom Fighters exhibited the same instincts. One jeep got blown to smithereens, and the man who was on top lost everything below the waist, but still he struggled to shoot down as many enemies before his demise. Riding ahead into the throng of battle was a tank with Sam Childers himself standing on top, waving a scimitar.

"Come on, let's jam out there," said Logan.

Before the four of them could get very far, a pair of jeeps skidded to a halt before them. A man popped his head through a driver's side window. He had a black, curvy bull-hide hat with metal rings lining the band and a buckle on the front engraved with the words "Prawn Barbie" over a snarling, berserk-looking dingo. He had a handlebar moustache and dangling black sideburns, and his chin had been shaved to the stubble with the edge of a knife he kept inside his fuzzy leather "Otter Country" designer vest. Delta Squad couldn't see it from this angle, but the back of his vest sported the image of a vicious snake gaping his mouth to the side and baring its poisonous fangs. The sweat on his white shirt shaped the outline of his pectoral and abdominal muscles. He could have bought a sleeveless shirt, but he preferred tearing the arms off for appearances and saving them for bandages to use later. Tiny bones and silver chains dangled from his neck with uncomfortable pointy bits, and he had a pink plastic bracelet around his left wrist. Around his right forearm were wound bandages and a scrap of a fishnet sleeve. He had polished snake-patterned boots for fooling poachers and tight, faded denim chaps. This man was Dingo Raver.

Tom instantly showed the palm of his hand. "We're with the Human Resistance!" he said before the man in the jeep could address him.

"I'm Dingo Raver," said Dingo Raver. "Get in the jeep and let's peel hell outta here, lads! Put the wounded man in first. We're heading back to the orphanage."

Delta Squad (minus Niko who was already piling into the jeep) exchanged wary then relieved looks. They thanked Dingo profusely by saying "thank you" as they helped load CJ's wilting form onto the vehicle. It turned out they were all wounded much more severely than they realized, but being rescued in the nick of time would prove fortunate. What was not fortunate, and what dwarfed their rough landing by comparison were the atrocities still lying in store for them.

Chapter Twenty-Four.

Work environments. Tragedy at recess.

Africa was harrowing, from its climate which dramatically contrasted Russia's to the ordeal they had faced upon their arrival. For the time being, Delta Squad 2.0 spent a bumpy, nauseous ride listening to Dingo's exposition on the warfront in Africa. He told them a lot about Sam Childers' crusade against Joseph Kony's wrongdoings, which Tom and Logan knew a little about from their iDroidBerry™ SmartPhones™. He told them how Childers had opposed Kony's barbarism all across the African continent (which wasn't a country), rescuing orphans but having to fight those same children whom had been brainwashed by Kony's ruthless campaigns for wealth and power. He told them about Kony's delusions of godhood, of many grievous attacks, and of many clever ways they had used Africa's natural environment and roused the victimised populace to pull out victories, no matter how small, by the skin of their teeth. Such topics took up the duration of the ride, and Dingo apologized for bumming them out after their miraculous rescue. As soon as they reached the McMartin Orphanage that was Childers' base of operations, Delta Squad was rushed to a medical station which was soon to be crowded with allied soldiers from the Freedom Fighters.

Logan asked, because Dingo's name and accent were overwhelmingly obvious, "You're from Australia, aren't you?"

"How'd you guess?" Dingo laughed at his own rhetorical question. "I was pretty much raised by poachers, always picking fights and risking trouble with the law. I've done some inexcusable things, but all it earned me was a bad reputation and all it cost me were people I thought were my friends. There was always a cost. But when you live a life of cheatin' and stealin', you get cheated and stolen from. Lost many things that way. Homes, cars, friends. Most people they get stern lectures from their parents. I lost my boss's knife once, and he gave me some lacerations. Came the year I had to flee the country, and I ended up spending over half my adult life hiding out in the rainforests of Ferngully in South America. Funny thing happened there between nature and me I can't explain, but I learned the errors of my ways by defending the land. Few years ago, I left South America and joined up with Sam Childers, fighting the good fight."

Logan had an inkling of serendipity about that knife Dingo mentioned, but he thought better of bringing it up. At any rate, Dingo ushered him off to the infirmary. Afterwards, Tom and Logan sat outside an orphanage that Sam Childers had built for the children, whose parents were taken from them. Niko had wandered off somewhere, and CJ was still undergoing medical treatment for his wound, but was reportedly enjoying the anaesthetic. "Still can't believe we survived that crash. Insane. Pity no booze for the ACUs." Logan sipped water from his freshly refilled CamelBak.

"I know, right? We are sodding lucky to have made it out alive," Tom said. "And I kinda know how ufologists feel. No one's gonna believe we're alive 'til they see us."

"I'd drink to that if I had some booze, but the way I see it, best not to question it."

Tom couldn't help questioning it. He couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. He had come so close to dying, and he had only just entered the damn continent. He wondered if this was a sign that he had been foolish to be longing to return to active service. He'd said goodbye too many times to Bella and Claire, and he would never see Daniel again. It was too late now.

"Not sure who's in charge now," Logan said. "I guess I rank highest in Delta Squad now, but I'm worried about Niko. Kind of a negative Nancy. Other than that, I figure we report to Childers. We were sent here as aids for him."

Niko returned and invited himself to sit down with the other two. He was chatting on his smartphone. "No, Roman, I'm busy. I cannot go bowling with you right now. I'm not even in the area, you understand? Sheesh." He hung up the phone and hid it within his pocket. "You two should check this place out. You could do a whole lot of damage with their resources."

"Why? What's it like?" asked Logan.

"Huge, for starters. They got a medical bay, guard outpost, hell, they even have an armoured vehicle garage."

Tom emerged from his train wreck of thought. "Guess they need some serious firepower to fight off Kony's men. This guy is fucking sick. He goes into villages and rapes the women before getting the children to kill their parents and join his army."

"A typical rape ape," said Niko.

"Whoa. Could you watch the ape talk?" Logan said. "It's kinda making us uncomfortable."

"I don't get why the children buy into this," Tom said. "Deep shit, though."

“It is obvious,” Niko said. “Kony exploits weak people’s vulnerabilities with rape and violence. The women see his success and power as signs of being a good provider, and the children become his slaves. Typical western sluts worship rape, so all Kony need do is punch their teeth and shit in their noses.”

Tom scrunched up his face and shook his head. “No, man. That sounds like you’re saying women love rape. That is the single stupidest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“You got treated for concussion, right, mate?” Logan asked Niko.

Sam Childers had exited the infirmary with Dingo and was making his way to what was left of Delta Squad. This was the first time Delta Squad got a good look at him up close. He was a balding man with a sweaty complexion and a wide, droopy moustache that made him look almost indistinguishable from a beaver, which was not to take anything away from the man. His face kind of slouched forward that way so he resembled a woodland mammal of sorts, which if anything, is complimentary to beavers. He kind of looked like a man out of work but enjoying a warm beer in his driveway nonetheless, but at the same time like a man who had no time to enjoy anything. He had a weathered face, hard and soft at the same time, like a jelly baby or a gummy bear that had been left directly under the hole in the ozone layer above a NASCAR race track. It was hard to tell whether he bore good or bad news, but this encounter was the former. CJ was going to live. That cheered Delta Squad up, particularly Tom and Logan who were happy to work with somebody besides Niko, who was bellyaching that one man in the face of dozens of lost lives was moot.

The other readily apparent thing about Childers was he was a man who always found an excuse to be busy, as he did now to depart with Dingo around the side of a building. “What do you think of those guys?” Childers asked Dingo. “We request four platoons, we get back four men. It’s like the time I borrowed my neighbour’s leaf blower and only the lowest ‘blow’ setting worked.”

"They are surely blessed to survive something like that. They must have someone looking out for them," Dingo said.

"Were you able to verify who they were? They have any paperwork on them?" Childers stopped at a water pump to fill his canteen.

“Their dog tags look genuine. Lieutenant Logan Walker and Lance Corporal Thomas Taylor-Randall. I’ll have a further chat with ‘em, but the rumour mill suggests they’ve been through hell together fightin’ the pony menace. And you can tell they ain’t like Kony’s men at all. They’re too smart.”

“They got time to fight ponies? I envy them,” Childers said in a way that didn’t sound envious at all.

“I ran a background check on ‘em anyway, though it was hell getting in touch with Moscow. They seem to be on the level, and damn near indestructible. CJ and Niko appear to be new recruits. Between Tom and Logan, they’ve got fifteen war wounds, five of which were deadly. On top of that, they were in the same squad as the leader of the Human Resistance, Daniel Williams. I think I’m remembering that all right.”

Childers took a gulp of water. “Sounds good. Why isn’t Daniel Williams with them?”

“Killed almost a year ago in the New York Crisis.”

Childers wiped his lips. “Damn. Save the country, can’t save the world. I take it they can’t spare any more men?”

Dingo shook his head. “Not anytime soon. They’re stretched thin between Cuba and protecting their own. They think they’ve got problems defending Moscow.”

Childers scoffed. “They think they’ve got problems?” He looked over at the playground where the orphans were playing at high recess. Some of them were wounded or forever impaired, and still they fought through the pain or helped one another to play. Some played on the jungle gym, others ran up and down the slides, and more still sat on the merry-go-round. A group of screaming, crying children ran up to Childers, and before anyone could ask what was wrong, a convoy full of Kony's men pulled up. There were going to be problems right here in Uganda.

One nearly struck Tom in the face. A gold-tipped bullet flew past him and dug itself into the support pole of an awning bench. He immediately dove to the ground, followed by Logan and Niko. A wave of bullets now washed through the orphanage like a sudden tide coming in, and some of Childers’ guards had already started to return fire.

“Get the guns!” Childers screamed at Dingo. The two of them were already heavily armed, but Delta Squad needed to defend themselves. They crouched and ran around the building back to where Tom, Logan and Niko were, firing their heavy artillery out into the fields.

"We need weapon!" said Logan.

“And bullet!” said Tom.

“Dingo! Take them to the armoury now,” Childers said. He guided the panicking children back inside the orphanage while Dingo took point of the three Delta Squad members. The armoury was located on the west end of the campus and was usually well-guarded. The orphanage grounds had become a full-on war zone, something Childers had always said was going to happen, as far back as when he was still building the joint. Kony's men were arriving by the dozens and Childers only had thirty men covering the orphanage, but he did have certain advantages. He had the home turf, and Kony's men were nothing but young, dumb sociopaths. Childers’ men were all fully-trained soldiers.

The run to the armoury should have taken no more than five minutes, but dodging bullets and incendiaries made for slow going, and each minute loomed like the eternity of the great beyond. The armoury was a metallic shed with a thick, armoured door that had to be opened by entering a five-digit code into the lock. Dingo had the door open in a jiffy and the group rushed inside. "Take your pick, boys, but hurry!" Dingo grabbed an AK47, some ammo clips, and a couple of assorted grenades out of a box before running back outside to join the battle. Delta Squad looked, but there wasn’t much to choose from the rows of AK47s, AK74us, M9 Berettas, and one or two rocket launchers.

Tom’s heart was coursing adrenaline through his veins. The last time he’d seen conflict now felt so far away, and for the first time in a long time he felt fear. As he stood there in a daze, Logan shoved an AK74u against his chest, and he gripped it tightly as if for solace. "Get some ammo and get your ass out there! Let’s get a move on!" Logan shouted over an explosion just outside the doors. Armed with AK47s and grenades, he and Niko exited the armoury. Tom quickly grabbed four extra ammo clips and two grenades he liked before following them out of the shed.

As soon as he left, he met an enemy reloading his weapon. “Hi, I’m the enemy! Just give me a second, I gotta reload. Something something Geneva Convention!”

As soon as he had eye contact with his foe, Tom squeezed the trigger. A burst of five rounds flew out the end of the barrel and struck the young man down. As he took the man’s life, he could feel his memories rushing back into his muscles. He re-grasped his weapon, stroked the trigger, and took a moment to survey his surroundings. Kony's men were pushing closer towards the orphanage. He rushed over to where Logan, Niko and Dingo were taking cover behind a rolling SUV along with three other Freedom Fighters. “Tom, take cover!” Logan shouted.

Munitions kept in armouries typically operate on principals of combustion. Grenades explode. Bullets are propelled from guns by enough combustive force by design to terminate the life of a human being. Combustible items are, by intrinsic property, volatile, no matter how many times you repeat that you’re using them “responsibly”. They can shoot through laminated cards that say “gun license” on them. The idea is to generate more velocity. Think of the big, expensive rocket ships designed to fake the moon landings, which needed to generate enough speed to break the earth’s orbit so that a huge rocket didn’t just come crashing down somewhere (we won’t get into the aerodynamics of why rockets aren’t designed to land gently like a bird on a tree branch). A bullet needs enough velocity to penetrate human flesh and cause extensive internal organ damage. Every grenade, and every bullet of every size, requires combustible fuel to work, and all those little bullets added up to one great, whopping big explosion.

Try and imagine setting off all the fireworks in a single show at once from about a foot away during a thunderstorm. If we called the combined noise, amplified through your subwoofer a “loud bang”, then Tom heard a cacophonous explosion behind him. He was sent riding up into the air on a strong heat pressing itself against his back. An enemy mortar had broken through the roof of the armoury behind him, and he was riding the shockwave like a bodysurfer. If he’d been any closer, the splash damage alone would have torn his body to pieces. It was a thrilling sensation, and his mind focused on that fleeting split second he was tumbling forward like an enormous frog named Ethyl. He could hear Logan shouting amidst the symphony of gunfire and was inclined to agree with what he thought was Logan’s assessment that Tom was screwed. The decelerating sensation abated and Tom came crashing to the hard, dusty ground. The impact was like concrete, and Tom groaned as his face bounced off the dirt. The other soldiers were not so lucky. Dingo led Logan and Niko out of the way at the last moment, and the SUV was tossed right over onto the other three soldiers, crushing them at once.

Tom's head was spinning and all he could hear was an atonal whistle. As he just lay there, he could feel bullets whizzing about above him all over the place. A voice in Tom's head began to shout, *Get up! Get up, dammit, get up!* Then Tom felt a hand on his shoulder, and he was violently pulled to his feet. He turned his head to see Logan.

"Fall back! We’re getting overrun!" Logan’s voice was a roar as he pushed Tom aside. If he survived this, he’d earn a sore throat for it.

Tom readjusted his AK74u before following Logan, with Dingo and Niko close behind them. The four of them continued running until they reached Childers, who was taking cover behind an upside down picnic table. In his hands, he now held two black revolvers which each had a white cross on the handles. He’d been joined by ten soldiers and they were doing pretty alright for themselves in holding off Kony’s soldiers. Childers was yelling at them to protect the children, but things had gotten pretty chaotic.

The worst part of it was that they were firing upon children. Tom stopped shooting. He couldn't do this. He couldn't fight these kids that Kony had indoctrinated like the most ambitious Jehovah's Witness in the world. Even if they were using deadly force, they were still children, and Tom couldn't stop thinking about Claire. He didn't want his daughter to hold a gun, let alone turn one on him. Before he knew it, tears were streaming down his dirtied face, and he looked over at his comrades. If Daniel were here, he'd lick his finger and wipe the dirt off his face, but Daniel was gone, and Tom's face was forever dirty. Dingo's face was set in a taut grimace behind his shades, just like Logan, but they were doing what they had to do to survive and protect the orphans. Only Niko seemed to be enjoying himself, smiling like a man reclining on a lounge chair on a breezy summer day. "This is what I wanted to do today!" Niko said.

"Sam, what's our status?" Dingo asked, joining Childers behind cover. The picnic table was taking quite the beating, and its parasol was already chewed to smithereens.

"We got one hundred soldiers converging two miles out. I got these ten guys along with five inside looking after the children. How's our west flank holding up?" asked Childers.

Dingo shook his head. "We lost the armoury! Took out everything around it, too!" Scrap was still raining down. The outdoor patio was engulfed in flames, and the grill had caught fire. Its propane tank was whizzing around through the air, but thankfully exploded in a group of Kony's boys.

"I saw that! We gotta get the kids to the garage!"

Logan, Tom and Niko opened fire at Kony's men who were all too eager to give their lives for whatever their cause was. Logan had leapt right back into his role as always, while Tom was sluggish and cautious. Niko's trigger finger was itchy, like he was having more fun just shooting than actually hitting anybody. Whenever some man was seen to fall down, mortally wounded, he gleefully claimed responsibility, and he slapped Tom's arm, demanding more ammunition.

"Goddammit, haul ass to the playground! There are still kids there for recess!" Childers popped out of cover, emptying both his revolvers. He didn't bother telling Delta Squad to cover him; they weren't stupid. Logan led Tom and Niko after Dingo and Childers to the playground where many children were running or standing around, screaming and gawking at the grisly scenes of traumatic, life-ruining violence.

As Logan drew closer to Kony's men, it became more apparent to him that there were no cover spots. "Prone!" ordered Logan as he dove to the dusty ground, and started to fire his weapon once more. Tom and Niko followed his orders and took to the floor. The three of them being in prone position gave them more accuracy when shooting as well as it made it harder for the untrained men that made up Kony's army to shoot them back.

Logan noticed Niko had pulled out a grenade and reprimanded him for not warning the others. Niko rolled his eyes, called, "Grenade out!" and hurled the grenade towards the densest cluster of Kony's men. It was easy to tell them apart in their sweaty, discordant clothes, versus the uniforms that Childers' men wore. The grenade killed three men and gravely injured two others. Between the three Delta Squad soldiers, they had now taken down twenty-nine of Kony's men. Even so, Kony's forces put up a seemingly endless onslaught, leaping over their fallen comrades like stampeding gazelle, if gazelle were actually terrible, bloodthirsty people instead of simple animals prone to panicking.

There was still very little cover by the time the five men reached the playground. The first thing Childers did was to pluck a child running around on the merry-go-ground. It was one of those merry-go-rounds where you hold onto the handlebars and kick your feet against the ground, then sit on as it spins around and around until the momentum runs out. It was decorated with small animals near the centre, with a giant toad, a miniature elephant and so forth. The majority of the playing children had gathered under a metallic geodesic dome that functioned as a jungle gym, thinking they would be safe there, but really just caging themselves in. The bars of the dome were styled like leafy vines, and on the top were models of creatures that could be sat upon, like a panther and a giant arachnid. There was an enclosed spiral slide resembling a boa constrictor, and one kid was still on the swing set. Dingo could almost fit up the slide, and he shooed two kids up from inside because it wasn't bullet proof like playground equipment made for urban cities in the United States. There were many spring rides that bobbled back and forth, each resembling a different ungulate, but these had been abandoned. Tom and Logan were inclined to use these for cover. Childers was busy trying to coax the children out through the gaps in the dome while firing off at the encroaching opposition.

"Shit, I'm running low on ammo!" Tom said.

"Shit, same here!" said Logan.

"Could you please not swear in front of the kids?" Childers said.

Kony's men had reached the playground and leapt aboard it, snarling and frothing at the mouth. They could have engaged Childers' forces from afar, but these were sick, bloodthirsty predators who wanted nothing more than to feel the violence they inflicted, the violence that Kony had raised them on. It was how their frayed sense of justice worked—they deserved what they got, and when their master beat them, it was only fair to beat the world right back. One of Kony's soldiers

leapt atop the slide. Dingo Raver smashed his palm into his forehead and the man slid down into the slide, burning himself on the scalding plastic. Logan suspended himself beneath the monkey bars which had flat, wooden monkeys decorating the underside and a flat, wooden cheetah napping on top, and he yelled as loud as he could as he swept his gun across a line of invaders. Children were now wandering around crying, soiling themselves and losing precious stuffed animals which Childers had to pry them away from in the nick of time. One of Childers' men was hopping around the battlefield, covered in blood and carrying his own severed leg in his arm. Tom had boarded one of the spring animals and was wobbling it back and forth, so that Kony's men just couldn't figure out when to shoot to hit him.

Some children were crying around a large, hairy lump that once resembled an enormous shaggy dog. "They killed Froofie the Dog," cried one of the children, and all the other children started crying in tandem.

Dingo Raver narrowed his eyes as a breeze ruffled the hairs of his mighty handlebar moustache. "Froofie's dug his last hole in the backyard: Your grave!" Dingo strapped on a rocket launcher and leapt on top of the crocodile-shaped roof of the clubhouse. He fired the rocket at the merry-go-round which caught on the handlebars and sent the toy spinning faster and faster. It unscrewed itself from the ground and achieved lift-off, hovering a few feet above and twirling through the air above the compound. It sank once more, landing on its side, and whirled across the ground like a lost wheel, chasing down a line of Kony's cronies. The handlebars whirred like a blender, crunching and tearing at the villains in a mass of bloody ordure until the rocket finally exploded, splitting the merry-go-round into fragments. One of Kony's men thought he got away, but the explosion threw him onto the monkey bars, shattering his spinal column.

"Wait, Froofie the Dog's okay!" one of the children cried, and there was much rejoicing as the mass of hair and a tongue went bounding over to the orphanage, guiding the orphans behind it. The whole situation was a catastrophe, a massive orgy of carnage, and yet as though by divine intervention, the men managed to herd the younglings in the direction of the orphanage.

"Go around inside to the back!" Childers ordered the small, frightened children. "We'll meet you at the garage!"

That is when it happened; the moment that would haunt the men for the rest of their lives (among other moments). Just as Froofie and the sick, wounded little orphans reached the building, the dog trod on a mine and a wall of the orphanage blew up. The explosion was echoed by the haunting cries of the children. The five of them watched in horror as five others of Childers' men and twelve children, their ages ranging from seven to thirteen (the soldiers were older), all came running out of the destroyed wall, engulfed by flames. "Froofie the Dog's on fire!" a child screamed. McMartin Orphanage, built by Childers' own manly hands, had been destroyed.

Before long, Childers' backup arrived, and within five minutes, Kony's men were all dead or forced to retreat. Unfortunately, the twelve children and their five guards were also dead. Tom and Logan just sat there in shock after the fires had been fought as much as they could be, and ruminated over the dreadful fact that the horrors of war had caught up with them once again.

Chapter Twenty-Five.

Interim. Party boat.

Countless miles away, Bravo Squad was still floating at sea. Days had passed since the commencement of their celebratory intoxication, and they were only now beginning to sober up. Nick's head ached something fierce, and the world was as murky and wavering as the ocean below their ship. The noise of hooting and hollering drummed a hypnotic rhythm in his ears, and he was having a hard enough time trying to find himself, let alone where the hell he was. There were lights overhead sizzling away at him, and he felt like a slab of Canadian bacon being overcooked. His eyes stung from their luminosity, and he slumped against the wall. The wall yelped at him, and he apologized to it before it pushed him away. His body careened into a pillar or something, but his stomach lurched the other way, and he puked all over his shoes. Getting drunk sure was fun.

His eyes managed to focus enough to see Philip Jack Brooks lifting weights around a crowd of men. He wasn't sure of Philip's name at the moment, but he thought he recognized him, and he wanted to get away from their noisemaking and the bright lights. He found the wall again and slid along its uncomfortable metallic surface until he fell through a doorway and landed on some stairs. Because he was feeling as though he was melting through the floor, he was already dropping to his knees and thus didn't have far to fall. He wisely crawled up the steps before him and was met with a dirty stench of salt. He must've been outside. It was cold and wet, but he was fairly sure the weather was fair, because there was that damned light again. Or maybe it was a search light. If he could guess that much, maybe his head was clearing up.

Usually he was the one to help his friends home from extra festive nights at the Ivory, but at this point, he sure wished one of them was here to help him. He smiled to himself as he remembered those times, and imagined what they'd think of him now, being hungover so badly he still felt drunk. "Daniel, sir, how many times have I helped you guys home when you were too drunk to walk?" Nick laughed as though Daniel had responded to him. "Yeah, well, I think it's only fair to return the favour,

eh?" He stumbled forward until he felt something cling to his shoulder. He tried to pull away, but it snagged onto him and whirled him around. He went teetering backwards, but somebody had a hold of him from the front and was pulling him forwards again. "Daniel?"

"Nick, snap out of it!" Becky was clutching Nick by his jacket and walking him over towards the nearest wall. A cold wind washed over him, and he became aware that he'd very nearly tried to climb overboard in his hazy stupor.

"Thank you kindly, Ms. Williams," Nick said. He went to tip his hat, then realized he wasn't wearing one. "I think we all partied a little too hard."

"I'll say," Becky said. She sounded a little slurred herself still. "You can't go swimming off to Cuba now. Crawlwaft wants to speak to us. I mean, Wallcroft."

They helped each other meander the boat, challenged by their own drunken ineptitude to find where Wallcroft had hoped to gather the members of Bravo Squad. He only managed to gather Nick, Becky and Eddie together. Eddie was poking at a fish tank filled to the brim with liquor and a rather dead-looking fish that he announced had been caught in the ocean. "I'm not sure who did that," he said, pointing at what he called the "beer-quarium", "but I think I was one of the people involved. Pretty sure it was a group of us."

"Enough about that before we forget what the hell I was going to say," Wallcroft said, pressing his thumb to his forehead. "We all got a bit tipsy and a little bit carried away. We accidentally drifted off-course, and the captain's replotting our new course to Cuba. We're gonna be a little bit late."

"Whoopsie," said Becky. "Did we take any damage to our ship? Lose any supplies by doing anything stupid?"

"No, no," said Wallcroft. "Goddamn. Ugh." He gave his head a shake, and that seemed to throw off his own headache. "It turns out we've still got plenty of food, water and booze. We're just going to be late."

"Sucks. But hey, at least we're alive, right?" Nick said, looking on the bright side. "Let's crack open the rest of the beer and celebrate not having screwed up worse than we did!"

"There's a thought," said Eddie. A few moments later, cheers renewed up and down the ship as the crew found the rest of the alcohol, and their party began all over again.

Chapter Twenty-Six.

A moustache is an upside-down smile. What friends are there for.

An hour after the attack on the McMartin Orphanage, Logan, Tom and Niko sat in silence on the front stoop of the orphanage. More or less in silence. Niko was counting off all the things that weren't on fire. The rest of the orphanage had collapsed, but the front stoop was okay. Childers and Dingo, along with some other soldiers, were piling up corpses like autumn leaves kids like to jump in. The first pile was for the children and fellow soldiers. They were going to be buried around the back of the orphanage. The second pile was for the enemy. Their bodies were going to have their heads removed and placed in Kony's territory, whilst the rest of the bodies were going to be food for whatever starving animals that should come across them: Cheetah, antelope, croco-gator, pelican, capybara, hyena, goblins, and gay lions and the like.

"They could chip in," grunted Dingo as he looked towards Logan, Tom and Niko.

"They deserve a break; they witnessed some traumatizing shit today." Childers place the corpse of a young girl gently on the pile. She was still warm because of all the fire.

"Wait, I thought we weren't supposed to swear."

"They're *dead."*

"Oh. We have seen some bad shit. Shit that's bad. They'll just have to get used to it."

Childers scoffed. "Used to it? There is no getting used to this." Childers pulled out a small hatchet from his belt and began to hack away at the neck of one of Kony's men like carving a Hanukkah tofu ham.

Niko finally broke the silence between the three men with a simple "Shit."

"Shit? Shit is an understatement," said Logan.

"And a pretty shitty one, too. I can't believe they..." The words caught in Tom's throat, as if they were too evil to be spoken.

"This has to be stopped," demanded Logan, beating his palm with his fist.

"You saw how many men he sent at us, and this is just to attack one. One orphanage! Only god knows how many men serve under him," replied Niko, pointing out the mass of dead men in the second pile.

“Or how many children,” Tom said sulkily.

"Yeah, but with the reinforcements, we got them all. Who’s to say that with a full on assault on Kony's hideout we won’t be able to take him?" asked Logan.

"Yeah, but we don't control this army. Childers does. And what he says goes" pointed out Tom.

"Well, all we have to do is convince him!” Logan said.

Niko let out a pronounced sigh and rolled his eyes. "Don't you think if he had any intention to launch an attack, that he would have done it already?"

"Well I'm going to convince him. I can't sit idly by and let something like this happen again!" And with that, Logan went charging towards Childers.

Childers deflected him with his arms. “What the hell are you tryin’ to tackle me like that for?”

“Oh, sorry. Mr. Childers, we need to talk.”

“Uh oh. Am I in trouble?” Childers chuckled as he readjusted the dress of a dead girl. Or it might’ve been a boy. It was hard to tell anymore.

"We need to launch an attack on Kony now! Gather all your men!"

Dingo interposed himself between Logan and Childers. "Know your place!"

"Hold on, Dingo, let the man speak," Childers said.

"Mr. Childers, you know where Kony hides, right?"

Childers crossed his arms. "I do, as a matter of fact. He’s not really hiding, he’s got this hospital dressed up as his ‘Kony Island Dubstep Palace’.”

"Then why are we sat on our asses? Let's take this prick out! Take him fast, he won't know what hit him! When Osama bin Laden’s Taliban of Islamic extremists attacked the United States, they put that bastard down...an administration later. And when the war between Russia and the Ukraine got a plane full of innocent people killed, the persons responsible were swiftly punished, too!”

Sam threw his hatchet into the ground. "Look, Logan, I understand where you’re coming from. I really do. But we tried once. We lost a lot of good men, friends, soldiers, fathers to children, husbands to now widows, owners to pets, tailors, and hairdressers. I will not risk another unprepared attack.”

Logan became angrier. He was mad and angry, not at Childers, but at his inability to do anything about Kony. He had to vent his frustrations. "Listen, us 'soldiers', we sign up to fight and die for our countries. It's just part of the job. But these children, these civilians, they don't sign up for this. They want to live and grow old with the ones they love. And each day you delay this attack, the more men, women and children are robbed of that privilege. So I do not ask, but I order you! Gather all the men! Kony will die today!"

Childers took a moment to think over Logan’s impassioned speech. He had a good point. This could not go on much longer. He gave a nod and checked his watch. "Okay. Kony will die today."

Later that day, they drove off to Kony’s palace. They hid off in the distant hills around the converted St. Germaine’s hospital, peering in on the hospital grounds, and behind them, meerkats popped out of their holes to watch them. "What do you see?" Tom asked Logan, who was observing the mansion through a pair of black binoculars.

"They seem to be arguing amongst themselves,” Logan said. “Trouble in paradise, eh?”

"How many men?" asked Niko as he leant against the Humvee. The three surviving members of Delta Squad 2.0 were positioned east of Kony's mansion. With them, they had forty armed men and three Humvees, all waiting for Childers’ signal (well, not the Humvees). Childers was going to approach Kony's mansion from the south along with Dingo and twenty more armed soldiers.

"What is going on now?" Tom inched forward on his belly.

"It seems like Makarov and Kony are arguing,” Logan said. “Haven’t a clue over what. Makarov’s holding up some ugly-looking drapes.” Logan let out a gasp, and a split second later, a shot echoed from out of the mansion grounds.

"What the fuck was that? Are they firing at us?" asked Niko.

"No, no stay calm. Kony just…he just killed Makarov." Logan couldn't believe his eyes, and he checked the binoculars to see if they were clean.

"What? Why would he do that?" Tom asked.

"How the fuck should I know?" Logan looked over his shoulder, then back out over the mansion using his binoculars, but they could all see the signal: Deep, grey smoke was rising up from behind the building. "Men, lock and load! We move out now!" Logan kicked off the ground to his feet and raced into a Humvee. Tom and Niko joined him alongside two other soldiers. Logan took the wheel, Tom the passenger seat and Niko and one of the soldiers took the back seat. The final guard mounted himself onto the heavy MG. Logan pulled up the hand brake, slammed his foot down onto the accelerator, and led the charge from the east.

He immediately kicked down on the brake. Everyone in the vehicle jerked back and forth. Everyone had seen a strange but familiar figure dart out in front of the car. CJ had shown up, panting and out of breath, dressed in a hospital gown and heart-print briefs. He'd thrown on a pair of socks and flip-flops. He was hunched over the hood, gasping for breath. "Why did you stop?" Niko asked. "We are not there yet."

"You left me behind!" CJ panted and helped himself into the vehicle.

"Where're your ACUs?" Logan asked.

"I couldn't find 'em in all the rubble! They probably burned up!"

Logan gave a helpless shrug, ignored CJ's awkward state of dress, and gunned it. The other two Humvees spread wide apart from each other. Soldiers filled the gaps in between, sprinting and opening fire. As they drew closer, fire was returned upon them by Kony's men. A few soldiers were hit by the return fire, but most shots had missed. "Are you sure this is the best plan?" Niko asked over the sound of the Humvee's heavy MG opening fire.

"The very best," replied Logan cockily. "Like no one ever was!" Within a short couple of minutes, Logan had the Humvee bursting through the extremely weak walls that surrounded the mansion's courtyard. Bullets whistled past and some bounced off the somewhat bulletproof bonnet of the Humvee as Logan slammed on the brakes and viciously turned the wheel. The back tires of the Humvee swung around, positioning the vehicle parallel to the front doors of the hospital.

"Out, out, out!" On Logan's command, everyone piled out of the Humvee, using the doors for cover and opening fire at any nearby soldiers of Kony's. Logan, Tom and Niko managed to take down twelve men between them before their allies broke through the barriers in the back of the hospital. "Do not infiltrate yet," Logan ordered. "Reduce their numbers to avoid pincer." An opening presented itself where Logan met up with Childers and Dingo. "Glad you finally made it, I was afraid you were gonna miss all the fun." Logan shot another young man in the face.

"Shut it, you cocky shit." Childers chuckled. Childers shot two more guerrillas at once.

The front doors, however, were far better guarded. Onyx stood on the front steps, gazing through his burlap hood at Kony's cronies being shot down like women in a gay bar. He decided that his optimal course of action would be to narrow his combat line, so he turned about and walked back into the hospital while bullets continued to whiz around him like bees. Five of Childers' soldiers had seen Onyx enter into the mansion, and they took it upon themselves to take him out. They all carelessly charged in and were almost immediately met by their doom. Onyx quickly claimed the head of the first to enter with one quick swing of his humungous sword. He twirled it with unrealistic ease and plunged the blade deep into the gut of the second man. There was scarcely enough gut to fit around the enormous weapon. The third soldier opened fire, and Onyx repeated the trick he'd used back when rescuing Makarov. He still had the dying man at the end of his sword and used him as a human shield before tearing the sword from his abdomen and spinning around in one swift movement with the blade pointing out. This proved deadly for the third and fourth soldiers whose throats were slit wide open. The fifth and final soldier was easy. Onyx held his blade up over his head before swinging it down in a diagonal slash, claiming the head of the final soldier.

"Claiming". It was like some kind of insane fetish for him, to think and act like it was a matter of honour to take ownership of somebody's skull, brain, hair and face. It was an act of selfish entitlement to some bullshit code only the likes of Kony would find anything but repulsive. It was like rape in the sense of committing a violent, ruining act of destruction at the behest of some valueless, personal gain. To exert thoughtless power. These men fought for survival. For justice. Even Kony's men were driven to murder for a deranged cause, but to Onyx, the act of taking people's heads was a trophy to him. There was no skewed justification, nor pity. He was a disgusting, loathsome villain, and there was no excuse, no redemption for his character. He was nothing more than a serial killer without tact who acted as though he never heard the word "no" in his life.

The battle raged on in the courtyard, destroying the uncared-for garden and making rather a mess. Jumba sat in a high window and picked off people with a sniper riffle, counting up his score. Down below, the third of Kony's cronies, the skinny

man with the fat arms and legs, was bludgeoning Freedom Fighters with his fleshy protrusions, but one of his own allies fumbled with a grenade and blew him up by accident.

Logan chunked a fresh ammo clip into his AK47. "Tom, Niko, CJ and I will get in there before Kony can make for an escape. Speaking of which, where'd that fuckbot wanker go?"

"Good luck. We'll clear these bastards out here so they don't get up your backside," Childers said.

"Let's move!" Logan shouted. The four Delta Squad members dashed up the steps of the repurposed hospital. They tugged hard on the door handles, but they didn't budge. "Bloody hell, not more push doors, lads." He tried pushing and they gave a little, but were jammed shut. Onyx had locked the doors behind himself to stall them.

A few yards away, Niko was cracking open a jeep and hoisting one of Kony's drivers out from it. "Jacking in real life! The ultimate high!" Niko threw the driver to the ground, kicked him in the face, and then commandeered the vehicle. Logan, Tom and CJ dove out of the way just as the jeep roared up the steps and smashed through the front doors, crashing the vehicle into the front desk. The rest of Delta Squad hurried in after him. Despite the stolen artwork, precious jewels, graffiti on the wallpaper and obnoxious dubstep sound playing on the intercom, CJ's hospital gown didn't look entirely out of place. Thankfully he wore those heart-print briefs. The men behind him could see an exorbitant amount of Africa-themed bling-bling and tattoos covering his mostly naked body.

Delta Squad met Onyx on his heels, stepping around the five dead soldiers. Niko stepped in a pool of blood and let out a curse. Before Onyx was allowed to react, Tom and Logan each pumped five rounds into his torso and chest. He crashed to the floor, gasping for air and choking on his own blood which stained through the sack on his head.

Directly in front of Delta squad was a stairwell leading to the upper floors. Kony appeared at the top of the stairs, his Desert Eagle in his hand. He blind-fired a full ammo clip before disappearing out of sight. Eight powerful shots rained down onto the four men. Logan dived to the right, Tom to the left, two bullets barely missing them both. The remaining bullets dug themselves into walls, doors and one unlucky bullet found its way through Niko's shin. Another caught him right in the dick. Niko let out a cry of pain and fired a full magazine from his AK, hitting nothing but the walls and stairs.

"Niko, you okay?" asked Tom as he slid a fresh ammo clip into his AK74u.

"Never fucking better!" roared Niko sarcastically as he rolled towards Logan and out of harm's way.

"Don't worry bud we got this," reassured Logan as he patted Niko on the shoulder. Niko swatted his hand away. "Split up. Look for another stairwell so we can pincer him," Logan said.

"I do what I want, when I want!" Even though Niko was severely wounded, he hobbled off down a separate hallway, which was what Logan had asked him to do anyway. Logan gave Tom a hand gesture which told him to advance up the stairs. Tom quickly made his way up the stairs, his weapon raised and his guard on high alert. Logan followed close behind him.

CJ stayed behind, making sure no enemies were coming in the door after them. Childers had the outside well occupied. "Damn, just like growing up in the suburbs," said CJ. He turned around to join his squad's heels and noticed that Onyx wasn't quite dead. The masked man struggled to pull one of his injections out of his pocket. After a few moments, he managed to get hold of an injection before plunging it into his chest. CJ watched this, confused but slightly intrigued. "Fucking junkies! Need one last fix before you die." CJ tutted, assuming that what was in the syringe was heroin. He got quite a surprised when he watched bullet shells pop out of Onyx's chest, through his jacket, and onto the floor amid strings of sticky, dark blood.

"What the hell?" CJ's final sentence was cut short. Almost before he even got himself up, Onyx stuck his sword deep into CJ's throat, severing his vocal cords as well as a major artery. CJ could not even make a gagging noise. Onyx pulled his sword out of his neck. He fell back, wide-eyed and in shock. The light was growing dim as all colour faded from his vision. He was cold and drifting, and a last word whispered through his mind: "Wasted." His last conscious thought was that all he had to do was follow the squad upstairs. Onyx took a moment before sneaking upstairs after Tom and Logan.

Niko, on the other hand, had discovered where many of Kony's barbarians were arming themselves, ready to go outside and join the fight against Childers. He reached for a grenade, but his phone went off instead. He answered it. "Dammit, Roman, no, I can't go smuggle drugs for you. I'm right in the middle of…oopsie." The men had spotted Niko when his phone went off, and he was obliterated in a hail of bullets that sent him sliding down the far wall.

Upstairs, Kony had retreated back to his office. That is where he found Jumba. "Kony, thank God I have—" Jumba started to say before Kony interrupted him.

"Yeah, yeah, go get them you dick-less prick!" Kony pushed Jumba out into the hallway where he was unceremoniously shot down by Tom and Logan, taking four bullets from each of them, eight bullets in total.

"We got you now, you sick fuck!" Logan and Tom intruded upon Kony's office, their weapons drawn. They were shocked to see Kony had been in the midst of an argument with something they had never expected to see again. Rumours had been passed by, but like the clouds drifting lazily overhead even in the thick of violent battle, rumours always passed by.

Sitting in the room, on Kony's bed, was Scootaloo, the orange Pegasus pony dispatched to Earth by Princess Celestia. "Stupid Kony. You're not handling this very well at all, are you?"

Kony had not yet reloaded his weapon. He was up a certain body of water without a certain navigational implement and he knew it. "Please, I beg you, let me live!" Kony dropped his weapon and fell to his knees. Delta Squad was left with a decision to make. On one hand, Kony was a murdering, rapist psychopath who had killed hundreds of people and indoctrinated countless orphans after ruining their lives. On the other hand was more of the same, because all of his crimes couldn't fit in one hand.

This wasn't one of the more complex ethical dilemmas that Delta Squad had to face. "Shut the fuck up!" said Logan. Then he and Tom simultaneously lifted their weapons and emptied the rest of their ammo clips into Kony. Kony let out a cry as his body was riddled with bullets. As soon as he dropped, they turned their weapons on Scootaloo. "Any last words, ya bloody cartoon?" Logan asked.

"No. Bye!" Scootaloo turned and ran, with Logan and Tom firing upon her. Their bullets flashed and ricocheted against the wall, but the sprightly pegasus proved too evasive for them both. She leapt and crashed through the window, her wings carrying her to safety and out of sight.

Tom and Logan dropped their empty and useless weapons and with a nod of approval to one another they turned around. The two of them gasped as their gaze found Onyx in the doorway, his blade dripping with CJ's blood. "It appears you have killed the man I was supposed to protect. That is not acceptable."

"That's impossible; we blew you away," Tom said.

"Apparently not. Enough talk! Have at you! You die by my blade now!" Onyx said.

Logan quickly pulled out his M9 Beretta which was tucked into his belt and emptied all fifteen rounds into Onyx. Onyx jolted back with each shot. Once the volley had ended, Onyx reached for another injection. He now had three left (write that down in your copybook now). He felt weak but endured the pain. Then he injected himself. Tom and Logan watched in horror as all fifteen rounds popped out of Onyx's chest and hit the hard wooden floor.

"My turn," chuckled Onyx as he lifted his sword. It was his turn. Then he lunged forward and made his first attack. The fight was on. They had only been exchanging pleasantries before now. Onyx swung his sword across in an attempt to hit Logan and Tom. The blade looked like it might sweep across the whole room, and it sliced open Tom's right cheek whilst Logan managed to dodge the blade completely. Next Onyx ducked low, spinning on his heel as he stuck one leg out. His kick managed to trip up Logan whereas Tom jumped over it. Logan slammed to the ground and gave a slight murmur of pain. Onyx then lunged forward towards Tom with his blade held out in front of him. Tom quickly turned to the side. Onyx's blade narrowly missed his stomach and dug deep into a wall.

As Onyx tried to pull his sword from the wall without turning his back on his enemy, Tom slammed his right elbow into Onyx's throat then dug his left fist into his gut. Onyx jerked backwards, releasing the handle of his sword. Tom waved a kick to Onyx's lower torso, but Onyx managed to grab his leg, stealing his balance. Onyx threw Tom sideways, spinning him to the floor, then returned to his zanbato. His hands were about to grasp its handle when Logan tackled into him and the two of them fell to the stained linoleum floor. Onyx now lay on his back with Logan crouched over him. Logan ripped off Onyx's burlap mask so he could land a few punches to his face, ignoring that it would probably be more painful with the mask on.

Logan shivered at what he found under Onyx's mask. His face looked like a crude drawing of a jigsaw puzzle. He had deep and brutal scars running across his entire face, so much so that it was difficult to say he looked human. These deep scars divided his face into modular plots of skin, separating his organs. His triangular eyes were crooked. The tip of his nose had been worn away as if someone had pressed it against a sanding machine. "You are one ugly mother!" Logan slammed both of his fists into Onyx's deeply scarred face. Logan had made four successful hits, each knocking the back of Onyx's skull into the floor, and was going for a fifth when he was stopped. Onyx blocked Logan's attack with his right forearm, whilst he placed his left hand firmly on the back of Logan's head. He pulled Logan's head towards his own and slammed them both together. The power of their heads colliding was enough to send Logan tumbling backwards and off of Onyx.

Whilst Logan had been wailing on Onyx, Tom had climbed to his feet and pulled the enormous out of the wall. It weighed more than all of his own gear combined, but he managed to raise it fairly steadily in front of himself long enough to charge Onyx. Onyx rolled out of the way of his own weapon before Tom could scrape it into him, then quickly rose to his feet and positioned himself in a defensive stance.

Logan climbed to his feet, un-holstered his knife, and stood at Tom's side. "Let's take his head! I doubt those injections will help him grow a new one!" growled Logan. The room fell into an awkward silence for a moment at what Logan had said. Each man was waiting for the other to attack first.

Tom let out a roar, half attempting to intimidate his opponent, half mustering the strength to raise the mighty blade and stab forward. Onyx turned on his heel and the blade just missed him by an inch. He then leapt in the air and performed a jump kick to Tom's head. Onyx's blade fell from Tom's hand as he flew back. Onyx landed on his feet, caught his blade in mid-air then swerved around and deflected an incoming attack from Logan. Logan and Onyx's blades made an ear piercing noise as they clanged together. Onyx quickly made another attack with his weighty weapon before Logan could assess the situation. He spun towards Logan's body so that his back was now firmly pressed against Logan's chest. Onyx then stamped on Logan's foot and pushed his chin up. He next ducked down low, wobbled to and fro, spun again, and swung his sword. The fine edge of his gargantuan blade sliced open Logan's left thigh.

Logan wailed in pain and fell to his knees. Onyx stood up, towering over Logan. "I shall now take your head!" said Onyx. He lifted his sword as high as it could go under the low ceiling and swung it down.

Onyx's blade was intercepted by an AK47. He glanced to see Tom using an assault riffle as a melee weapon. Onyx growled and slammed his elbow into Tom's face. As Tom recoiled back, Onyx made another attack, this time swinging his unwieldy blade around and slicing open part of Tom's chin and his left cheek. “Dammit, Tom, get your shit together!” Tom said to himself. Onyx then pulled his sword diagonally down, cutting open his left shoulder, down across his chest and across the right side of his stomach. The blade did not go in deep enough to kill Tom, but it hurt like hell and sent him crashing to the floor, writhing in pain.

Onyx stood over Tom and shook his head. "You’re all the same; fucking sissies at hand to hand combat. I expected more from the 'magnificent' Delta Squad. I guess I was wrong.” Without any further words, Onyx plunged his blade deep into Tom's torso. Tom moaned as the blade slipped in between his lower ribs.

That is when Onyx gave a gasp of his own. Blood began to pour out from his abdomen. Tom could now clearly see the tip of Logan's knife sticking out of Onyx's stomach. Onyx turned his head to growl at Logan, and then lifted his sword out of Tom and held it above his head. Tom took this opportunity to draw his knife which he had tucked away in his boot.

"You coward. Get a man with his back turned.” Onyx’s raspy voice was a hiss, and Logan grimaced at the sight of his sewed-up face which appeared to be issuing his voice from every crevice.

Still, he chuckled. "I ain’t the one hidin’ behind a mask, mate.”

Onyx brought his heavy sword around himself. Tom mustered all his strength and sat up, gripping Onyx's belt and bringing his knife forward. Tom plunged his knife deep into Onyx's back, severing his spinal cord, but it was too late. Onyx had already removed Logan's head before Tom's blade went that far.

Tom’s scream caught in his throat and choked him before he even got it out. Up until now, the most horrifying scene he had ever witnessed was shooting his best friend, Daniel, in the head. He had seen that wound open up in the left side of Daniel’s temple and turn his closest companion in the entire world into an object. Logan's head tumbled to the floor in a wet splatter of blood, his eyes closed as if he knew what had been coming. His body was next, completely detached, twitching as it audibly spurted blood from its stump. Logan was broken, and Tom’s entire being shook with the instinct that nothing could make this terrible wrong right again. The only course left to him would be to deny its reality, but every fibre of his being could feel the pain of his friend. This was not the death worth of a hero. This was a helpless, savage death. This was a death that disrespected everything Logan was. At the time, it wasn’t even a matter of past tense. Logan’s head was still rolling in a disgusting manner along the floor.

In anger, Tom ripped his blade out of Onyx's back, before plunging it straight back in. He screamed. He cried. Onyx gasped and fell onto his knees, dropping his weapon. Tom’s hand was a flurry of swift stabs. He stabbed and carved and slew him over and over again, wanting to feel the killing impulse as many times he could before it was too late. He wanted to damage his body in such a way that nobody would even notice the scars on Onyx’s face anymore. He broke his blade off in Onyx’s back, then grabbed Logan’s bowie knife. There was a surge of pain as he remembered the wound Onyx’s sword had stabbed into him. He could feel something throbbing inside of him. Hot blood rushed along cold nerves, and he stabbed Logan’s knife through the side of Onyx’s head.

Tom collapsed, crying as one arm clutched over his stomach. "You bastard!" He sobbed outwardly, knowing full well he might be heard, and not caring. The whole war ought to have stopped just for him and the grisly scene that surrounded him. He couldn’t let go of Logan’s dagger, so he withdrew it and looked around himself. He looked at Kony’s holey body. He looked at Onyx’s prone form. He glimpsed Logan’s severed head and headless torso, and started crying again. How did it all come to this? He inhaled deeply, coughing through his tears, and noticed he had turned Logan’s knife on himself. “No! No!”

He noticed something had rolled out from Onyx's torn jacket: Two hypodermic needles. The injections Onyx had been using. Tom had no idea what CJ had seen, but his mind wished the two ideas into place. He knew he and Logan had shot Onyx up downstairs, which made Logan's brutal death feel even more like a cheat. Was this how Onyx had survived? By some drug?

He pocketed them both and crawled along. Tom's legs had stopped working. He chipped at the linoleum with the bowie and dragged himself over to Logan's body. A wide stream of blood smeared behind him, and dragging himself along on his belly was the second-most painful sensation he could envision. Logan's death had been far more vivid. Every breath tasted of blood, and Tom knew he didn't have much time. He bit off the sheath of the needle and tried to decide where to inject Logan. He rolled his body onto its back, stifled the feeling of futility and jabbed him in the middle of his chest.

"Please. Please, work." Tom's voice gurgled. His throat was filled with blood.

Part III: Ruin of the Haemophiliac Slayer

Chapter Twenty-Seven.

Shields up. The halitosis of life. Give and take.

Back before the fall of human civilization, before the pony invasion of Earth, there used to be regular postal service. It wasn't all that good. Registered mail wouldn't get delivered on time. Packages would be shipped clear to another province or state beyond their final destination. Postal workers claimed they didn't have enough work and so should have Tuesdays off in addition to Sunday, yet if not enough work was the problem, working on Sundays would have given them more. The postal system was abused by commercial enterprises sending junk mail (known as spam) and bills of extortion for essential services. Still, people enjoyed the anticipation of receiving something they imagined would bring change, or at the very least momentary respite into their lives.

Even during the war, people kept waiting for news, even though the collectivist governments had ceased civilian postal services. People wanted to hear if their loved ones elsewhere had been killed or captured by the ponies, or that ponies were coming to wherever they lived, forcing them to have to evacuate their homes. Many people never unpacked. Some people were waiting to hear the ponies were invading Moscow so they could slate their hunger for battle. Some people in Cuba were waiting to hear their reinforcements had arrived after an unexplained delay. Some people were waiting to hear their mission dispatch to Africa was a success. Some people didn't even know they were waiting for the news that their closest friend was going to be alright, and another was waiting for the latest updates from Moscow on the advances in military exoskeleton technology, and still others were waiting for the go ahead to publish their reports on this whole terrible war after working so very long and hard on it and simultaneously waiting to hear further reports from a field agent who had so recently been struck down in the line of duty.

Andrew Grant was about to receive his news, delivered to him by one of his assistants, Warren Davis. "Sir, the Silverbacks are ready!" Warren was a tall, skinny man with black skin, a corn row haircut, and a short, but very wide nose. He wore a t-shirt from the Cirque du Soleil. He hated the Cirque du Soleil.

"Good, now start working on a new source of ammunition. We will eventually run out!" Andrew was feeling snappy today. He didn't even look up from his mirror where he gazed at the black eye Peter had given him. He sighed and slapped his raw steak back onto his face.

"Sir, what about the cure for Daniel?" asked Andrew's second assistant, Tracy. She was tall and had long black hair which she kept up in a bun. She had small facial features which fitted together nicely onto her face, which was wear they belonged. She was, however, ambidextrous.

Andrew slapped the steak down onto his lap and frowned, spite tainting his next words. "He's dead! Screw the cure! He won't be needing it when he's in the morgue! Now do as I say, and find a new source of ammunition!"

"But sir, what if others are infected with the same serum? What if they end up like Daniel? Shouldn't we continue to find the cure so we could help those people?" asked Andrew's final assistant, Mali-Ling Wald. She was a short, plump Chinese woman. She had black hair but had her fringe dyed bright red. On her face she wore small, black, rectangular glasses.

"God damn it people! I am your boss! Do you want to end up jobless? No? Then do as I say without questioning me every five minuets! I am in charge and you will do as I say!" Andrew was so angry that he had said "minuets" instead of "minutes".

"Yes, sir," said Mali-Ling.

Andrew turned from his mirror with a groan and snapped at Warren. "Show me the Silverbacks!"

"Yes, sir, right this way," Warren said with a slight stutter. He led Andrew into the back room where the Silverbacks stood, and Andrew grinned at the marvellous technology he had designed then let others actually build for him. Two robots, each the same size as an Equestrian Charger, were equipped with different weaponry and painted in different colours. The first one was black with two red stripes running down its helmet and body. It was equipped with a heavy-duty rocket launcher which was mounted to its right arm and a heavy machine gun which was mounted to its left. "This is Black Phoenix. It is armed with—“

Andrew interrupted him. "Yes, yes, I can see what it is armed with! Is it a robot or is it manually operated?"

"Er, one person climbs into the back, and that person then takes full control of it."

"Okay, good, what's the next Silverback?”

Warren gestured to the next suit of mechanized armour. “This is Ghost 311.” This one was similar to the first as it had the same pattern, but instead it had white armour with two dark blue stripes. On its left arm it had a giant blade as thick as the arm and made from stainless steel. On the right it had an oversized full-auto shotgun. The structure was identical to the first Silverback in terms of engineering, and totally encased its wearer in a massive body. The operator’s feet stood on a platform in the legs and operated the weapons in the arms. They could peer out of a transparent face and wore the body like an enormous metal costume.

"I take it this one is the close and personal bot," said Andrew, making observations.

"You are correct, sir" replied Warren. "We have reason to believe that this bot could take a Charger on in a hand-to-hand combat situation.”

"Good, this will serve as a good weapon when the ponies attack here," said Andrew, lost in his thoughts and not realising what he was saying.

"Wait, what?” Warren shook his head in surprise. “The ponies are going to attack here? How do you know?"

"Because, that's what I would do.” Andrew rolled his eyes before leaving his assistant to dwell on that thought. Something wasn't quite right. Too bad the Freudian slip about the ponies was right. Dun dun dun!

Celestia, Blueblood, and Rainbow Dash sat in the main hall of Canterlot’s royal palace in Equestria. They were waiting for status reports from Kony and the Cutie Mark Crusaders. "I don't know why I have to be here!" groaned Rainbow Dash. “I’m supposed to be at the obstetrician’s. Plus which, I’ve got a lot of important strategies I think would benefit the war effort, such as having the pegasi centurions enact a fog of war—“

Celestia interrupted her. "You are part of this family, therefore you must carry out its duties like the rest of us.”

"I did, and it wasn't good enough, remember? I can’t do it like the rest of you, because the rest of you weren’t demoted. I certainly didn’t do it like Luna, either, because she hasn’t set one hoof onto Earth while I was there from day one, fighting on the front lines.”

"Don't be a brat! You failed, that is your own fault. Luna deserved a chance, and so far she has proven herself useful!" snapped Celestia.

"Yeah, useful at cleaning out your flank," muttered Rainbow Dash.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, Mother."

"I still am not entirely sure how you managed to fail twice," Blueblood butted in.

Rainbow Dash whinnied. "Gee, it’s pretty easy to succeed when you’re just sitting on your heinie here saying ominous things instead of actually putting your life on the line out there. What happened was magic was banned. That left our armies weak. Twilight was the most powerful unicorn I knew, but book smarts don’t suffice for field strategy.”

"Nonsense. Luna is doing just fine without it!" Blueblood laughed.

Rainbow scoffed. “You’re a unicorn. You can’t make me believe losing the innate abilities you’ve had since birth wouldn’t traumatize you. I had my wings shot up three years ago by the humans, and I can tell you exactly what it’s like. In fact, I even threw together my revenge in spite of that impairment.”

"Shut up about magic! The gods gave it to us, and they took it from us! We must respect that," said Celestia.

Blueblood and Rainbow Dash looked at Celestia in astonishment. Only Rainbow dared speak. “What in the hay are you talking about? What ‘gods’? We don’t have a theistic society. Nopony’s ever seen any evidence of the ‘gods’ the humans always go on about.”

"Not their false gods, but I have seen them, and let me tell you, they are angry, vengeful people. They are ten times more advanced than the humans, and could easily destroy us. I follow their every command! So should you.” Celestia leaned over to glare down at Rainbow Dash in a wholly uncharacteristic manner.

Rainbow Dash gave her a weird look, because she found Celestia’s outburst to be very weird. “But we still have magic in Equestria like we always have. Twilight said magic didn’t work in the human world. Your star pupil said we had to do things the human way in their dimension. Are you saying that’s the fault of your gods? That’s why there’s a ban crippling a third of our population, and whatever percentage has to police them?”

Celestia leaned down and gave a sharp hiss. “What I’m saying is stop asking so many questions unless you wish you be reunited with your precious Twinkle Sprinkle.”

Rainbow Dash went quiet. She could not be bothered to argue with her mother. She knew she would not win. Thankfully the windows opened and a pegasus messenger flew in, landed before the thrones and bowed. "What news do you bring?" asked Celestia.

“And how fareth Kony?” asked Blueblood.

“My Prince, I am sorry to report that he is dead,” replied the messenger. “Your highness, the Cutie Mark Crusaders have received their package and are well on their way to Cuba where they have already secured a connection with Vaas and his Iron Wolves.”

"Dead! Already? What of Onyx?" asked Celestia.

“Presumed dead. A group of ponies have been sent to collect the body and bring it back.”

Rainbow Dash placed her front hooves to her face and feigned concern. “How could Luna’s precious soldier fail in his duties? Especially when she’s doing so much better than me somehow in a way that hasn’t been clearly explained yet!” Even Blueblood had to admit this was a disaster.

"Assemble the armies!” Celestia ordered. “Once Onyx is found, we move on Moscow!" The messenger gave a nod, a bow, and then took his leave.

"Moscow? That is their main city,” said Rainbow Dash. “They will have thousands of men, upgraded defences, more advanced weapons. You don’t need to wait for one weird human pet of Luna’s if you just use my strategies. I’ve fought the humans personally for years. If we use a fog of war, we can pick them off like ants from above.”

Celestia didn’t act as if she heard half of what Rainbow had said. "Exactly, driving them from their city will leave them more than vulnerable. Besides, we have a spy on the inside. He will let us know what we are heading into.”

“And was that spy Luna’s doing, or something that *you* set up?” Rainbow asked.

Nopony else listened to her. They just stamped their hooves and chanted, "The humans will fall!"

In an entirely different dimension, Tom inhaled deep of the bitter, cool air as his eyes burst open like grenade eggs. His heart pounded violently like a cannibal’s drum knocking at the proverbial back door of his in-laws apartment in his chest. It was totally oh my god just like he had been just reborn just now, as a baby would be. The very last thing he remembered was his and Logan’s bloody encounter with Onyx. He grabbed his own neck as he remembered that grievous, fatal wound Logan had taken. Now that was a pain in the neck. Tom felt like he was going to lose his head, too. He couldn’t help his thoughts from getting ahead of him as he remembered the sight of a man he’d known for so long rolling across the floor. If only he’d been a little more headstrong. He remembered succumbing to his own wounds and thought that he’d joined them both in heading to the afterlife. The only bright light at the end of the tunnel was the garish, lit ceiling of the St. Schaivo’s Hospital in Moscow. He tried to sit up and stopped as an excruciating pain struck him in the side. It took him three attempts to prop himself up. He rubbed his face with his hands, then gave himself a couple of hard slaps to make sure he was alive. He was pretty sure he felt it, but he still felt numb inside. He wasn’t sure that was a relief.

Tom hung his head and told himself he wasn’t going to break down, much in the way you might tell yourself you’re not going to throw up. It didn’t work. All the pains he’d feared came rushing up through him as life sucker punched him right in the gut all over again. After a minute of quiet, choking sobbing, he looked out the window and recognized the Moscow skyline, even though it looked little more than a scattering of lights in the night-time. He spent the next hour in contemplative repose of a sorts, feuding with his own mind on how he’d anticipated his grave misfortune and yet could not bear the aftermath. He appeared to just stare out the window, but inside the wounded soldier’s heart was occluded with turmoil such that his body was

paralytic with grief. He kept searching there for something he could not remember, but the only ray of light shining through his clouded brain was how death was the only connection he would have left to Logan, and above all, to Daniel. Yet, doubt kept misting over his obsessions. He felt like he was forgetting something, something important that could help. The icy feeling ate away at him like a hundred annoying gnats until the epiphany struck him.

Onyx's injections. He had slipped one into his pocket before he passed out. Tom threw off the bed cover of the hospital bed which rested across him and carelessly ripped the needle from his arm that earlier he had considered a weapon against himself. He then realized he was dressed in a hospital gear. His army fatigues would have been taken somewhere. He perused his bedside and found a call button, used to summon a nurse like a flight attendant on an airplane and with a similar manner of service. He pressed it. He pressed it again. He tapped it repeatedly, incessantly, like his own condemning thoughts, until Nurse "Dixie Clemets" (as her nametag read) appeared through the doorway.

"What seems to be the problem, sir?" she asked in a thick Texan or Brooklyn accent.

"Uniform. Where's my uniform?" Tom realized he was short of breath and dizzy from exertion.

"Er, well, they had to cut your shirt off to operate and stitch you up. You were in some nasty state of affairs, y'know. Your pants and other gubbins are in this drawer." She opened up a chest of drawers against the wall near Tom's bed.

"Please. Please hand me my trousers."

"I don't think that's such a good idea. You are not supposed to be wandering off."

"No, I won't! Please, I need something from one of the pockets." Tom clasped his hands together, outright begging. Dixie only scrutinized him. "Please?"

"Fine." She sighed and rolled her eyes, but secretly she savoured his pathetic appeal. When she handed him his trousers, he quickly unfolded them and dug his hand straight into the right thigh pocket. He smiled as he withdrew the injection. Dixie's lipsticked mouth gaped in an O, and she snatched the hypodermic away from him. "Oh, hell no! Mm-mm! No taking any heroin on my watch!"

"No, it's not heroin! Give it back, it's mine!"

"Hm, sure, and the pope actually shits in the woods."

"He does! And it isn't."

"Yeah, right. Look I am going to flush this down the toilet."

Tom interrupted her. "No! Please, it is an injection which heals people. Brings them back from the dead, too! Please, just tell me where the morgue is!"

"Okay, you're definitely high."

"No! Look, I know it's hard to believe, but please! Please, just let me inject my friend with it. Then listen for a heartbeat. If you don't hear one then you can go tell the army I was taking heroin or whatever, and they will discharge me. Again."

Dixie could hear the sincerity in his voice. He was telling the truth, or at least he thought he was. At least, that was what she thought. She sighed again. She was a sucker for a subservient male. "Fine, but if this doesn't work then you're in trouble. Not me. Got it?"

"Yes! Thank you so much!" Tom's pained smile returned.

"Hm. Yeah, sure. Let's get you wheeled out of here. You may have had a split hernia and broken bones, but this ain't a soft hospital. Don't want you getting' bed-comfy now." She left a moment and Tom considered pacing, but his legs felt so weak and she returned soon enough with a wheelchair. She helped him slide into it, and it took about ten minutes for the pair to reach the morgue. At this time of night, it was generally untended, so she brought him inside unseen and without a fuss apart from Tom's own impatience. The place was cold and eerie. Even Dixie let out a shiver and mumbled something to herself. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

The two of them found a room with many stainless steel drawers filling the wall. Dixie parked Tom aside to start looking, but Tom rolled himself to the wall as well. "What was your friend's name?" Dixie asked after checking several nametags on the drawers, realizing she had not been told until now.

"Logan Walker. He was decapitated. He'd be kind of hard to forget."

"Listen, buster, I'm just a nurse here, I ain't the hospital director."

The pair of them searched thoroughly, especially Tom, even though he was growing more petulant every time he didn't find "Walker, Logan". Part of him didn't want to see Logan's severed head again. Part of him was hoping the injection he tried back at Kony's had taken, but Logan would've been there by his bedside. He would've left a card at least. Even Dixie ought to know if a patient had been taken in whose head had grown back. After the third "Doe, John", an idea sprang into Tom's head. He even envisioned a cartoon lightbulb switching on. The name "John Doe" is not held by anyone this correspondent has ever met, nor has anything this correspondent interviewed since the subject came up known anybody by such a moniker. The name "John Doe" (and "Jane Doe", if female) is a reserved pseudonym for someone whose identity cannot be identified. If a headless body had been taken in, Tom thought maybe someone had failed to identify it. He didn't want to consider the ramifications just yet. Like when searching for one's car keys in the last place one looks, Tom found his friend in the last "Doe, John" slot he opened, but not the friend he had been expecting.

"Daniel!" Tom didn't know what to do with himself. He trembled. He'd shot Daniel himself almost a year ago, so why was he here, now, in a hospital morgue? Why was the leader of the entire Human Resistance on a slab marked "John Doe"? Why wasn't his body decomposed after all that time being dead? Dixie just stood in awkward silence, remembering the time she watched her mother breaking down over her father's casket. It'd been a closed casket funeral, but the casket was very cheap and ugly. Tom mulled over his mysterious questions until she tapped him on the shoulder.

"You gonna jab this in him like you said, or what?" she asked, now chewing a piece of gum.

"Where should I stick him?" Tom asked. He had been guessing when he tried to resurrect Logan, but with a medical professional here, he thought the question couldn't hurt.

Apparently he guessed right, because Dixie accepted the needle from him and pointed it over Daniel's bare chest. "This is messed up. Forgive me, sir," she said to the stiff before plunging the injection into his heart and releasing the fluid into it. Tom pulled back the white sheet draped over Daniel's unmoving form. Dixie pulled out the injection and placed it next to Daniel's body. Chewing her gum loudly, she grabbed hold of his wrist to feel for a pulse. Tom opted to lower his head down and placed his ear on Daniel's chest. They both waited patiently as nothing happened. With a loud smack from her gum, Dixie waved her hands flippantly. "I knew it. I can't believe I—"

"His heart! It's beating!" Tom cried. He began to laugh. His face hurt as he smiled for the first time in a very long time. His friend was alive. He knew it. He kept his head on that chest as it started to heave for breath.

Dixie hadn't noticed the chest, but she tried again for a pulse on the wrist and on the neck. "Damn. I guess I'd better go notify his next of kin, then!" She hurried out of the room, leaving Tom alone.

Daniel's body twitched slowly. His muscles were weak from having been in a coma for so damn long. His body was frigid and stiff, but a painful buzzing sensation elicited jerking motions as blood began to form and surge through his veins once more. Tom took his head off his chest and helped Daniel to sit up, grasping his hand to help him feel again, and patting him on the back as Daniel choked up something green and nasty. Tom stared closely at his friend to help himself believe this was truly real. Daniel was back from the dead.

More or less. Daniel continued to wretch up gunk, even as Tom gave him hugs and sobbed on his shoulder. It was rather a disorienting welcome back from the beyond. Daniel's head was so foggy that Tom was the only thing he remembered, and he had no recollection at first of his strange dreams or of how he became comatose. Certain details seeped back into him with time, and his first words to Tom when he had his voice back and was done dry heaving were, "I'm sorry."

This struck Tom by surprise. "What, mate?"

"The ponies were controlling me." Daniel stopped to cough, and said what he'd been waiting to say for what felt like an eternity. "I forgive you for having to shoot me."

Tom shook his head and shushed him. "No. No, man, don't say that. That was ages ago. Don't worry about it. All that matters to me is you're alright. Let's not worry about all the bullshit just yet."

Daniel lay there in Tom's arms, still groggy. He smacked his lips and tried to salivate. He shivered, so Tom drew Daniel's sheet back up to his neck, but that was about all he could do for him at the moment. Daniel wanted nothing more than to wake up after a sleep that had lasted for so long, but everything, even his own muscles, felt so far away and faded. He clung to Tom as hard as he could for fear of falling back into death. The two lifelong comrades huddled like that in the morgue for a long time, but not long enough. Peter Williams entered the room, his gruff voice sounding more timid that it had ever sounded before. "Daniel?"

Daniel turned his head to see his father and Dixie enter the room. Peter frowned at Tom who was still holding his son, and Dixie rolled another wheelchair to escort Daniel to a hospital bed. For the present, Tom felt as if he was the ghost, as Dixie pushed the wispy Daniel from the room. He rolled after them to the door where Peter gave him a grim acknowledgement. "My son needs to recuperate, Mr. Taylor-Randall. I would appreciate it if you returned to your room as well."

Daniel spent the next couple of days alone, apart from a close circle of military medical personnel. There was much hubbub kept to shy whispers about his apparent return from the dead, hushed over with an exaggeration to the length of his true comatose state, but the leader of the Human Resistance was spared the celebration of his revival and the morale it provided. He endured stringent diets and excessive poking and prodding. He'd been asked to recount everything he remembered since he'd been poisoned by the ponies, even the dreams he'd experienced while unconscious, and if he remembered anything while he was dead, to which he had nothing to reply with. Even he could detect the tension from the doctors, his father, and Andrew Grant, at least until there was confirmation that all traces of what they dubbed the "Pony Obedience Toxin" had left his system, presumably because it relied upon a living human system to function.

After another day of gruelling physical therapy separate from any of the other patients, Daniel was visited by his father. "Son?" Peter said, rapping on the doorframe. He pulled a chair up beside Daniel's bed and let out a sigh as he sat down on it. "It's time for your debriefing."

Of course it was. Daniel had been dead, so he'd been told, and in a coma before that, and his father wanted to treat him like any other soldier. Calling him "son" was just an oddity. Peter continued, although there were the timid gleams of joy hidden in his stoic expression. "As has been alluded to, you have been in a comatose state for almost a year. You were pronounced dead for three days before coming back to us. The reason this information was kept confidential was because of the multiple reports we've had regarding the pony obedience toxin and your apparent betrayal. Calling it a stretch would be putting it mildly, but it was your report to Sergeant Taylor-Randall that let us believe you were not acting of your own accord. As for your death, this will remain classified for obvious reasons. Insidious aliens from an alternate dimension are less of a stretch for the imagination than a man coming back from the dead."

Daniel just stared at his blanket. So he had been dead. And yet, nothing felt different. Things felt as if they were going to be the same. If only it wasn't far too late for that. "When am I going to be allowed visitors?" Daniel asked. "And what happened to New York?"

Peter managed to stifle a sigh. "We wanted to confirm the toxin was no longer in your system. New York was lost, although your squad managed to prevent the operation from being a total loss. The Equestrians disappeared for a long time after that, but there have been distressing reports of their imminent return. The army has once again mobilised, and we have reason to believe Moscow will be targeted quite soon."

He'd been asleep for a year, and still he felt he deserved some rest. It figured that trouble would find him anyway. Instead of asking if his missed birthday still counted against him, he asked, "Who's been in charge of the army without me?"

"That Sergeant-Major Avery Johnson. I've been too wrapped up in presiding over your case, and your sister's been deployed to Cuba. Your mother will probably visit tomorrow. She's at home, grieving."

"So Delta Squad's in Cuba?" Daniel asked. "What about Laura Vickers?"

Peter shook his head. "New battlefronts, son. Your friends all got reassigned." He let out a sigh as though having been badgered for information. "Your sister and Nicholas Bronson were supposed to arrive in Cuba a week ago. Collin Dwell and Tyrone Jones are stationed locally. Logan Walker was killed in action in Uganda, his body never recovered, and Laura Vickers has also passed on."

"What? No!" Daniel sounded as if he was scolding his father. Logan? Dead? The thought was unthinkable. How had Laura died? Had she waited for him? He wanted to go back to sleep. Back into his coma. He wanted to wake up again, and prove that *this* was the dream, and the bad news was only a nightmare. But it was real. His younger self was nowhere to be seen, nowhere to be heard taunting him. Daniel shook his head and his eyes began to produce a large amount of tears. "No, no. No!"

Peter stowed his notes and sighed. "I'm sorry, son." He departed from the room when he was no longer able to bear having failed to guard his son's emotions.

In Canterlot in Equestria, emotions were rousing. Kaiser Celestia stood on a balcony to address tens of hundreds of thousands of ponies. Behind her, Luna smirked at Rainbow Dash, and Rainbow Dash scowled back at her with her front limbs crossed. Before her on full display was a tabernacle whereupon Onyx's body was sprawled out. "As everypony may already know, we failed to conquer the African lands of Earth. I won't lie; I'm very disappointed about this turn of events, but that is what we get for trusting Kony to lead us. In hindsight, it was a bit impractical to think a mere mortal human could understand how we ponies think and act, and they have no frame of reference to our innate abilities as Equestians."

"Four legs good, two legs bad!" somepony in the crowd shouted.

"But you won't let us use magic, either!" shouted somepony else.

"Who said that? Stop talking about magic! Where was I? We are the superior species. Our victory is inevitable. Yadda, yadda, yadda. Oh, right. Our next target is Moscow! They won't think of us attacking there so soon after our last attack ."

Celestia leaned over and whispered to Prince Blueblood who sat beside her, snacking on some bleu cheese. “When was our last attack?”

“Rainbow Dash flooded a city known as New York almost a year ago, Earth time.”

“Right.” The alicorn once more addressed the audience. “We are the better, more advanced species! Oh, wait, I said that bit already. Moscow is the base of the entire Human Resistance. We’ve never attempted to take it before now, not quite sure why at the moment, but they have grown indolent in their assumption it can never fall! They believe it safe. Like it is some kind of ‘safe zone’ where nopony dare dread, so humans live in safety. Well, guess what, everypony? We’ve got tens upon hundreds upon thousands of…how many? We’ve got a lotta ponies willing to show them they’re wrong?”

“Oh? Where?” asked somepony in the audience.

“Shut up!” continued Celestia. “We shall demonstrate how naïve the humans are, especially when we have spies working for us on the inside. Spies high up among the humans’ ranks. Humans who have devoted themselves to us. They betray their race, and unlike us, racial homogeny is their only path to enlightenment!”

Somepony started stomping their hooves in applause, and other ponies followed suit. Celestia looked a bit surprised that her speech had already enthralled them long before it was finished. She had to shout over them to get them to simmer down. “I’m not—I’m not finished yet, everypony!” When they quieted down again, she resumed speaking. “The truth is, we have lost more great soldiers to this war than the enemy has, but today you will be led by a human who is invincible. This human lies before me"

"But he's dead!" called out another pony from the crowd.

“Who said that?” Celestia frowned out over the crowd of ponies. Oh well. If the crowd wanted to get riled up, she’d rile them up. Celestia smiled and pulled out a fresh belt of injections that Pinkie Pie had cooked up. She pulled a needle from the belt and held it high for all to see. Everypony had to squint real hard to see what the hay she was holding up. "This is how we know you won't fail, because we have technology like this!" She plunged it into Onyx's chest and released the liquid into his blood stream. Everypony in the crowd went quiet. A breeze blew some colourful flower petals into the air. Somepony coughed. Then Onyx gasped and sat up, his body flailing as though he’d never used his limbs before. The ponies also gasped, but instead of struggling to breathe, they were reacting with even more horror than when the dead corpse had been dropped out in the open before them, under the blazing summer sun. "Hah! See that shit, bitches? How can you lose when your fierce leader cannot die? How can the enemy win when we have a solider of this calibre? How? Hm? Hm? Hm? How, I ask you. The answer of course is that we cannot. Welcome back to the fight, Onyx!"

Onyx gave a weak nod, rubbing the back of his head. He’d been dead, but everything still hurt, as though the pain had been locked in him when he expired. “Thank you, my queen.”

“I’m a Kaiser, ass-hat!” Celestia snapped. Onyx climbed off of the table and Celestia gave a nod to Blueblood before turning back to Onyx. "You seem to have lost your sword and mask."

Onyx sighed. "Indeed I have. People keep takin’ my stuff when I’m dead, I guess.”

Prince Blueblood stepped forward and handed a long, shiny ivory box out to Onyx. "Enjoy!”

Onyx took the box and opened it. He smiled. Inside the box was a brand-spanking new katana with a dark ivory hilt and a fine twenty-two-inch silver blade. Next to it was also a new mask, completely different from his old burlap bag. Onyx lifted the mask and admired its beauty. It was in the design of a half-cracked skull with two curved, sharp horns. He slipped the mask on and took the sword. He spun it around a couple times before sheathing it. "This is the best present ever, my queen!”

“I’m a Kaiser!” Celestia hissed. She cleared her throat. “My pleasure. Now, go get them!” The mood was now set for Onyx to live up to his family name and full life consequences!

Chapter Twenty-Eight.

Home front. Vodka runs like water, blood runs like vodka. Tom’s chaser.

The day was drawing to an end. The sun and the moon shared the skies, which gave a contrasting red glow to the darkening skies. Tom, Daniel, Tyrone and Irish were huddled around a table in the Ivory Inn since around 4:30pm, and the time was now 7:15pm. In all that time, they’d only had nine drinks between the four of them, and Irish had five of those. Tyrone drank two of his favourite Chango beer, and Tom and Daniel each had only one. Over at the next table, a man in a busy raincoat had had just under two Shirley Temples, and consumed more pretzels than he thought. At the counter, an obese, elderly woman was getting piss drunk, smacking her lips and belching nonchalantly as she ordered her sixth Kentucky Frontier Bourbon of the evening. A young teenaged boy wearing shades was sitting in the back, carving blindly on the underside of a table.

Irish raised a glass. “To—braaap! Sorry, excuse me. To Logan, God rest his soul down under. And to Daniel, for returning to us after his year-long nap.”

“Bloody hell, man. ‘Down under’?” Tyrone asked, already mixing in local jingo again.

“Yeah. The outback. Australia. That’s where he’s from, ain’t it?” Irish asked.

Tyrone shook his head, then raised his glass. "I can't say it enough man; it's good to have you back.”

Daniel thumbed his glass. “I wish I could say it felt good to be back.”

Tyrone gave a sad shrug. “We’ve all been through a lot, man, but unfortunately, this is war. This is what it’s about.”

Daniel didn’t know what facial expression to make. Instead he stared into his drink and poured out what was on his mind. “I think I forgot how I felt when my brother, James, died. I did not become a solider until after that happened, so I was always wallowing in helplessness. Ever since I became a leader of the world’s army and avenged his death, I now know I can fight back. Now that Logan’s gone, I feel helpless all over again.”

Tom squeezed Daniel’s shoulder. “I’ve lost members of my family, too, mate. So at least don’t feel alone. Alright?” Daniel nodded and smiled at this, then Tom raised his glass again, “And you know what Logan would say? Here’s to Nick.” The others concurred and drank.

“I was kind of hoping he would be here. I do not know, I guess I just expected a better welcome back than this,” said Daniel.

Tom patted him on the back. "We all expected a better welcoming back for you.”

The table went silent for a moment. It didn’t speak much, but Irish said something. "Well, at least you have this time to get reissued into the world. Anyone want another?" He stood up from the table, although the men shook their heads. "Suit yourselves.” Irish followed with another burp and staggered for the bar. Surprisingly, he was not yet drunk; just a bit tipsy.

“So how’s your family been?” Daniel asked Tom.

Tom frowned in thought. “They didn’t visit me in the hospital. They’re alright, though. I’ll take you to meet Claire tomorrow. Your place is still vacant, by the way. Hope you don’t mind me checkin’ it out. I don’t know if your dad, or, um, Laura kept it.”

“When’s her funeral?” Daniel asked, trying not to get choked up.

Tom paused. “I heard she was cremated. Didn’t have any next of kin, so no funeral.”

Daniel blinked and shook his head. “Well, damn. It is as if somebody wants me to feel nothing.”

Irish returned with his drinks and huddled low over the table as if he had a secret to tell Daniel. “So what was it like?”

Daniel asked, “What was what like?”

“Being dead!”

“Aw, man, don’t ask that,” Tyrone said. “That’s a truth you don’t wanna know.”

Daniel was quiet for a moment. He swallowed. **Then suddenly!** A siren ran through the dense city of Moscow. It was shortly followed by the sound of bombs exploding. The ponies had arrived!

The sound of the pony alarm rang throughout Moscow, alerting the Human Resistance and the citizenry to the presence of hostile enemies. “Send an APB to the Moscow cops, there’s a thief made of cinnamon and lemon drops!” The vocalized fantasia distress signal let the humans know of the danger, whereas the ponies would be unfamiliar with the true significance behind the cultural klaxon. Onyx didn’t care; he let out a sinister laugh in his guttural voice as the first wave of Equestrians marched into Moscow. "You all know what to do! Kill anyone holding a weapon in the most painful and brutal and humiliating way possible. I want to hear the cries of men over the sound of that music! I want to hear them pray to their gods and beg for mercy. I want them all to feel the wrath of Kaiser Celestia! Now march!" This was the same man who had been deriding Joseph Kony with sarcasm. Now he was revelling in anticipation of committing much the same horrific crimes. The Ponies cheered and marched towards Moscow.

Tom and Daniel rushed through the streets of their city. All around them were soldiers lining up and getting ready to fight off the pony invaders. In the distance, over the siren, they could hear a fight already commencing. “Why are soldiers gearing up this far in?” asked Daniel. “What happened to the border patrols?”

Tom was in a panic. Daniel thought he looked just as scared as the civilians. "I need to get my kid and girlfriend out of here!" Tom held his side which was starting to ache again from his wound in Africa.

Daniel grabbed a hold of Tom. “Hey, stay with me here! Do not worry; we will get them to safety. Then we will need to find my mother.”

Tom pushed against Daniel, but stopped himself. He nodded. “Agreed.” The two of them launched a fast pace down every street and alleyway shortcut between the Ivory and Tom’s house. The trip would have been short, but every footstep filled Tom’s head with a dozen worries, and each one played out in his mind. None of his doubts mattered, certainly not the ones that told him if he looked, the worst would become real, because nothing was going to stop him from seeing his household. The trouble was his house was near the edge of the city, and as it turned out, the ponies were attacking from that side. When they reached the street where he lived, Tom drew in breath as though he’d just dipped his body into an ice-cold pool. Daniel stopped running.

On their end of the street were three platoons of sixteen men each. At the opposite end of the road, near to where Tom’s and Daniel’s houses were was a nightmare. Countless droves of ponies were marching their way. They saw no sign of Onyx, who was attacking from the opposite end of the city. “God, no!” Tom said, his voice furious.

Daniel hurried to the nearest platoon leader. "Hey! What has happened to all the civilians in these houses?" shouted Daniel as all three of the platoons opened fire at the ponies.

"They're still in their homes!" the platoon leader answered him.

Daniel let out an expletive. "I got to go get them!" said Tom, who was preparing to charge.

"Don't be crazy!" Daniel barked doggedly, seizing Tom by the shoulders once more.

"That's my wife and daughter down there! I am not just going to leave them!"

"So what are you going to do then, huh? Charge down there with no weapon and just hope the ponies don't shoot you?"

"It's better than staying here and waiting for them to kill my family!"

"They are not going to kill your family! We will get them out of there, I promise. It's just, we need a plan first. We are no good to anyone if we’re dead."

Tom averted his gaze and tried to steady his breathing. "You got five minutes to come up with something, then I'm running down there and getting my family.”

Daniel gave a nod and turned back to the platoon leader. "What's your name?"

"Captain Jax Teller!"

"Okay, Captain Teller. I am Daniel Williams. You probably know me from such wars as the Raid on Berlin and the New York Crisis.”

"Yes, sir. It is an honour, sir."

"Yes, well, I need two riffles; one each for me and my friend here. Also, I need a team of four men."

"Okay, but what for?" Jax juggled a sceptical look between Daniel and his fighting soldiers.

Daniel nodded to the rows of conjoined houses which inhabited the street. "We are going to hop each fence and evacuate the residents of these homes using the back gardens. The ponies won’t see us, and that way we can ensure that there are no civilian casualties."

"Can’t ensure anything in war, but okay. You four follow him!” Jax pointed to four men in turn, then he pointed to three dead soldiers which lay near him. "You can borrow their weapons.”

Tom and Daniel scavenged the weapons from the dead soldiers post-haste. Tom got hold of a standard M16, whereas Daniel picked an AK47. “This is my gun,” he said. “There are many like it, but this one is that guy’s. This one is mine now.” They then made a run to the closest house and leapt the fence without issue. They ran into the back garden with the four select soldiers following behind them. “Okay, we take this slow and get each house before—“Before Daniel could finish his sentence, Tom sprinted off and started to leap the fences so he could get to his own backyard. "Oh, God dammit!" snapped Daniel. He turned to the four soldiers. "Okay, you guys start evacuating these houses. I'm going to go get him!"

The soldiers all responded with "yes, sir" and then set off into different houses to evacuate the residents. Daniel set off after Tom. He could hear his friend yelling for his girlfriend, and saw him burst in through his back door. “Bella!”

"Tom, shush! Be quiet!" Daniel said when he caught up to him. His entire body felt like boiled spaghetti and he almost collapsed on the back stoop. He really ought to have undergone more physical therapy, but leave it to the ponies to forego such courtesy.

Tom ignored Daniel and moved into the empty living room. "Bella!" he cried again.

"Tom, they will hear you outside! Be quiet!" Daniel scolded him. Tom once again ignored Daniel and charged up his stairs. Daniel was about to follow him when he heard Tom cry, "No!" This was followed by a short burst fire from the M16, but it was the sound of his voice and not the gunfire that made Daniel's heart leap in his chest. It was already pounding so hard he thought it might slip free of his ribs. He froze at the bottom of the stairs. He was afraid to continue up them. He didn't know what waited up there, but he knew it wasn't good. A lull of silence enabled him to hear Tom break down into tears. His cries of agony drove Daniel to tug himself up those stairs by the bannister. Once there, he raised his riffle and approached the open door which led to Tom and Bella's bed room where the noise was coming from. Daniel slowly walked in, his riffle raised just in case there was an intruder. That's when he saw a terrible sight.

The room was smoky with the fresh scent of flame. The bedspread where Tom and Bella slept was burnt, and small fires licked at the furniture. Two charred blobs that had once been bodies occupied the bed, so horribly burnt that Daniel did not recognize them as Bella and Claire, not that he would've known the latter. Tom was on his knees at the foot of the bed, sobbing. A dying pony slumped over on the window, and Daniel set his gun on the beast, which muttered, "I said hand me the pineapple, not the grenade." Daniel shot the pony dead. Tom gave a jump, but continued shaking with grief.

"A child," he said, his voice wavering. "Who the hell thinks it's okay to kill a child for any means?"

Daniel realized the ponies must have had similar ideas to the humans. They had sent ponies over the fences to take over the civilian homes and use them as vantage points. That meant there would be more ponies in the other houses. He knew that he and Tom ought to leave, but how was he supposed to tell his friend to leave behind his dead wife and daughter? He knelt down beside Tom and let out a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry. We have to leave now." Tom ignored Daniel's warning and continued to sob. Daniel repeated himself. "Tom, we have to go. Please just come with me." Before Tom or Daniel could say another word, a grenade came crashing through the window. "Shite!" Daniel cried. The grenade went off, and everything went black for Daniel. The first personal casualties of battle had been dealt, and yet the battle had only just begun. Only time would tell who was next.

Soldiers had been scrambled throughout the city to be briefed as briefly as possible. Walker walked into the training barracks which were built into the lower levels of the Moscow military headquarters. There, he confirmed what everyone feared: The ponies were attacking, and now it was time for these new recruits to graduate from boot camp and pick up a riffle. Lugo and Adams were close behind him, loading their weapons and checking to make sure they were in working order. "Walker, are you sure these guys will be up to it?" asked Lugo where all the recruits could hear him. They began to fret and hug their weapons.

Walker frowned at Lugo's childish lack of tact. "They are going to have to be. This isn't some drill. This is a war starting in our very own backyard. If we don't eliminate the threat soon then we could be looking at a full-scale invasion. The marines are as ready as they are ever going to be."

"Isn't it kind of an invasion already? Ponies have already been sighted in the city," Lugo said.

"Well, let's get this party started," said Adams, cocking his gun for old time's sake.

Walker pushed his way through the main hall doors where he was met by an ocean of panic-stricken soldiers, barely two months into boot camp. They were all chatting away, swapping fashion tips and rumours of what this red alert was actually all about. Some said it was a drill, some said it was the ponies, and others said it was the Iron Wolves launching an attack, despite there having been little to no intel available to suggest anything of the sort. "You mean the Steel Wools?" somebody said. "They're in Cuba, with Vaas. They wouldn't come here."

Walker, Adams and Lugo pushed their way through the crowd of untrained soldiers until Walker found a table. He leapt up onto it, straining his hip and knocking aside a few clips of ammunition, and cleared his throat. "Everyone listen up!" he ordered. The crowd calmed down. For some reason, they all turned and listened to what Walker had to say. "Okay, men, I ain't gonna sugar coat the situation. I ain't gonna powder it, or glaze it like a donut. Ain't gonna drizzle no sumptuous confectionery. We are still at war with the ponies."

"Aw, man," many of the soldiers said, more or less in unison.

"They have resurfaced with great numbers and are leading a charge right here, right now. I realise that you soldiers are not fully trained, but we need you right now, right here. The enemy outnumber us three to one, even with all you guys helping. I ain't going to lie, and I'm not going to sell this to you. Not gonna charge you adman thing. Not one cent. It's too ugly for that. But we are fighting the enemy at our own doorstep." He turned to Adams. "I say 'doorstep' already? No? This will be painful; a struggle. A lot of you will die. Some will be badly injured. But just know that you are fighting for your freedom, for the freedom of the man next to you. For the freedom of your families. For the freedom of mankind! Only by killing the ponies will

we be free of their tyranny. This is your finest hour men. This is your time to shine. Now let's get your asses into gear and go grab a weapon. Hoh rah, marines!"

The men cheered as Walker nearly slipped trying to dismount the table. "It's a good day to die, men," he said to himself. "Kaplop!"

"Wait what did he say?" asked a young soldier.

Lugo chuckled. "Don't worry, kid. Marines don't die, we just regroup in hell." The young soldier turned pale white as a group of marines put on thick shades and started beatboxing dubstep.

"Amen to that, brother. Let's go to war!" said Adams, giving Lugo a series of improbably handshakes.

Charlie Squad was already deployed. Irish and Tyrone lined up next to Ezio and Zone-Tan, along with four hundred other soldiers spread out down the long Great Trotsky Highway, one of the main thoroughfares leading into Moscow. In the distance, they could see the ponies marching. "Pony corpses shall litter the streets of Moscow!" growled Zone Tan.

Irish cocked his M60, which had been handed to him by Ezio, and gave a joyful laugh. "I'm with you there, sister!"

Dmitry knelt down onto one knee next to Irish and lifted his AK47 to his shoulder. "Okay, guys, we hold this position until I say so! Hut hut hike!"

"Roger that, sir!" replied Charlie Squad in unison. They smiled at one another that they had managed to do that. Irish was rife with excitement.

"Irish, you need to calm down! We are at war here. This is real! Stop acting like it's all just a game!" barked Dmitry.

Irish hid his smile and his perplexity and nodded. "Yes, sir!" As the squad waited for the Equestrian army to draw nearer, they double-checked their weapons and straightened out their ACUs. Irish stepped a foot onto the traffic barrier and pointed his weapon at the pony hordes off in the distance while imitating shooting noises. "Man, I wish we could pick 'em off from here."

"Hey, weren't you two in Delta Squad a year ago?" a scrawny soldier asked Irish and Tyrone. He had a huge forehead and his voice sounded like a Munchkin from the *Wizard of Oz*.

"We sure were!" Irish said.

"Can you give me any advice before I go into battle? I don't wanna get killed."

Tyrone stepped in. "Talking strategy, remember what you've been taught. We had good teachers who roughed us up for good reasons. We don't wanna see any camping. You know who camps? The ponies camp. They camp it up. We don't wanna hear your noisy hip hop music on the comm channels, nobody wants to see a video of your first time into battle, and if anybody in this lobby is a hacker, let me tell you right now, that ain't gonna help you in the real world. Any of your friends have high kill streaks, then this is the time to use that to help one another. Remember, we're at war with the ponies, not with each other. You a pro, you don't keep it to yourself, but you share the wealth, am I right? And please, don't teabag the enemy corpses. Don't teabag your allies' corpses. And as for quick-scoping,—oh, shit! Here they come!"

"Irish, get behind the damn barricade," Dmitry said. Irish and Tyrone took cover where the others were waiting. They studied the advancing ponies who were all wearing masks made from human skulls that covered half of their faces. They each carried miniature zanbatos on their backs, and carried either M16A1s, MK14s, MDLs or SN6s, each having been modified so a pony could fire it, and it would be an embarrassment to die by such weapons in the hooves of ponies. Many of the ponies were wearing armour beneath tight leather coats.

Amidst the swarm was Onyx, who had his shiny new sword drawn. He was pretty easy to spot, being much taller than a pony. He waved his blade in the air from the middle of that sea and shouted, "March on, my little edge lords! Today they all die! Ha ha ha!" The ponies advanced, and both sides commenced fire.

"Return fire!" ordered Dmitry as a bullet flew past him. Irish let out a prolonged battle cry as he fired his M60.The ponies continued to march as their allies fell beside them. That is when Onyx emerged from the swarm with his sword drawn.

"Is that a human working with them?" asked Zone-Tan. "How gauche. Fucking traitor!"

"Fuck him. He will fall with the rest of them!" said Tyrone as he slipped in a fresh ammo mag.

"Do you mind?" asked Ezio. "I'm trying to work here."

Tyrone aimed down his sights for Onyx and fired. The first bullet missed Onyx, but this was enough to get his attention. He grabbed a pony soldier and dragged them in front of him to take the bullets. The pony let out a surprised yelp and flailed his little legs as he got all shot up. When Tyrone had finished firing, Onyx looked straight at him and made a mental note

to claim his life, as he took offense that someone would shoot at him on the field of battle. Allied soldiers began to fall and retreat while the ponies still advanced. "Keep moving! They are retreating!" Onyx ordered as he sliced the head off of a nearby Russian soldier. The ponies would soon take the highway. That is when an explosion went off in the distance to the left.

"Was that HQ?" asked Zone-Tan.

Dmitry turned and shook his head. “Pay attention!” Then he turned to Irish. "You, Tyrone and Ezio get over there and find out!"

Irish nodded. "Come on, let’s move!" he called as he began to run in the direction of HQ.

“They don’t need us here?” Tyrone asked. “I was just hittin’ my groove.”

“Eh, sitting here is boring. These missions are more our style!”

That was approximately the time when Daniel opened his eyes. His head felt several sizes too big, probably from brain swelling, and all he could hear was a high-pitched squeal. He was still knocked for a loop from the grenade’s explosion, so it took him a moment to figure out just where he was and how he got there. The events prior to the blast started to fall back into place in his mind, which was when he remembered what had happened to Bella and Claire, and that Tom had been with him when the explosion went off. He didn’t really need to think about it; when he looked about, he could see the damage which had obliterated Tom’s bedroom. Even the charred bodies were nowhere to be seen amidst the debris that he had to shove off of himself. Daniel rolled onto his stomach and gazed around the destroyed bedroom. "T. To. Tom!" gasped Daniel, choking up a cloud of dust. The tinnitus he was hearing started to tone down, but there was no answer.

"To. Tom!?" called Daniel once more as he started to climb to his feet. Again, no answer. Daniel reached down and pulled his AK47 out from underneath a bit of rubble then moved out of the bedroom and into the upstairs hallway. "Tom!?" he called. Yet again, there was no answer. He was beginning to think Tom was nowhere in the building. Considering the state the structure was in, that was a pretty reasonable assertion. Daniel staggered towards the stairs leading down to the bottom floor of the house. He was still feeling unsure about himself after the explosion, and his legs trembled under the weight of his body. "Tom? You down there?" continued Daniel as he made his way down the stairs.

Daniel moved through Tom's living room and made his way out the back door into the garden. He let out a gasp and recoiled back at the disturbing sight that lay before him: Three dead ponies. All of them had been violently gutted. Daniel could tell this act was perpetrated with a blade, judging by a bloody knife still sticking out of the third pony. This looked to be the work of a very angry and depressed man, Daniel reasoned. Not exactly unlike someone who had just lost their lover and child. This was obviously the work of Tom. Daniel shook his head. He hated the ponies with every bone in his body, but no one, nopony, deserved to die in such a brutal way as having their intestines trailed around the yard like a garden hose.

"Tom!?" cried Daniel as he started to make his way back over the garden fences. With each fence that he jumped he found yet another dead pony. The first had its neck snapped. After jumping the second fence, he found one with its brains bashed in by a large rock, which was still lodged into its head. "Shit, Tom. I’m gonna need to have a look at your DVD collection when this is over.” By the looks of things, Tom had well and truly lost it, but surely crazy Tom would never go berserk on the enemy.

Daniel returned the main street where Jax Teller and his marines had been lined up. Daniel let out another weary sigh and shook his head in disappointment. By the looks of things, he was the only living person &/or thing in the entire street. Ponies and men lay spread out through the street, just like in his nightmares, all with their own bullet holes to show off. The ponies had obviously won this fight and had moved further on into the city. Daniel lowered his head and took a moment to mourn the brave soldiers who had died defending this once great city. He was halfway through his prayer when he heard a strained cry for help.

"Hell. Help me, please,” the voice stuttered.

Daniel raised his head and looked around. He couldn't see who it was that was crying for help, or where they were. "Hello?" he called out, searching the piles of bodies.

"Help. Over here!" came the voice again, sounding as if it was having a hard time raising its volume.

That's when Daniel noticed a hand raise up from under the bodies of two resistance soldiers. “Oops.” He’d been standing on someone. He swung his AK47 over his shoulder by its strap and saw Jax Teller's head, left arm and his shoulders were sticking out from underneath two dead soldiers. Daniel grabbed his arm with both hands. "Don't worry, I got you." Daniel struggled to pull Jax out from underneath the bodies, and was rewarded by yet another disturbing and nightmare worthy sight. By the looks of Jax's torso, he’d been directly hit with a grenade launcher’s shell. His rib cage was sticking out through his shirt and his organs could clearly be seen quivering like shiny, scalded masses of flan. Daniel hadn’t endured something this hard since Rainbow Dash had raped him.

Jax struggled to lift his head and look down at his own torso. Daniel turned his head away and took a moment to catch his breath. "Oh. Oh God. " Jax had managed to see his obviously fatal wound, and began to cry. He knew he was going to die, and that sucked. The pain was becoming unbearable. "Oh, oh God, no. No, please, God, no, no, no. No, God, please, why, no please, why, God, why, God, oh God, please, no, please, please, please, God, please, no, why, oh no."

"Shit. I'm sorry, man. Shit." Daniel didn't know what the right words to say were in such a situation, so he just shrugged and shook his head. If only those Hallmark people were here.

Jax continued on in much the same manner. "Ooh, God, it hurts. Damn, it hurts so…so bad.. Ow."

"I don't know what to do, man. I'm sorry. I really don't." Daniel could only apologize so much. He was feeling useless, and that very thought was depressing him.

"Why couldn't they just eat me alive like they used to do?" Jax asked.

"Huh?"

"The ponies. Three years ago, they used to eat humans they slew on the field of battle."

Daniel blinked. "I…I don't know, man."

Jax let out a painful groan. "Please, just…just kill me. I can't take the pain."

Daniel shook his head. "I dunno, I kind of feel weird about that sort of thing."

"Please! Please euthanize me. My life has become unbearable and I can't take it anymore."

Daniel rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, okay," he said with a heavy sigh.

Jax closed his eyes. "Make it quick."

Daniel pulled out his knife. He didn't get a lot of use out of it, ordinarily. "I promise you won't feel a thing." Daniel took Jax's head in one hand.

Jax opened one eye. "What are you doing?"

"I was…gonna stab your brain," Daniel said.

"What? That's not quick! I'll be bleeding out in even more pain for hours! Just use your gun!"

"Eh, I've read guns can still be pretty messy. Plus, I'm not exactly the best shot in all the world?"

"What? You just press the barrel against my forehead and pull!"

"Yeah, but I read you can get braindead from that, and not actually dead. Then you're, like, a vegetable. You'll still be in pain." He added as an afterthought, "Plus, I wanna save my ammo for the ponies."

Jax sighed and rolled his eyes. "It's never bothered me when I put down a dog back in California. Some of them were even rabid."

"Should I just use the knife? The only other thing I have is some grappling rope and it takes a long time to strangle someone, too. Plus I kind of just got discharged from the hospital, so stabbing you will be hard enough as it is."

"Well, geez, at this point I'm hoping you just brought some vodka and prescription medicine."

Daniel shook his head. "Anything you want me to do before you, um, die?"

Jax sighed and rolled his eyes. "Could you tell me I was a good soldier?"

"Sure thing. I mean, I didn't know you at all. I never met you before today, so…"

"Just say anything! Oh, and one more thing. Tell my motorcycle I love her."

Daniel nodded. "You did good. You won't be forgotten." As he paused to think up something more to say, he got distracted with staring at Jax's open torso and reached in to poke one of his lungs.

Jax opened his eyes again. "Stop that." He shut them again and waited for the stab. Without further ceremony, Daniel plunged his blade into the back of Jax's head with greater ease than expected. Jax's eyes flung open in shock, which surprised Daniel, so he hurriedly jostled the blade around. The knife pierced Jax's cranium, and within a split second, it was lights out for Jax. Daniel shook his head. The casualties of war were quickly beginning to take their toll on Daniel. He didn't know how much more he could take.

Daniel holstered his weapon and let out a sigh as he took a moment to honour Jax Teller and the sacrifices that he had made. "May you rest in peace, comrade. Well, pieces." Then he ran his hand down across Jax's face, gently pulling his eyes lids down over his cold, dead and haunting eyes. He wondered if he could pass for a brain surgeon, but remembered all the medical schools had been bombed by ponies, so he rose to his feet and took hold of his AK47.

Taking a deep breath, Daniel headed in the direction of the ponies' march. He moved silently through the streets, following in the path of destruction that was left in their wake. It took him ten minutes before he found another sign of life apart from the distant sounds of gunfire, explosions and the cries of men and women alike. They truly were the sounds of death, like an album the Fox network might put out. What he found was not a welcoming sign for Daniel: A group of twelve ponies were searching the surrounding buildings. He quickly dove behind a group of trash cans then readied his riffle. Peering through the gap between the cans, he counted up the dozen ponies. "Twelve. Shit." He ejected his ammo magazine to check how many rounds he had left. "Shit," he said again. He only had ten rounds left. Even if he could manage to take down each pony with one bullet, he still wouldn't have enough to take down all twelve. Twelve minus ten is two, so he would need two more bullets to kill all the ponies. Daniel slipped the ammo clip back into the AK47. *Save that for a last resort,* he thought to himself.

Daniel now had to think of a different plan. He looked around for another possible escape route. The alley to his left had a building on either side, which was sort of what made it an alley in the first place. The building to the left of the alley was the old Red Sun comic book store, and the one to the right was the Rising Sun Chinese takeout shop. It was called a "Chinese" take away even though people typically complain that the food isn't genuine Chinese cuisine, despite every employee working there being of Chinese origin. He didn't name them, so he decided not to dwell on the matter. What was important was that both buildings had back doors leading out into the alley. Daniel lay on the dirty, grimy ground and began to commando crawl through foamy puddles and across foetid trash into the alleyway. The door to the right, which led into the Chinese takeout, was wide open. "Well, when one door closes, another opens," joked Daniel, trying to make light of his situation. Luckily, nobody was around to hear him. He crawled in through the doorway, managing to avoid being detected by the ponies.

Once inside, Daniel had a quick look around. He was in the take away's kitchen. He jumped to his feet and shut the door behind himself. "Well, I guess I'm better at stealth than I thought," he said aloud to nobody before giving a chuckle. He turned back away from the door and gave a quick glance around the kitchen. Everything seemed normal at first, like a standard commercial kitchen for any entrepreneurial business. The floor was sticky, filthy dishes cluttered the counters, and bags of monosodium glutamate littered the area. The air was heavy with the smelly of enticing albeit salty food, and beneath that was the unmistakable scent of hamsters. Daniel raised his AK47, before making his way through a set of double doors.

As he approached them, he recoiled at the sight of a blood stain across the doors. He readied his weapon for whatever lay behind the set of double doors. At first, he raised his left boot, inching it towards the doors, then nudged the one on the right. It drifted open with pep, letting out a tiring screech on its rusty, stained hinges. Behind the set of doors was a dusty counter, and beyond that was a waiting room which had been tainted with permeable darkness. Daniel took a deep breath of the sweet and sour air and stepped through the opening. His right foot sank into a thick pool of blood. He jumped back with a gasp and looked down to the deep red pool at his feet. "What the fuck?"

Coming from somewhere in the murky darkness, he could hear a muffled moan and a squelching sound. Daniel quickly pointed his AK all around at the shadows. *What the hell is that?* he wondered to the rhythm of his pounding heart. "Only one way to find out," he said to himself. He tread into the darkness, taking each step with great care. After walking through that kitchen, his shoes would forever stick to where they stepped, making a flatulent sort of sucking sound as they pulled away from the floor. Beads of sweat rolled off of his forehead, and he had no idea what he would find. Disappearing into the interior shade, his eyes gradually adjusted to the inky blackness. He could then make out the shape of a single door on the far left wall, to which he made his way over. As he drew close, he could once again feel the thick, sticky blood suckling at his boots. He did his best to ignore the feeling. The last five feet between Daniel and the door was taking far too long for comfort, and his anxiety approached right along with him with every step. Could anyone blame him for his fear? After all, he had no idea what was behind those doors, and the amount of blood, mixed with the weird noises coming from the other side of this door, was not a good indication to what Daniel might find.

The moment of truth was at hand, or at least the door handle was. Daniel stood at arm's length from the men's restroom. He took a deep breath, wiped a layer of sweat from his forehead, and reached out with his left hand. He tried to grab at the panel and pull, but it wouldn't open. It was a push door. It opened inward. He instead pressed his hand against the door and pushed. The door swung open, and Daniel let out a gasp and recoiled back at the gruesome sight which lay in front of him. His jaw dropped as the loo lights flickered on and off and the stench of blood and guts smothered him like a nanny putting a child to bed.

The overpowering reek was the result of a paralysed pony, laying on the floor with one hoof raised in a plea for help. Its stomach was opened up like a sack of Halloween candy, and there was Tom, both hands full of squishy pony intestines. He was pulling them out like the way one draws a bucket from an old well, and he had this bug-like look on his face as he looked the pony in its dead eyes. He was silent, so Daniel was sickened by the grotesque squelching of its innards slipping out from the

gore and ordure that was its abdomen. Just looking at Tom made him feel green. He turned away and threw up all over the boring carpet of the restaurant. He straightened up for a moment, hugging his stomach, then stooped over to vomit once again. When he stood again, he held up one finger as though expecting to eject his contents once more, but he nodded when he determined he could keep it down for now.

The whole time, Tom hadn't even turned his gaze from his victim. He had reached the end of the pony's entrails as though unaware Daniel was there. He was lost in a world of his own; some sick, twisted and demented world. Daniel placed his right hand on Tom's shoulder. Tom responded with a belligerent cry, devoid of knowable human emotion, and swatted his friend away. He bounded to his feet, seized Daniel by the neck, and marched him into the wall. Daniel dropped his AK47; he wanted to disarm to show Tom he meant no harm, and the weapon was knocked out of his hand once he was slammed.

"Tom! It's me!" Daniel's words were choked. Tom was cradling his throat in a furious death grip. He tried to look his best friend in the eyes and got a fleeting glimpse of a maddened, bloodshot stare. He thought Tom's soul had left his body, and he had fully transferred over to the crazy category. He wasn't Tom anymore. He was like a wildebeest.[19] Daniel reached for his sidearm before he could tell himself not to. Tom's and Daniel's grips both tightened, but Daniel's was squeezing the trigger of his M9 Beretta to lodge a hot bullet right down into his companion's thigh. The pair parted almost like two dancers at the end of a song. Tom hobbled back, hunching over sort of like a bow, and Daniel clutched his neck which would soon show signs of bruising.

"You need to snap out of this!" Daniel's voice was hoarse. He couldn't stop his shallow coughing, but he willed himself to keep standing. He watched as Tom stumbled towards the pony and grabbed a knife he'd used to disembowel the creature. Tom rounded on Daniel with his teeth clenched, then sprang up from his knees. Before he could think, fear dictated his next action, and Daniel sent a bullet whizzing forward into the dimly lit scene and straight into the figure crouched ahead.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence as Daniel steadied the trigger. He stood, holding the weapon, his eyes locked on Tom who staggered back. Tom looked down at left shoulder where blood was now oozing out of the fresh wound. He looked up to Daniel and gave him a cold scowl as though he did not feel the surging pain weighing down the entire side of his body. It was a miracle his entire shoulder had not ripped off from that shot. Daniel stuttered, but didn't lower his weapon. "Look, Tom, just snap out of it, please!" Tom remained silent and instead just continued to give Daniel that unnerving stare. "Tom, please! You need to snap out of this! We need to get you to a doctor!" Daniel continued to beg, still keeping the weapon raised just in case. Tom took a step forward. Daniel pulled the hammer back on his Beretta and aimed it at Tom's head. "Stop! I mean it! I don't want to do this! I don't! Don't make me do it!" Tears began to build up in Daniel's eyes.

Tom took another step forward. "Do it," he whispered. "Or I will slit your throat, you pony scum!" His voice was hoarse, probably from doing so much screaming beforehand.

Daniel let out a gasp. Tom really had gone crazy. He never talked about slitting throats before. This meant that the chance Daniel would have to kill him just doubled. "Tom, please! It's me, Daniel! You know me. Look at my face!"

Tom shook his head slowly. "Kill me, just like you did to my family, or I will kill you, just like I did to him." Tom pointed to the pony who was still lying on the floor with its guts spilt everywhere. Tom had removed the head and spinal cord and placed the head where the pony's butt was. "Your time is running low, pony. Either give me back my family just as they were, or kill me dead!"

Daniel took a step back which now put him back into the waiting area of the restaurant. He shook his head. "I won't kill you," he said, lowering his weapon.

Tom gave a grin. "Then you shall die." He moved towards Daniel at a steady walking pace.

Daniel staggered backwards, holding out a hand. "Tom, stop! Just stop this! Please! Don't do this! Stop it, Tom! I mean it! I mean it, please, stop! Don't do this and stop! Stop and don't do this, Tom! Tom? Tom, please! Just, please, Tom! Please stop this, Tom. Stop and stop this, Tom. Please just, Tom." The words just bounced off of Tom, who continued his approach. Daniel kept backing up until he backed into a wall. "Tom, ponies are colourful, waist-high and walk on four legs. I'm bipedal, Tom! Bipedal! That means I have *two* legs! Why are you going nutsoid like this, Tom? Did you go bonkers when you had to shoot me? Did you become a loony whack job when your parents got bombed by the pony Luftwaffe? Do you think my mind cracked like a walnut because James died? Or Laura? Shit, my soul aches, but at least I can tell who's a talking horse or not! Bella cried for days when her father, John, bought it; she didn't go postal! Christ, let's not do this all over again, Tom!"

"Beg all you want, pony. I ain't going to stop." Tom raised the knife and Daniel raised his handgun.

"I'm not a fucking pony! Oh, god dammit. I'm sorry." Daniel sighed and squeezed the trigger. The gun just clicked.

[19] Daniel's opinion on wildebeest does not reflect that of the editing staff.

Tom let out a laugh. "Looks like you're out of bullets." Then suddenly, a bullet came flying through the shop window and dug itself deep into Tom's neck. He gasped and dropped his knife as blood began to squirt out of his neck. He dropped to his knees and unsteadily tried to lay himself down on his side.

"No!" Daniel dropped his gun and rushed to cup his hands over Tom's wound in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding. Tom fell onto his back, and Daniel knelt next to him, applying heavy pressure to his wound. This is when Tom began to spit out his own blood, and even began to choke on it. "No! Stay with me! Come on, damn you, stay with me!" cried Daniel.

The establishment's door opened and a small group of people entered, consisting of a woman who looked to be in her late thirties or early forties, a younger woman who looked to be in her twenties, and a man of similar age to that of the first woman. The man was holding a hunting riffle. He had been the one to shoot Tom. "Help me, please!" cried Daniel.

"Ian Brandon Anderson, what have you done this time?" cried the older woman as she rushed to Tom's side.

"He was going to hurt him, Amy! What the hell do you suppose I should have done?" barked Ian.

"He said 'please' at any rate!" The older woman who went by the name "Amy" looked to Daniel. "I need you to remove your hands so I can see the wound."

"No! No, if I do, he will bleed to death!" responded Daniel.

"Trust me, I'm a doctor! It says so on my t-shirt. Okay, I need to know how deep the bullet went. Was it a few centimetres? More than a few? A couple of inches?" Daniel sputtered in confusion and removed his hands from Tom's neck so he could count on his fingers. "Take my word for it, it's important," Amy said. "I had a teacher who was obsessed with measuring things." Amy looked at the wound, before taking Daniel's hands and cupping them back around it. "Okay, the glass seemed to slow the bullet down. I can see it, and I am certain I can remove it. The problem is I have to act fast, and all my equipment is back at the apartment, so we are going to need you help in moving him okay? I mean, 'your'." Daniel gave a nod in response, so she said, "Okay, good! Ian, help carry him. Rachael, take these." She threw the younger girl a set of apartment keys.
"Go and make sure my equipment is ready to go, and that I have a place clear to operate."

Rachael caught the keys and nodded. "Okay, mum!" Then off she went. Ian put the riffle over his shoulder and ran over to Tom. Amy took over for Daniel in covering Tom's wound, whilst Daniel and Ian grabbed hold of Tom's arms and legs and lifted him off of the ground.

"Okay, Ian, lead the way!" said Amy. Ian led the group out of the take away and Daniel followed. They had little time to save Tom's life. He was bleeding to death and fast! Only time would tell if they would succeed or if Tom would die.

Chapter Twenty-Nine.

Phantoms of death. Medical civilians. Rinsing off.

Looking every which way as he went, Yuri Raslov rushed through the streets of central Moscow, having been given the personal order of defending the evacuation zone in the centre of Moscow, which was to where all the civilians had been instructed to congregate. This was an order Yuri gladly accepted as he hoped to find Soap amongst the thousands of worried civilians. The EVAC zone was guarded by one hundred soldiers and there were thousands of civilians piling into all the buses Moscow had. Luckily the ponies were nowhere near this point. This meant that the civilians were being more "civil" than they would if they were under fire, more or less. They were all lining up patiently waiting for their turn to board a thirty passenger bus which then made a fast get away out of the back of Moscow.

Yuri swung his AK47 over his shoulder and pushed his way through the lines and up to the guards near the buses. In between each bus was a desk with five soldiers taking the civilians' names and ticking them off of the list of people living in Moscow. This list was digital and had been implemented during the first year of the pony invasion to ensure that no undercover operatives working for the ponies could get in. Each soldier had a small laptop which they used to tick off the civilian names, which made it easier for Yuri to ask if Soap had gotten on any of the buses as each soldier with one of the laptops would be able to easily find out, provided he could get through the lines. One older red-haired woman wearing a very expensive dress, hat and mink stole was smiling cheerily at a soldier and trying to convince him without success to send some soldiers to her house to help move her things out. One woman reporter was trying to weasel information out of another soldier as her bumbling partner pushed his glasses up his nose and begged her to board the bus. A hermaphrodite named Flo was asking a third soldier whether the transport was properly insured.

Luckily, as a military operative, he could just cut ahead. "Excuse me, ma'am. I'm sorry to stop you during your work, but I need to ask you for an important favour."

The volunteer was a young, pale woman with lots of lip gloss, eye shadow, and earrings of little cartoon animals. She had on a knit cap with sewn animal ears and a winter jacket with Japanese writing on it and more strange cartoon images. “Omigosh, no problem,” she said. “Just gotta make it snappy, alright?”

"I just need you to search a name for me, just to—“

The woman interrupted him from over-explaining. “Okay, sure, yeah, what’s the gentleman’s name?”

"Soap MacTavish.”

“M-A-C, or M-C?” The woman gave a nod and typed in his name. “Okay, awesome. Like, I don’t have a ‘Soap MacTavish’, but I do have ‘John MacTavish’ who goes by the alias, ‘Soap’. But he hasn’t been through, either. Sorry!”

Yuri nodded and tapped his fist lightly on the table. "Okay, thank you,” he said before hurrying out of line. He continued searching for Soap amidst the queues, but he was nowhere to be seen. "God damn it, Soap, where are you?”

A woman overheard him. “Gosh darn it, soap! That’s what I forgot to bring!”

Soap MacTavish could feel his ears burning. He awoke from his alcohol-induced slumber to the sound of a Humvee blowing up in the adjacent street over. He found himself in a closed dumpster where he’d routinely been trying to avoid Yuri, and thanks to his alcoholic state he had fallen asleep, so you can see why drinking is such a popular social pastime. The sound of gunfire and screaming women and children took little mercy on his hangover. At first Soap thought he was having another nightmare, but it became quite clear to him he was not when a stray bullet flew through the dumpster and burrowed into his left elbow. He let out an agonized cry and shot up out of the bin, casting his first sight of the wide-awake nightmare outside.

Soap was in one of the newly-pony-occupied streets of Moscow. Hundreds upon thousands of bodies littered the asphalt, and there were very few soldiers left on the street still fighting. Even fewer civilians were left alive to attempt a last futile run for their lives. "Dear God," gasped Soap, but he quickly abandoned this dictation as he crawled out of the dumpster and took cover behind it. Hiding in the alleyway, he remained unseen by the thousands of ponies that were marching down the streets, shouting “Sieg Heil!” and killing the few humans who remained. Soap quickly took his belt off and wrapped it tight around his fresh bullet wound. This hurt so Soap had to bite his bottom lip to stop himself from screaming. His adrenalin had kicked in to combat the alcohol in his system, which magically made him feel sober and forget about the pain in his head. He knew he needed to get out of here, but where could he go?

An elderly woman fell at the opposite end of the alley. She had three bullets in her back and she was choking on her own blood. The woman's head was facing towards Soap, and the two of them made eye contact. Soap froze. He felt a pain in the pit of his stomach as the dying woman stared into his eyes and left a burning mark on his soul. Her withered hand rose and pointed directly in his direction. "Help me," she gasped desperately, in the Slavic tongue. Soap knew he couldn't help her, and for some reason he couldn't take his eyes off of her. Soap felt horrible, and the fact that he could do nothing brought tears to his eyes and a sickly feeling to his stomach. A pony stepped up over to her and put a gun to her head. It squeezed the trigger as if it was batting a fly. Soap closed his eyes as the gunshot rang through the alley and the crone let out her final breath. The pony hadn't seen Soap, so it just kept on moving.

Soap lowered his head in shame. "God has abandoned us," he muttered to himself. He climbed to his feet and rushed into the alley entrance of the building closest to him. Once inside, he slammed the door behind him, dropped to his knees and began to cry manly tears. He licked them as they streamed down his cheeks past his lips. They tasted salty. The many casualties of this war were taking their toll on everyone, and it was only a matter of time before there would be more. No one could have ever been remotely prepared for the heart ache that was to ensue in the coming hours, and most of all, no one had really been far even as decided to use even go want to do look more like.

Soap crept along in this manner for some time, moving from building to alley to building and avoiding the outside world. His vision was starting to blue, and he felt dizzy and dosineitred. He thought muttering aloud to himself would help, "Just need to keep moving and find the resistance," but somehow it just slowed down his pace more. He staggered into the lobby of the Red Star Hotel and got about five steps in before collapsing to his knees. A painful bout of nausea swept through him as though someone wear pouring a frothy pitcher of sick into him. It rumbled in his intestines like a buoyant stone, cramping his stomach until emanating waves of pain paralysed him. Perspiration rolled down his face like thick layers of cake frosting, and his body shivered even though his extremities were hot and tingling like pinpricks. He wasn't sure what was happening, but he had a pretty good guess that some small bullet fragments were still lodged into his arm. This was bad as it probably meant that by this point at least one of those fragments had entered his blood stream, giving him a *bad* case of lead poisoning.

"Come on, you pussy, you can't die now. Not like this.” Vulgar insults always motivated Soap. He gagged several times, but soon lost the battle with his stomach to expel its contents through his gullet and onto the floor, leaving a nasty stain. There was a nasty strain and the caustic vomit was streaming hard against the roof of his mouth to ricochet outwards. After

three or four minutes of puking, Soap collapsed face-down in his emesis like a hungry dog. Too weak to move, he just lay there, feeling humiliated and fed up. He wasn't even scared. Soap had been around far too much death in his life to even care when it stared him in face, although it wasn't usually any better-smelling than his barf. After the fifth time he told himself he ought to, Soap managed to roll onto his back and just stared up at the hotel lobby's ceiling. *Fuck my life*, he thought to himself as darkness began to seep into his sight.

A shadowy figure appeared in his view, and it wasn't Lamont Cranston.[20] "Are you really going to give up this easy?" asked the silhouette with the familiar voice.

Soap squinted to try and make out the darkened face of the figure. "I can't." He didn't like to say it, but it was the quickest answer he could give, and he wanted the pain to be over.

"You can't what? Move? A man paralysed from the neck down can't move. You're feeling a bit sick is all, and you're going to let that stop you?"

"How did you know I was feeling sick?" asked Soap. He really must have been sick if he didn't realize what a stupid question that was.

"It's obvious. You're sweaty and pale and laying in a pile of puke. I would have to be a fucking moron not to figure it out." It was a very foul-mouthed silhouette. Soap knew the voice. It sounded like John Price. But no! Surely not. The figure leaned downwards, and Soap drew in his foul breath as a familiar face emerged in his shadowy vision. It *was* Price. "You look like you've seen a ghost," he said.

" You're dead!" It wasn't much of a way to greet a friend.

"Yeah, and you will be too if you don't keep on truckin'. Now don't give me any of that 'I can't' shit. All the shit we went through in the past few shit years, and you're shit going to let yourself be shit taken out by a shit bullet to the shit arm? Seriously?" Price quirked an eyebrow, then gave Soap a phantom kick. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself![21] Get your ass up! Keep moving! Being dead isn't a good feeling, trust me, I know!"

Figment or not, Soap picked himself off the floor at Price's behest, unable to even bring forth another faecal-oriented obscenity. He could've used one right about then, because the hotel didn't have a second alley entrance on the ground floor. He slumped against the inside of the front entrance and peered out through the tinted glass doors. He grabbed the handle and started to pull when he was interrupted by Price again.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you."

"And why not?" Soap asked.

"It's a push door."

Soap let go of the handle and pressed his palm to the cool metal instead. "You're just my imagination. John Price is dead."

"Did you actually see me die? Or were you just told that by a doctor.? For all you know my heart stopped for a moment. My doctor thought I was dead, then went off to tell you the bad news. During that time, my heart could have restarted, and I could have been fine. I mean it's perfectly logical isn't it?" Price was smiling. Soap shook his head at his words and gazed out through the doors to watch as a string of polo ponies marched down another street and out of view. He was becoming confused, and his blood loss and dehydration weren't helping much either. Even so, he knew something was off about Price, even if he couldn't focus the words to form the reason why. Knowing something is different from being able to explain it. When Soap said nothing in response, Price said, "All the same, I wouldn't step out into that street."

Soap decided to ignore the dead man who was insulting him. Price wouldn't smile at him while he was dying in a rush. He pushed open the door and stepped onto the unseasonably warm street. "I wouldn't do that if I was you!" called Price as Soap reached the end of the sidewalk. Soap promptly discovered why as an explosion went off an inch away from him. His ears popped, and he was thrown up high. For a moment, everything slowed down for Soap as he just drifted through the air. His ears gave a piercing ringing sound, and he had a strong pain just below his right knee. He came crashing down onto the pavement as the roller coaster came to a halt. The lower half of his right leg landed next to him with a thump. Soap stared at the bloody stump, utterly dumbstruck.

"I warned you," said Price's voice.

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[20] The name of *The Shadow*, for those of you over a hundred years old.

[21] A phrase popular with teenage girls wanting people to get past their own problems so they can pay more attention to *them*.

The first time Soap opened his eyes, he only saw the underside of the awning outside the Red Star Hotel, where the doorman stashed bottles of Everclear without clearing away the spider webs where dead bugs still hung like forgotten leftovers at the back of a fridge. The second time he opened his eyes, his vision was too blurry to make out anything, though he thought he heard indistinct voices and felt hands stroking all along his body. He imagined some kind of spiritual host beckoning him onwards to the great beyond, even though as a soldier he was too nihilistic to believe in an afterlife. The third time, he could feel his heart beating like never before, and heard the blood rushing through his head. He found himself on a creaky bed that felt like it might not hold up his weight for long. He tied to raise an arm to block out the blinding ceiling light, but a gentle hand pressed his limb back down again. He squinted and blinked and looked in the direction of this person, and when his vision eventually cleared, he found himself almost touching noses with an unfamiliar woman.

"Shush. It's okay," the woman said. "You're in Apartment 11C on the south end of Moscow. That's a city in Russia, you remember that? We've set up a medical triage here. We saved your life, but you're probably a little fuzzy on that."

Soap settled back down on the bed and sighed. He felt so peaceful, he thought he was dead. Soap calmed down as his memory came back to him. He remembered being shot, throwing up, passing out and then finding Price. He remembered Price being an asshole, and then he remembered a loud bang. That was about it. "Is it over? Did I miss the whole battle?" he asked, and grew more excited. "Did the humans win? Is Moscow saved?"

The woman bent open a Venetian blind. Outside were many streams of smoke and the hail of gunfire. "Oh, no, the siege is pretty much still on. We just evacuated the last load of wounded, and there's talk of abandoning this zone of the city altogether."

"I don't suppose you found anyone else with me," Soap asked, knowing the answer full well.

"It was just you. No one else was there," the woman said as she tidied up the disorderly room. "It's just as well we found you. You weren't walking anywhere."

Soap looked down and a moan escaped him. His right leg was missing to the upper thigh, which had fresh bandages wrapped all around it. Now he remembered the bomb going off. He remembered losing his leg and his dead friend vanishing from his view. Soap's response was to sigh.

"I know that seems bad, but I used to work as a PA for soldiers who had lost limbs. It gets better. I promise your life will not change." The woman had an insincere smile.

Soap looked ten times as unconvinced, and he waggled his head around to give her a look. "What's your name?"

"Lauren." She giggled and wrinkled her nose. "What's yours?"

Soap ignored her question. "Look, Lauren. I know your trying to make me feel better but I would appreciate if you just quit the shit! Okay! I know what this makes me now! It makes me a useless piece of shit!"

Lauren dropped her jaw at his ableist outburst. "That's not true. I know it seems that way now—"

"Cut the shit!" interrupted Soap, which was not a phrase used to thank someone for rescuing you. "The only thing I have been good at my whole life is taking lives in the name of a country or cause. How the hell do I make a living now? No one is going to take a crippled freak!" barked Soap before breaking down into tears.

Lauren shook off his abuse. She knew he was going through a tough time, so she opted to give him carte blanche to imply that differently abled people were incapable of providing for themselves. This was okay, because she really didn't have the luxury to repeat herself ad nausea out of the pamphlet on "So you've lost a major limb". She wasn't really included anyway, because Soap kept bemoaning his fate.

"Now what? I'm just supposed to become a civilian? Just get some boring old job with bad pay and pretend everything is fine? Sit back and watch as war claims the lives of more of my friends? No, that ain't any type of life. You should've just left me to die," Soap said. It feels good to blame others, much in the way it feels good to scratch a mosquito bite. He slapped his face into his palms and sobbed. "I'm not ready to explore my dream of becoming a professional gamer yet."

Lauren rolled her eyes. "Look, buddy, I have been helping men like you for years. I know that at this point nothing I say will make you feel better, so I'm going to leave you alone for a while and let you get over what happened. If you need me, give me a call. I'll be in the next room if you need me, Soap."

Soap fell back into bed as he realized she already knew his name. She must have checked his dog tags. Asking him his name was a test of his mental state, and now he came across as unready for the challenges ahead. It was just as well. He didn't feel ready. He thought she'd left the room, but she'd paused at the doorway. "If you don't mind me asking, why do they call you Soap?"

"It ain't a nickname; it's my actual name," he lied.

"Oh. Well, that's different." She slipped out of the room, and just as Soap tried to rest his head, he heard an indistinguishable ruckus not unlike a door being thrown open and a bundle of people hurrying inside. Just as he was about to relax, his interest was piqued by the panicked conversations between Lauren and a flurry of other voices.

"Quick get him onto the table!" ordered Amy as Ian and Daniel brought Tom into the apartment. Some children in the living room had been watching Fireman Sam on the television and screamed at all the blood.

"What happened?" asked Lauren who was clearing off the table for them.

"No time to tell you what the patient is suffering from! Just clear the table!" Amy said, even though "shot in shoulder" would have been quicker. Lauren cleared the stacks of books and paper off of it with one quick swipe of her arm, knocking them all onto a Siberian husky who was napping on the floor. The mutt got up with a whine and wandered off, insulted, into the other room. Ian and Daniel then lifted Tom up onto the table. Ian then held Tom down by his shoulders whilst Daniel applied as much pressure as humanly possible to Tom's neck wound without strangling the man. "Rachael, get my medical bag! Now!" ordered Amy. "Now, now, now!" she screamed. "Kids, now is the time to panic." The children looked away from their television and screamed again.

Rachael raced into another room before returning almost instantly with the bag. Amy snatched the bag and opened it with great haste. Tom was still choking on his own blood and seizing up on the table, and his heart rate was beginning to slow. "You need to move fast! He's dying!" cried Daniel. "Gotta go fast!"

"Give me a minuet!" snapped Amy, who needed the music to pace herself. The heat of the moment was getting the better of everyone!

"Amelia Rosepond, concentrate! The man's right. This guy don't look too good," said Ian.

"Look, if you want this man to live, then you has got to give me a minuet! I do all my best operating to music! I need the correct equipment, and I need space to breathe! Shouting at me only makes me panic! I panic and I make mistakes. I make mistakes and this man dies!" As she hyperventilated, Amy took out a pair of surgical tweezers, a set of clamps, a morphine shot, a roll of bandages, and a bottle of disinfectant. She wiped sweat from her forehead and took a deep breath then picked up two clamps and looked to Daniel. "Okay, I need you to listen to me very carefully. If you don't listen carefully, all sorts of horrible things will happen to your friend here, so I don't want you to get distracted and think about what those might be. First, I'm going to attach a clamp to each side of the bullet wound, then I'm going to stretch it out as much as possible so that I can go in and take out the bullet. The problem is when I do this you will need to hold the clamps, and you can't panic or make any mistakes. Not one single mistake. You need to be absolutely perfect. Once I stretch the wound loose, he will begin to lose blood a lot faster than he is now. There is absolutely no room for mistakes here. Do I make myself clear?"

Daniel gave a nod and gave a gulp. "I got it."

"Too late! Now move your hands away." Amy shoved Daniel aside and clamped down on two bits of Tom's flesh at either side of the gunshot wound. She pulled the wound open, and Daniel was hit right in the forehead by a spray of Tom's blood. Daniel let out a dry gag as his entire face got squirted. "Take the clamps!" snapped Amy, who had no time for his shenanigans. He took hold of the clamps on command and turned his head away. This whole process was making him feel very, very sick. Amy took hold of the clamps and peered into Tom's gaping wound, but she couldn't see much. "Rachael, get the torch out of the bag and shine it on the wound!"

Rachael did as she was told, and she had the light on Tom's wound instantly. "Is he going to be okay?"

"Just keep the torch there," replied Amy, who was being careful not to make any promises that she knew fine well she would not one hundred percent be able to keep. She gave a clever smile when she could see the bullet shell lodged in Tom's neck. "It's always the last place you look," she said before sticking the surgical tweezers into Tom's neck. The tweezers made a horrible squelching sound as they pushed aside all the meat. Tom's neck looked not unlike an undercooked kielbasa. That was about all Daniel could handle. He made sure he was facing away from everyone, and then he threw up. A lot. He tried to apologize, but his words were substituted by another wave of sick coming up through his system. "You weak, weak fool! Lauren, take over for him and hold the clamps!" Amy said. "Serves me right for trusting in a man I don't know instead of a fellow medical professional I'm close friends with!"

Lauren stepped around the pool of Daniel's sick and took the clamps away from him, tutting as she did. Daniel excused himself into their bathroom, which could be seen from where they were, and continued to throw up into their toilet. "If you clog it up, the plunger's behind the door!" Lauren shouted.

Amy continued to push the tweezers deep into Tom's flesh until she was confident they were close enough to the bullet to grab it. Amy clamped the tweezers onto it and then slowly began to pull it out. Once it was out, she put down the tweezers. "Ooh, shiny. Lauren, remove the clamps and put pressure back onto the wound."

Lauren did as she was told. She removed the clamps and put pressure back onto the wound.

“So that's it? He's going to be all right now, right?" Rachael asked. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She had seen her mother perform several operations just like this today, but she was having a difficult time getting used to the gasping spectre of death, especially in so domestic a setting. She knew what her mother did for a living, and she liked to think of her mom saving lives. Up close, her work resembled some crude science experiment, playing with people’s lives.

"It's good, but we are not out of the woods yet,” Amy said. She wanted to hug her daughter, to tell her everything was going to be alright, that this was all part of what she did for a living, but she couldn’t right now. Her hands were busy. All the affection she could afford her offspring was one fleeting, furtive glance. Amy grabbed the bottle of disinfectant and a short bandage. She then poured some of the disinfectant onto the bandage and looked to Ian. "You need to hold him tight. This is going to hurt him, and he will flinch," she said.

“Bedamned, woman, I ken well that!” Ian put down more pressure onto Tom's shoulders. “Just do what you gotta do".

Amy took a deep breath then gave a nod to Lauren. Lauren removed her hands and Amy placed the bandage down onto Tom's neck and applied pressure. Tom let out a painful, exasperated wheeze that was supposed to be a scream. He couldn’t get his voice out, so he tried to flail around like a carp. Ian braced his weight down on Tom to hold him still.

"That's good. Now we need to stitch him up.” Amy grabbed a needle of thread and began to stitch just as Daniel returned to the room to boggle at all of these dramatic strangers. The sight of the needle piercing his friend’s flesh and the thread being pulled through his blood-soaked neck was too much for the military’s finest killer to bear. His eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed right onto the dog that had wandered back in, hungry. The dog yelped and leapt aside, then departed again. For the second time in only a short span, Daniel had once again gone unconscious.

Chapter Thirty.

Duplicity. Like father, like son. Discorderly conduct.

"I'm sorry to spring this onto you right now, but I really think we could use your help," said Johnson, as he marched down the narrow, pale white corridors of the main HQ with Discord and Kane.

“Why of course, Junior,” Discord said. “First, don’t look like the character you’re voicing. Second, start with a warm rinse before the lather, then a razor should do the trick. If not, kerosene and a match are sure to kill it dead.”

Avery stopped walking. He didn’t look happy. “I’m talking about the siege. Moscow is being invaded as we speak by ponies from your dimension.”

Discord shrugged. “Call the police?”

"After finding our home the way we found it, I would love nothing more than to engage in a bloodbath," said Kane.

Avery was happy to hear Kane’s enthusiasm, but a lingering scrutiny led him to ask Discord, “Don’t you have a human form, too? Soldiers take one look at your weird-ass body, they gonna shoot you on sight.”

“My unique physiology permits me most of the conveniences of you humans while still maintaining my true form.” Discord gazed proudly at his own manicure.

“Like nudity?” Avery addressed Kane. “That’s good to hear, anyway. I’d really appreciate if you could fly up and give us an aerial of the city. Air forces are a luxury we’ve afforded very little of. Just keep flying around, helping where you can.”

Kane nodded. Discord looked sceptical. “Oh, brilliant strategy, Napoleon.”

Kane was more eager than his master to aid the humans, even if the reasons behind his brother’s betrayal boiled in his brain. “It’s been a few good years since I have engaged in a brawl of such magnitude. It should be fun.”

Avery waved them both off. "That's great. Please go now" Discord gave a nod, and both he and Kane turned back the way they came and made their way to the exit of the building. Johnson continued on towards a service elevator which led underground down to the labs in which Andrew Grant worked. Johnson entered the elevator quickly and pressed the button which said “-12” which meant twelve floors down into the ground.

The elevator had an automated voice. "Please enter your authorisation code.” There was a number pad located next to the elevator panel. Johnson entered the numbers “3698217”. The artificial voice thanked him, then the elevator descended deep into the earth, below all of the secrets buried under Russia over its lengthy history personified by trouble. It sank beneath Ivan the Terrible’s torture chambers, beneath Catherine the Great’s canal system, and beneath the ancient, Byzantine libraries. The underground labs may not have been historical, but they were equally as impressive in terms of secrets. Only a few select personnel with the highest security clearance, including Johnson and Andrew and his staff, were even aware of its existence.

There were research and development labs on the surface, of course, which in itself was an incredible feat in the face of Equestrian oppression. After a five-minute descent, the elevator doors opened, and Johnson stepped out into yet another narrow corridor. At the end of this corridor was a metal door with “L-13” stencilled on it in white, and on the adjacent keypad, Johnson entered the numerals “36912”. The door shunted open, and Johnson stepped into a vast laboratory, busy with clutter, before the door shut behind him.

Andrew was in the lab with a young woman called Marcie, one of his few assistants for the secret lab. Most of his other assistants had no idea about them. Andrew spun around in his seat to greet Johnson, spun around too far and had to grab hold of a desk, then tried to turn back around. He turned too far and waited until he came to a stop again, using the desk to ensure he faced Avery. "Sergeant, we need to talk.”

"Yeah, I know we do. Kill the girl."

Marcie was sorting through some test tubes when she heard what Johnson said. She paused and her mouth dropped open like a goldfish. "Excuse me?"

Johnson and Andrew ignored her. “Really, sir?” Andrew asked. “It's hard to explain all the spontaneous deaths down here.”

"It's fine. I’m confident that after today, the resistance will be dead.” Johnson tugged his mouth sideways into a frown and shook his head. “Pity. They’re kind of the only thing keeping our species alive.”

Andrew shrugged. “If you insist. It won’t be so bad, though. We can retire!” Andrew grinned at Marcie, but frowned to realize she was panicking. "Oh, I'm sorry, Marcie, really I am, but you know, work is work!”

"Mr Grant, please don't! Please!" begged the woman. Her entire face had become splotchy and her bottom lip was trembling. Even her hair looked to be coming undone from its tight bun.

Andrew pursed his lips into a warm smile and stretched his arms out open. “Aw, Marcie. We’re only kidding! We’re sorry to scare you. Here, hug it out.” He waved his hands in a welcoming manner. Marcie let out a sigh of relief, rolling her head back as she walked into Andrew's open arms. He pulled her close and hugged her tightly, then he reached one hand out to a small metal table which had surgical tools on it. He grabbed a scalpel and dug it deep into the back of Marcie's skull. Her cranium made a crunching sound, her brains squished softly, and she loosed a death rattle. Andrew sighed and dumped her body to the floor like a used tissue. "What a waste of a good piece of ass.”

There was an unexplained sound of canned laughter, as though a studio audience was observing these events and finding it very funny. You’d be horrified at what testing audiences find funny. Johnson looked confused, but Andrew drew his iDroidBerry™ SmartPhone™ from his pocket. “It’s the Sycofanatics app,” he explained. “So, what's up?"

“It’s time to ensure victory for the ponies,” Johnson said.

"Look, sir, we’re on the same page here. The resistance won’t get their hands on the Silverbacks. They can’t physically be operated by a pony, but our human soldiers won’t get their mitts on them."

"Not what I was going to say. We need to make it look like we want to win this war, or our careers are toast. The Human Resistance may stake its base in Moscow, but there are still a few other factions left out there: Cuba. Childers. The Vatican’s gone silent. Actually, you could give the Silverbacks to a couple of guys. In fact, make it some guys from the former Delta Squad. The ponies see them as something of a thorn in their hooves.”

“Okay, but I designed those, you know. They’ll greatly increase our chances of winning.” Andrew didn’t even act smug about his claim. He was that high on his own self-esteem.

“Sabotage them, then! You designed it. Put like, I don’t know, a shocker in them.”

"A shocker?" Andrew looked incredulous at his choice of words. “You mean a short circuit self-destruct, sir?”

"Whatever! Like something that will shut them down, but not straight away. Just give them enough time to think they’re invincible in those ugly contraptions. Then you activate the shocker and shut ‘em down.”

Andrew nodded. "I can make that work, though it’d be nice to be told that *before* the ponies were marching on Moscow.”

“I’ve already had Walker clear out the barracks, so the HQ is virtually deserted. That unstable fool thinks he’s taking the men to fight an *honest* fight. Once the ponies wipe them out, they’ll take our base. Peter Williams is still upstairs.”

“Oh, good!” Andrew grinned and dabbed at his black eye. “What about his son, Daniel?”

Johnson shook his head. “Man wasn’t cleared by medical. He’s been in a coma for a year. His muscles would have atrophied. He’ll collapse out there if he’s not dead already. Either way, the resistance will be nothing but a bad memory after tonight.”

Andrew let out a groan as if he was undecided about something. “What is it?” Johnson asked.

“I was kind of thinking we’d need the Silverbacks ourselves to escape the city unscathed.”

“Peter’s the only man with access to Metro-2. I’ll grab that from him and we’ll escape through those old tunnels of Stalin’s.”

“Just makin’ sure.”

"Exactly. Now get to work. It's not going to be long before I send them to you for those Silverbacks."

"Fire!" There really was no need for Walker to shout that over the sound of gunfire. The Human Resistance was already inclined to be shooting upon the Equestrian hordes that had driven them deeper into the city and closer to HQ. Soldiers scattered themselves behind vehicles, crates, walls and two sheds. Some even just lay on the ground, making themselves into smaller targets. The city was a deafening racket of metallic hail, like some invisible infestation was chewing at the structure, a stone-eating virus that plagued the infrastructure. Bullets flew from both sides and men and ponies alike began to drop like babies.

“Shit, there’re too many!” Lugo cried as loud as he possibly good, so that his crying could be heard over all that racket.

Walker emptied the magazine in his M4A1 (by shooting it out at ponies) and managed to take down seven ponies in the process. He turned his head to Lugo who was to his right, and loaded a fresh ammo clip into his weapon. "We need to hold the line! We have the defensive advantage!" he responded, at least a smidgeon louder than Lugo. What he lacked for in credibility, he made up for in volume. Walker then raised his riffle and began to take down ponies with quick-burst fire rounds.

A young soldier close to the HQ's main gates panicked as the ponies drew closer. "Retreat!” he cried as he leapt to his feet and turned to run back towards Walker.

"No! Get down!" ordered Walker, but it was too late. The young soldier's body was quickly torn apart by no less than two hundred rounds. "Shit!" cursed Walker.

"We need something more powerful! Something to take out a grand number of these fuckers!" shouted Adams, even louder than Walker, as he threw a grenade into the approaching sea of ponies. They went kaboom.

"We could use a fucking tank!" added Lugo, breaking his maximum volume as he sprayed all two-hundred rounds out of his LMG. He also sprayed spittle from his mouth as he screamed like a banshee.

"Fuck, you’re right! Okay, you two go fuckin’ see what we got in the fuckin’ HQ's garage. And hope for the fuckin’ best!" ordered Walker. Adams and Lugo nodded and then rushed off, keeping their heads low. The garage was around the back of the HQ. Lucky for them, the ponies were not coming that way, so once they turned the corner, they were safe. They quickly sprinted to the giant titanium garage door, which was locked and could only be opened by inputting a code into the security panel. This code was something the two of them did not know. They quickly charged over to the door.

"How the fuck do we open it?" asked Lugo.

"Oh shit in my pants," said Adams as he noticed the security panel.

Lugo followed Adams’s gaze and then joined him in cursing. "Shit and fuck and poopies!"

"We are at fucking war! How come no one has fucking opened this thing?" whined Adams, stamping his little foot and huffing.

"I don't know. Can't you, like, break in?"

"What? Because I'm black, you assume I can just click my fingers and break in to any fucking garage?" responded Adams.

"What? What in the hell are you talking about? We’re in the middle of a war! I’m asking because you’re the only other guy here, and I sure as hell don’t know how to get in there! Oh, just fuck it!" Lugo lifted his weapon and shot the fucking security pad. The bullet just ricocheted off of it, leaving a black mark that soon faded.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" roared Adams, pushing his limit on how loud he could squeal.

“I thought that would open it! It works for beer!”

"Where in the world would you get that idea? It's a fucking maximum security fucking lock! If it fuck was fuck this easy to fuck break fuck into fuck then they fucking wouldn't fucking use it to fucking guard fucking nuclear fucking weapons!" said fucking Adams.

"It would've worked if I was fucking Rambo!"

"I hate to break this to you, but you're not fucking Rambo! I don't think Mrs. Rambo is fucking Rambo!"

"You sure as Hell aren't Rambo either!"

This argument and all of its petulant obscenity was put to a merciful death as a small group of ponies snuck around the opposite end of the HQ. With them was a Charger. "Shit!" cried Adams and Lugo at the same time before they leapt behind their corner for cover. The ponies opened fire at them whilst the Charger moved towards the titanium door. He tensed his big, muscular hands and punched them both straight through it. Lugo and Adams poked back around the corner and opened fire on the ponies, taking down nearly the entire small group. The last two remaining ponies ran back the way they came. Lugo and Adams started to reload their weapons and were getting ready to fire at the Charger, but before they could get a shot off at him, it had torn the door out of its frame, and was now using it as a shield to charge towards them.

"Fuck me in the arse, and call me Santa," gasped Lugo.

"Maybe later! We got to get past that thing and get a tank!" Adams charged towards the Charger whilst firing his weapon. The Charger looked as if it was going to hit Adams with the door when Adams dropped to one knee and slid through the gap between its legs. The goliath let out an angry roar and ignored Adams, instead continuing towards Lugo.

Lugo sprinted back towards the resistance soldiers fighting out front, screaming for help. This earned the notice of Walker and some of his men, who were promptly ordered to kill the giant. The soldiers and Walker focused their fire onto the Charger, but it managed to block most of the bullets with the titanium door.

Thankfully, Adams rolled up behind the creature in a tank. "Eat goddamn shit tits, and cocksuckin' die, you pussy-ass bitch motherfucker!" The first tank shell slammed into the Charger's back and sent it flying forward. It crashed into a mob of ponies that were conveniently running into the compound at that moment, crushing them as it expired.

"Hell, yeah!" cheered Lugo.

"Direct fire onto the ponies!" Walker returned his attention to the Equestrian army, and his soldiers celebrated the boost in their morale. Adams was taking down anything from ten to twelve ponies with each tank shell he used, and the other soldiers were taking down around five to eight ponies with each ammo clip. The ponies just kept marching through the bottleneck in the compound walls. It really was just like shooting fish in a barrel, right up until a group of six Chargers came from around the corner behind Adams. The first of the soldiers to go were a small group of three huddled around a row of crates. A Charger ran over and snatched up a crate before using it to beat the soldiers to death. Walker realised now that the men had to retreat. They would be no match to defend the Chargers against such an enemy. All he could do was hope that everyone inside had evacuated before too late, but of course that was not the case.

Walker sounded the retreat, but only Adams stayed behind. In his tank, he had no shortage of confidence, and he fired a shell into one of the Chargers. "Just go! I got this!" He loaded another shell into the chamber as Lugo begged him to retreat. A Charger gripped the tank's gun barrel then spun around, hoisting the tank off of the floor with improbably strength. "Shit!" Adams said.

"Put him down, you shits!" Lugo opened fire.

Walker sighed with regret upon seeing things. He knew Adams wasn't going to make it out of that tank alive. He rushed forward to grab Lugo by the shoulders. "Lugo, we got to go!" roared Walker. Before Lugo could protest, the Charger released the tank, heaving it straight into the side of the HQ building. The impact of the tank caused its explosive shells to knock against each other at such a force that the tank exploded in one hell of a blast. Walker had to drag a screaming Lugo away from the scene. The HQ had been lost to the ponies, and now Onyx was marching towards it in search of any survivors hiding within the wrecked building. This was Onyx's time to leave a devastating mark on Soviet Union

The walls, floor, and ceiling of Peter's office shook as though they might come apart from one another. One of Peter's personal guards, Sergei, informed him that the building had been breached. Peter ordered him to guard the hall against Sergei's pressing urge to evacuate him. "No!" Peter insisted. "We must stay and fight. If our men see their own leaders abandoning HQ then they will lose hope, and at a time like this, we can't afford to lose morale."

Sergei nodded. He understood their army would be sad if Peter ran away and lived to lead them, and honoured if he died like a rat cornered in a maze instead. He stepped out into the hallway along with three other soldiers. The four of them took to one knee and readied their AN-94s. "We kill anything which presents itself as an enemy. Understood?" His men nodded in reply. "Good. May God watch over us."

Peter made his way behind his desk where he knelt down and ran his hands along the underside, looking for a switch. Upon flicking it, a secret compartment opened up, revealing a silver pump-action shotgun with an ivory-wooden stock and an ivory trigger. Thinking of the elephants that died to make this gun, he took a box of red shotgun shells from the bottom left-hand drawer because they were his favourite colour. Once his shotgun was loaded, he cocked it. "Finally, it's time for some action."

A group of four ponies were the first to trot up the stairs and into the hallway. Sergei and his soldiers opened fire and eliminated the threat with an almost disappointing lack of fuss, but now the thirty other ponies "guarding" Onyx were aware of the danger zone. They were not intent to march to their deaths. "Hold it!" Onyx said as he took the lead. "There's only one way for us to enter, and that's their only escape. Bring my a smoke grenade."

Nopony dared ask how Onyx knew this, because nopony wanted to risk being his next body shield. A pony with cyan fur stepped forward, carrying his requested smoke grenade on her hoof. "Here you go, sir," she said in a slurred, almost creepy tone, because ponies are creepy.

Onyx took the grenade and sniffed it. "Let's do this," he said, flexing his thighs. He pulled the pin on the grenade and hurled it up the stairs like a skeeball shoot. The grenade ricocheted off a wall and rolled towards Sergei and the three soldiers. One of the soldiers cried out a warning all too late. Smoke filled the hallway, and though Sergei's men donned masks, they couldn't see the other end of the corridor. Once Onyx saw the smoke drifting towards the stairs, he gave the order. "You ten get up there," he ordered as he selected ten ponies at random rather than the first ten in line. The ponies did as they were told and began to charge.

Sergei, hearing Onyx's commands, gave a command of his own. "Open fire! Nothing gets through this hall alive but us!" The three soldiers fired blindly into the heavy smoke, but the ten ponies returned blind fire. Bullets flew from both sides. Most missed and dug into the walls of the hallway. Sergei's three companions were hit. One was struck in the chest, the other in the neck and the final one in the eye. Blood coughed from his socket as his body tumbled into the air and backwards. At the very least, all ten ponies had been taken out, but it was little recompense to think Sergei was but one man against twenty-one more.

Onyx climbed the stairs with another pony on his sword and entered the hallway. Sergei sensed him there, though his footsteps were quieted by the hissing of the gas grenade. He panicked, reloading his riffle with shaking hands and forgetting about his side arm. He heard Onyx's sword scraping against the left wall, exercising his own gullibility as he fired in that direction. He heard the sword scraping against the right wall and fired in that direction, but soon that metallic clawing sound was back at the left wall. This time, Sergei fired at the right wall. Soon after, Onyx appeared through the haze. "Didn't anyone tell you smoking will lead to an agonising death?" Onyx laughed as he plunged the end of his blade deep into Sergei's stomach, making a shish kebab with him and the pony on his daikatana. Sergei let out an agonising gasp as Onyx twisted the blade then ripped it sideways out of him again. Sergei's body slumped over.

"Didn't anyone tell you not to bring a knife to a gunfight?"

Onyx looked to see Peter standing in the hallway, his silver pump-action shotgun in his hands. He squeezed the trigger before Onyx could react. There was a deafening blast as Onyx was sent flying into the far wall and toppling sideways down the stairs he'd just ascended. "Get him," he gasped to his nineteen remaining ponies, utilising another of his injections. They moved in steady formations up the stairs while Peter found the grenade in the dissipating mist and kicked it after Onyx. Peter backed up a few steps as he cocked the shotgun and fired off another round once the ponies came into sight. The spread of pellets four ponies stumbling backwards into each other at once. When the Equestrians opened fire on him, he had but a split second to dive into his office to evade the barrage of bullets. The enemy's fire surged like an ocean as they came washing down the hallway, tearing up the walls and the fine paintings which hung from them.

Peter slammed his office door shut and laid his shotgun on the floor. With all the strength he could muster, he pushed a bookcase in front of the exit, turning it so that the books would face the door. He grabbed his shotgun again, flipped his heavy oak desk onto its side, and knelt down behind it with his weapon peeking over the edge. When the gunfire outside died down, he was aware of his heart thumping inside of his chest and the sweat dripping from his brow. The suspense alone was on the verge of killing him. The fanciful door handle jiggled, but the door only banged against the back of the heavy bookcase.

He could hear a pony speaking. "Horse apples! What now?"

"What do you mean, 'what now'?" said another pony. "Now we tear this bucking door down with as many bullets as we can spare!"

Peter heard a symphony of guns being tuned up with the tinkling of fresh ammo clips before being percussively cocked. "Take aim!" said a pony. "Fire!"

A swarm of bullets began to infest Peter's office. His books on his shelves were demolished. His windows shattered. Pictures of his wife and children were obliterated. Bullets tore away at his desk like freezing rain into powdered snow. A couple of bullets managed to dig their way straight through and find his left shoulder. He cried out in pain, but nothing would comfort his wound. There was no time left. The last of the bullets dug into the walls and the gunfire came to a halt. In place of where the office door had once been was a pile of wooden reminiscences. Even half the bookshelf was a pile of splinters and sawdust, and the ponies were shoving their weight against the ruined object to enter.

"Is he alive?" Onyx asked as he walked down the hallway, shoving a pony or two aside to get ahead of them. Two ponies had pried Peter from behind his desk and held him by his arms. Onyx smiled beneath his skeletal mask. “Looks like you’re not so tough without your little gun, eh?”

"Go fuck yourself!" Peter had been socked in the gut and kicked in the back of his legs by the ponies and now spat blood at Onyx. It is rude to spit, but spitting doesn’t compare to the rude things Onyx has done.

Onyx went to wipe the blood away, but he couldn’t tell where it had landed amidst all the other blood that stained him. “Nobody spits on me!” said Onyx. “That’s rude, not to mention gross!” Onyx had taken the pony corpse off of his sword and now rested his blade on Peter’s shoulder. “Any last words before I remove your fucking head?” he asked. It is polite to ask people what they would like (so long as you do not swear), but nothing Onyx had done could be reconciled with any meter of etiquette.

"You can take my life, but my son will claim yours in return,” Peter said.

“I have millions of humans to slaughter today,” Onyx said. “I’m sure I’ll get around to him as well. You sure you don’t want to try some better final words?”

"If I am to die, then I shall prefer to die at the hands of a human and not these cartoon scum!”

"How very noble. Valiant, even. Too bad there aren’t any humans here, and if there were, don’t you think I’d be a traitor to the species? Oh well. We all know what happens to noble men, now, don’t we?” Onyx paused to raise his sword. “They die!”

Peter closed his eyes and took his final breath just before the blade pierced his chest. His body froze and so did his heart. Onyx twisted the blade before tearing it back out. The surviving ponies let out a cheer for Onyx’s ignoble victory, during which they cut down the Soviet flag on the wall and replaced it with the flag of fascist Equestrian. They saluted it in tandem, shouting, “Heil Celestia!” Onyx gave an evil grin even though he didn’t find Peter Williams a troubling opponent. They had won. Now they could wipe up the rest of Moscow.

Outside, Walker sought to regroup his unit with the first squad he could find. If they could lead some of the ponies away from HQ in the process, all the better for it, but for the time being, they were outnumbered. Lugo was still haranguing about the death of Adams, but Walker had to force him along. Some soldiers were shot in their backs by the ponies as they fled. Others turned to fire off a few shots but instead were shot down themselves. The war was an unmistakable massacre, just like it had been that first year the ponies invaded.

On the opposite side of headquarters, Irish, Tyrone and Ezio were running through an alleyway only minutes away. “How much further?” Irish had become so very tired of running, and he could taste copper.

“Not long now. Keep up.” Tyrone was also low on stamina.

"Jesus Holy Christ. I swear I can feel my lungs quitting on me,” Irish said.

"Maybe if you didn't drink so much, you wouldn't be so out of shape." Ezio didn’t appear to have even broken a sweat.

"Fuck you! I would like to see you haul this big ass piece of shit around and not get tired." Irish lifted up his M60.

"Please, both of you just shut up!" said Tyrone. Irish didn't have the energy to respond, and Ezio liked to remain as silent as possible, so for the last few minutes of their run, all they exchanged were heaving breaths beneath a cacophony of death and destruction. These sounds became louder and clearer as the three men reached the end of the alleyway where Tyrone dived to the pavement. “Shit, get down!” As Irish and Ezio followed his lead, he pointed at the mass of ponies swarming the HQ grounds.

"Shit! We lost the HQ. Think there are any survivors?” asked Irish.

Tyrone shook his head. "I highly doubt it."

"What now?" asked Ezio. “Head back?”

"No way! Fuck that! I have not just run all the way down here just to run all the way back!" Irish said.

"Well what the hell do you suggest we do, Irish? Huh? Because I'm all out of ideas," said Tyrone.

"Let's search for survivors!"

"Are you kidding me? No way are we going to be able to fight are way through that many of those fuckers!"

Ezio interrupted them. "Look; they are leaving." Tyrone and Irish watched with boundless apprehension as the ponies abandoned the HQ to pursue Walker's battalion.

"See? We can go look for survivors now!" Irish beamed smugly.

"Fine, but we have to wait until we can be sure that we will be safe getting over there," said Tyrone. The three of them waited in silence for the HQ to be left dormant, which took the better part of an hour. "Okay, let's move out." Tyrone clambered to his feet, raising his M16 over his head. Ezio and Irish followed his lead, and all three of them made a quick dash for the HQ's front entrance. Only the corpses of humans, ponies and the occasional Charger proved an obstacle.

Once at the entrance, Tyrone and Ezio flanked the door while Irish readied his M60 in the centre. "Okay, on three, breach. We don't know if they left this place completely empty or not," Tyrone said.

Irish gave a nod and counted down from three in his head.

One little pony.

Two little ponies.

Three little ponies.

Tyrone and Ezio kicked both doors open at once, and Irish moved into the lobby of the HQ. He checked to the right. Clear. Then to the left. Also clear. He lowered his M60 and turned back to the others. "All clear," he said. The pair followed him inside.

"Okay, we need to work out how we're going to cover the premises and find survivors," Tyrone said.

"I can take the left on my own. I work faster that way. You two can take the right, then we can meet down here when we are done," said Ezio.

Tyrone gave a nod. "Yeah, if you're sure you don't mind."

"I'll be fine," said Ezio before running off through the set of doors to the left.

Tyrone was left standing there with Irish. "Looks like it's just me and you again."

"Yeah, just like the good old times."

"You ain't wrong, brother. Oh, but hold up. I just had a thought. We need to check for wounded outside." The pair of them dashed back outside to loot the corpses for ammo, booze and bubble gum cards.

Ezio searched the first five floors of the building to his satisfaction in a little over ten minutes, but found nothing pertinent. Peter's office was on the sixth floor, and when he reached this storey, his well-trained senses could tell something was amiss. He readied his M14. The hallway, like most of Moscow at this point, was littered with bodies from both sides of the battle. Ezio stepped lightly towards Peter's office from which he could hear a very quiet sound within. He pressed his back against the wall for cover and peeked his head in through the doorway.

Sergeant Johnson was kneeling beside Peter Williams's dead body, whispering something to him. Ezio stayed his impulse to approach Johnson, instead following his temptation to eavesdrop.

"I'm sorry it had to come to this. You know I am. Sort of. Maybe if you didn't push so hard. Maybe if you just let your son die. Hell, maybe if I thought I could have at least convinced you to join the ponies. Then *maybe* you would still be alive. But no. All those maybes seem to have become the death of you. I can't say I'm glad, but I am in no way sad."

Ezio stepped into the office, his weapon aimed at Johnson. "Hands up, now!"

Johnson jumped to his feet startled and turned to see Ezio. "Jesus, you scared the shit out of me!"

"I said hands behind your head, now!"

"What? Why?" Johnson let out an awkward laugh.

"I just heard everything you just said, and I will kill you if you don't!"

Johnson bit his bottom lip. "You heard that, huh?"

"Is my English no good? That is exactly what I said. Now, for the last time: Hands on your head!"

"You know what? No. Why don't you just shoot me? Get it over with! Huh?" Johnson was feeling invincible for no good reason.

"Because you are obviously a traitor to the resistance, and you shall be executed for treason in front of everyone, just like you deserve."

Johnson gave a chuckle that grew into a laugh and shook his head. "This is a war, private! We ain't got time for staging executions! And who's everyone? Look around, kiddo. Everyone is dead. The ponies have won. They won the second they launched an attack on this city. Just give up. Lower your weapon, and I'll let you live. Hell, I'll even say you were helping me and Andrew."

"Andrew? Andrew who? Are there more of you? More traitors?" Ezio could feel his finger soften on the trigger. How deep did this conspiracy go? If the head of the resistance was in on this, then perhaps fighting was futile.

Johnson sucked on his teeth and exhaled an exasperated sigh. "Oh no, I have gone and given up my partner in crime. What am I ever to do?"

"Enough! I have had it with you. Now I'm going to count to ten, and if you have not put your hands behind your head then I will shoot. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine…"

Johnson drew his magnum from his holster too fast for Ezio to react in time. He fired off two shots, both of which struck Ezio in the chest and sent him flying back out of the door to Peter's office. The two bullets had done serious damage to Ezio: One had cracked a rib which punctured a lung, and the other had split open a major artery. He lay in the hallway, trying to pick himself up as he shook and choked on his own blood. Stupid, stupid, he told himself. Why did he have to count so high? He was an assassin. Justice and conspicuous trials weren't his style. Now he was pinned to the floor by an invisible elephant no matter how hard he struggled to get up.

Johnson laughed as he approached Ezio as though trying to cover up for a social faux pas. "Looks like I still have my catlike reflexes. And people say you become slower with age." Johnson stood over Ezio and the two stared at one another. Ezio couldn't say anything or do anything; he was in too much shock. Johnson smiled as Ezio let out a guttural gasp, then became still as a death rattle escaped his throat. "You almost had me," Johnson admitted. "Almost. But now no one will ever know the truth, and I take it you were not alone. So if I do happen to run into whoever it was you were with, I will be sure to tell them I killed you once I found out you were a traitor." Johnson holstered his magnum with a tut and his cheery demeanour dissipated. "Sorry, kiddo. Wrong place, wrong time, but hey, maybe you'll get me back in the next life." With that, he departed from the hallway office and headed downstairs.

Once Johnson had descended the stairs, Ezio blinked. As a parkour assassin, he knew the ins and outs of pretending to be dead. Too bad he was still wounded. The pain was immense where the bullets had impacted his bullet-proof vest, and if he didn't seek medical attention soon, he would surely die. This time when he tried to move, he took his time rolling over onto his side. He couldn't quite stand up; the exertion was too much and he couldn't breathe right. There was a cold gurgling sensation in the right half of his chest, and it stung every time he inhaled or exhaled. He managed to hobble to his knees, and managed himself onto one foot if he stooped over, and he dragged himself along the wall in this way into Peter's office. Peter Williams was still there, dead. Ezio had to just about fling himself over to the desk, and then rebound off of that towards the window. There was only one route of escape open to him.

Outside in the yard, Irish and Tyrone had confirmed that everyone in the yard, save for themselves, was dead, and most of them had died emptying their magazines. It was a crying shame, and there were just too many to loot them all for dog tags. Tyrone was shaking his head as he met back up with Irish who had leaned his weary self up against a wagon with a bale of hay. "This sucks," Irish said. It was an understatement, but he meant it. He shuddered off the feeling that he'd grown cold to the horrors of war. "It's gone quiet. You think the war's already over?"

"Naw, it's just moved away from us," Tyrone said. "C'mon, it's time to check inside." He led Irish to adjourn inside headquarters. Irish pushed himself away from the hay wagon, nudging it a few feet away from where it had been. He dashed indoors along with Tyrone just before Ezio came tumbling out of the window six stories above. He missed the bale of hay and landed right on his head on the pavement where his body crumpled into a broken mass and expired.

Johnson roamed the upper floors of the Human Resistance HQ and reminisced about the years he'd spent working there. Years of briefing and debriefing countless young marines, most of whom were all dead now before getting to be half his age. Years of rancour between that next job promotion and the thrill of working out in the field, training fresh cadets like he yearned to do. Years of ordering men to die and butting heads with his co-workers and his superiors on ideal military strategies. Years of watching the world slip through the fingers of other men as sacrifices had to be made. Years of kissing the Williams family's asses and taking orders from pencil pushers who hadn't seen real combat as often and as recently as he had. It was the

first feeling he'd had in a long time of being a soldier, and he could no longer tell if that was the way he'd always felt. He had nothing to show for those memories except the grim pictures in his own head.

He left his own old office and bumped into Andrew, who had a wide grin. "We did it!" Andrew said. "Man, I feel so alive after years of waiting! We finally are entitled to the land and rule we deserve!"

Johnson gave a grim nod and took a swift look around. "Yes, we are," he said as he resumed heading downstairs. Andrew followed him.

"I can't believe we did it! Me and you! We took down an entire army just by using our wits and cunning nature!"

Johnson stopped in his tracks. "Or, just by being in the right place at the right time." Was that all it had been? Somehow, even though Andrew Grant was an engineering scientist, it was hard to think of him was particularly witty or clever. Johnson felt more like his entire life had been used simply because of who he was to bring him where he was today. Nobody else was in the position to pull off such a betrayal.

Andrew chuckled. "We'll be heroes either way! Ponies will worship us! It'll be refreshing to get some recognition for my work. I've never liked being a secret researcher and not being able to take credit for anything before."

"Mm-hmm."

Andrew gave Johnson a confused stare, having noticed that the latter man had not been mentally invested in their conversation. "What's a[22] matter?" he asked. "Something go wrong?"

Johnson stared at the floor, hands on his hips, and shook his head. "No, everything went according to plan. That's kinda what disappoints me. We worked with dozens of highly-educated, highly-trained professionals, and the two of us alone managed to pull this off."

"Well, technically not alone. So what's the matter?" Andrew slapped Johnson on the back.

Johnson grimaced at him. "Well, actually, the mission is not yet complete," he said. Andrew fluttered his eyelids in curiosity, so Johnson explained. "I received one more objective. I was ordered to kill you when we were done."

Andrew froze and his heart rate increased. Tears began to emerge from his eyes. "What? Why?" he asked. Johnson's face broke out in laughter. Andrew wiped away his tears, even more confused now. "What's so funny?"

"I'm only messing with you!"

Andrew's mouth dropped open, and then he managed to break a smile. "Oh man, don't do that!" he snapped as he realized how close he'd come to soiling his pants.

"I got you, though. You gotta admit, I got you good!"

"Yeah, yeah, you got me." Andrew's nervous laughter continued.

Johnson stopped laughing. "So did you trap the Silverbacks?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely. It's a shame to waste something I worked on for the past year and a half, but I got a button in my pocket that'll activate it from anywhere in the city." Andrew rooted around in his pockets as though to search for it, and moments later he aimed a six-shooter at Johnson.

Johnson froze. "What are you doing?"

"Not so funny, is it?" said Andrew, answering Johnson's question with a question.

"Come on, quit playing around. You know I was joking, right?" Johnson answered Andrew's question with another question of his own, so that he was answering a question to a question to a question. Even so, his hand was reaching for his magnum. Andrew tapped the trigger of his six-shooter twice. Two loud bangs went off, and Johnson gasped as he felt two bullets pummel their way through his chest like a pair of bowling balls. A look of shock etched itself onto his face as he collapsed to the ground, soaking himself in blood.

Andrew took a moment to take in what had just happened, furrowing his brow as though perplexed. He shrugged as he tucked his gun away, then knitted his brow again as Johnson fought to speak to him. "What the hell, you crazy son of a bitch?"

Andrew knelt down next to him and drew his gun a second time, weighing it like a loaf of bread. "You know, I thought they played us both for a moment there. You see, you may have been joking about a secret objective to kill me, whereas I was

[22] Sic.

actually given one. " said Andrew as he stared down at Johnson, who spat out some of his blood. Funny, really, when you think about it, isn't it? And the English actually believe only they understand irony in all the world."

Johnson could no longer respond. He was in too much pain now and was choking on his own blood. His eyes couldn't even focus on Andrew now as he just lay there, head propped up against the wall, and shook. "Come to think of it, I don't guess you wouldn't be finding the funny side of this situation." With another shrug, he aimed his weapon and emptied the remainder into Johnson's face, spreading his brains all over the streaked linoleum tile. Once finished, he tossed the weapon to the floor. "I'll be finding it funny for years to come."

The army of the human resistance found their position to be no laughing matter. Walker had been pushing a retreat for far too long, and he decided it was time to lay down some heavy fire. Not only could his men remain mobile with less chance to be flanked, but on the plus side, the advancing pony army was beginning to dwindle in number. Lugo was still cussing up a storm in between empting the contents of each ammo clip and loading in a fresh one. The ponies continued to advance forward like mindless zombies, clumping together so tightly that only the ones in front could actually fire upon their enemy. It wasn't just that they had no sense of fear; they had no sense at all. The ponies in front would fire as many bullets as possible before being gunned down and replaced by the pony behind them. This tactic may not have seemed practical by any avenues of rational thought, but the truth of the matter is that it was. It really was! Honest to goodness! See, the resistance soldiers were led to believe that the ponies had no fear of death, and that they wouldn't stop marching until every single last one of them was stone dead. The human race was impressionable that way. Their brush with extinction was like a collective near-death experience, and they valued the sense it brought them.

It was the numbers. There were so many ponies, Walker estimated in his head that there would never be enough ammunition to take them all down. However in the hell did they make so many ponies? They really were like a virus. Even after fighting for so long, even after taking out their main commanders one after another, the Equestrians never lacked for quantity. Worse yet, Walker recognized a lone human figure once more presiding over the throngs of his diminutive equines. Onyx had returned to lead his troops, his sword still stained with Peter's blood. He pushed his way through the Equestrian hordes, hungry for more bloodshed, then realized he was out too far in front. When he saw the ponies before him falling row after row, what they were doing seemed pointless and pants-on-head retarded to him. If they didn't adopt a new tactic, he'd soon be in the line of fire, and he didn't feel like spending another injection on a street of which he hadn't even checked the name. He knew that he had armed each pony with a miniature version of his old zanbato.

"Switch to you melee weapons and then make a charge! The resistance won't be able to kill us all!" ordered Onyx. All the ponies responded with a roar and threw their weapons to the ground.

"What the hell are they doing?" asked Lugo upon seeing the ponies disarm themselves.

"I don't know! Just keep up the heavy fire!" said Walker. "If you start to run low on ammo, switch to some light firing and retreat!"

All the ponies pulled out their blades. "Now charge, and kill them all!" Onyx shouted.

The ponies let out a battle cry: "For Equestria!" and rushed forward. Onyx joined them, holding his daikatana up high.

"Oh, crap! They're not even shooting back now!" Lugo said.

"Everyone, fall back, now!" ordered Walker. The resistance soldiers turned to face the opposite direction to that of the ponies, and then they began to sprint away.

"It's working!" cheered a pony.

"Keep on them! They can't run forever!" Onyx was right. The thing that Walker had been praying for had just arrived at the wrong time. Walker and his men turned a street corner to find Dmitry and Zone-Tan with a platoon of their own. They too had been pushed back by the ponies, and both squadrons realised they were trapped.

"Oh shit!" cursed Lugo for about the umpteenth time. "Oh merde! Oh scheiße! Oh sranje! Oh merda! Oh gówno! Oh дерьмо! Oh skiten! Oh cachu! What the hell do we do?" he asked, turning to Walker.

Walker turned right around on him and started shouting into his nose. "Well how about you stop swearing every five seconds, because it's getting to be *so* annoying that it's distracting me from not getting my ass killed, and frankly, just because you say 'oh shit' doesn't mean the situation is getting any worse or that I feel any more excited to fight for my life!"

Logan just boggled at him. Walker ignored anything further he had to say and ran off in Dmitry's direction. "Who here is in charge?" he asked.

"I am!" Dmitry answered. "Charlie Squad! At least, what's left of us!"

"Okay," Walker said flatly. He gestured to himself with his palm to his chest. "I'm Captain Martin Walker. I don't have much time to explain, but there is a huge horde of ponies charging us from our side. Actually, I can see that you yourself have a similar threat your side, so I'm going to need your men to go into a defensive stance and focus on the ponies coming from your side. Kind of like you're already doing, actually. I will order my men to do the same, but with my side. I hope that's not too confusing. We need to hold here for as long as possible and pray for some assistance to fall from the sky. Understand?"

Dmitry looked like his brain hurt. "So what you're saying is, we're screwed." He shouted to his soldiers: "Defensive positions!"

"Oh, excuse me!" Zone-Tan said. "I thought we were fighting a war here! I am remiss!"

"Conserve your ammo, so let's have a mid-to-light fire, about a little bigger than a bread basket, capisce? We need to hold up against our enemy for as long as possible!" he ordered.

"No, I want to take a break in between," Zone-Tan said.

"We have no choice. This is how it has to be" responded Dmitry.

Walker's men turned to face the charging enemy. They were all scared. Not one man, including Walker himself, was not scared. He was more scared than he'd ever been in his entire life, including that helicopter crash he'd been in, and he knew this scenario would end just as *poorly*, but he couldn't let his men know that. He needed them to have some assurance of victory. He couldn't let them die like cowards. Every man should go down with his pride intact, he thought, and that's how he planned to have his men go out: Fighting like heroes, with their leader by their side. The word "coward" refers to someone who is prone to shameful fear, such as a person who betrays their allies for an irredeemable enemy, or a person with irrational fears of exotic foods, or a politician who secretly concocts a war to accrue more wealth without telling his country the truth. It is incorrect to refer to someone as a coward because the stakes are too great, or because that spider is poisonous, or because the people who are meant to help them are useless, or because realtors are oblivious to the fact that all white walls conjure images of serial killers. That Walker's men, fighting for their lives, wouldn't die as cowards, was a foregone conclusion by this point.

Walker returned to his men to rouse them in a similar fashion. "Come on, men! We have to hold position until help arrives. I won't lie; we are trapped. We've got no other options than to fight, so fight we will!"

"Help's coming?" Lugo asked. "That's good to know."

"I never said that, but at least we go down fighting for what we believe in."

"And doing the thing we love. Killing pony scum!"

Walker let out a slight chuckle. "And we do a damn fine job of it." Apart from being trapped by a tactically inferior force, that is, not to mention being outnumbered and outgunned by melee weapons.

Bullets started to once again fly, and the bodies of ponies started to drop. So far, so good, however, it would only be a matter of time before Onyx and his ponies reached Walker's defensive line. "Charge! Feel no fear!" Onyx shouted, waving his sword around for attention since he still was out of stabbing range. No matter how many of the ponies were shot down, their charge showed no signs of slowing. The ponies closing in on Dmitry's squad noticed this tactic and decided to join in just because. They threw their more useful ranged weaponry aside and unsheathed their blades off their backs.

"Aw, shit! Now we're really screwed six ways from Sunday!" Zone-Tan said. "Not that you'd know."

"Oh, not you too," said Dmitry. "Just keep up the fire! In fact, everybody just assume that you should be shooting the four-legged colourful, talking ponies!"

As Walker gunned down more suicidal ponies and faced his own imminent demise, he remembered something he had planned to do since he got up this morning, but forgot. He wanted to give a speech should the odds ever come to this, with either Moscow on the verge of collapse or the Equestrians about to be defeated once and for all. Everybody was too busy panicking and shooting and getting shot down, but there was no time like the present for saying what he thought needed to be said. "We are soldiers of the resistance! We have defied these pony scums since they first arrived, and we will not give up now! Humanity has beaten them back time and time again! We defied the odds countless times, and today will be no different, for we are fighting for our freedom, for our families, for our friends and brothers in arms, and we shall not fail! We are the human resistance, the last remaining weapon for all mankind! Our nature is to survive, and we shall not perish to the likes of these scum! We are survivors!"

The men that heard him gave a cheer, which made Walker feel better about himself. Too bad that was when the ponies closed in on them, bringing their usual death and chaos. The resistance soldiers wielded their guns as melee weapons as the ponies crashed into them, just like in the medieval films. The ponies threw their bodies against the wall of human soldiers and

wormed their way through. Walker pulled out his wee combat knife which had an ivory handle and a nine-inch, stainless steel blade. "Come get some, you fuckers!" he roared as he charged into the onslaught of ponies.

“Now who’s breaking the Geneva convention on not swearing?” Lugo asked.

The battle had now gone from long- to medium-ranged to hand –to-hand combat. The resistance fought back hard, and they seemed to be doing well in spite of the ostensible circumstances, whilst the ponies tried to hack and slash at anything they could. Walker ducked under the blade of a pony as it swung for him, then he moved himself close to its body and dug his knife into its stomach from the side. The pony gasped and let out its final breath as Walker tore his blade up through its flesh. The pony’s guts came spilling out like a serving of hot spaghetti. Walker then picked up its miniature zanbato, which was just a little heavier and larger than his own weapon. Now he had two blades! One plus one equals two, and that means two hundred percent power.

Walker was only able to cut down four more ponies before he was met by a true warrior. He removed the head of a pony (which took some doing to cut all the way through), and as its body fell, he found the deadly gaze of Onyx being laid upon him. The two of them were only a few inches away from each other, and there was a moment where they just stared into each other’s eyes with terrifying and intimidating gazes. "Come. Let's see how you hold up against a real fighter!" hissed Onyx.

"A real fighter? I doubt you know how to use that blade of yours properly." Walker had not properly seen Onyx in a fight yet, and did not know of Onyx’s getting-killed-repeatedly tactic.

Onyx gave a large grin under his mask. "Well, let me prove you wrong.” And not another word was said. Onyx lunged forward with his sword swinging down towards Walker. Walker blocked with his combat knife before swinging his machete across in an attempt to cut open Onyx's torso. Onyx of course managed to manoeuvre past the machete's blade, then he slammed his right shoulder into Walker's chest and used all his body strength to push Walker back. Walker stumbled away from Onyx but kept his balance. Onyx then made another quick attack, swinging his blade up high. Walker blocked with the machete, bringing it across his body and just managing to catch the tip of Onyx's blade. Onyx then ducked, spun on his heel, and swung his blade around down low in an attempt to remove Walker's lower leg. Walker hopped up onto his opposite leg and then swung his combat knife down. Onyx quickly stopped his attack by simply wrapping his free hand around Walker's wrist, then stabbing forward with his sword. This was a close call for Walker; he only just managed to smack the blade away from his stomach by once again swinging his machete horizontally. Onyx stayed low and stuck out his right leg then once again spun on his heel. This simple attack managed to catch Walker off guard, and Onyx managed to trip Walker up and he slammed to the concrete floor.

"I must say you have quick reflexes, but trust me, you have nothing on me,” Onyx said, paying a compliment much in the way Jumba would have.

A deep, gravelly voice spoke from behind Onyx. “No, but maybe I do.” Everyone turned to look at Discord in astonishment. A few humans noticed him standing there amidst the chaos like a chaperone at a dance, but even fewer had the luxury to aim their weapons at this inhuman creature that looked even stranger than the ponies. Discord kept very stiff as he looked about, then he shrugged and smiled while everyone stared at him in shock. “What? Can’t I sound all self-important and dramatic, too? Just like you, right Onyx?” He nudged the masked warrior in the paunch with his elbow.

Onyx was annoyed to start, then let out a scornful laugh. “Really? You?”

Discord was sporting a bushy, curled moustache and waving his mismatched fists in front of himself. “I may not have the magic that makes me who I am, but my pugilistic skills haven’t been on hold that long. Wanna watch me do a hadouken? No?”

Bored, Onyx took a lazy side swing at Discord with his daikatana. Discord leapt into the air with an extra boost of lift from his wings, and dropped his clawed heel down hard onto Onyx’s face. Onyx was sent skidding along the street. Walker just looked in awe as Discord dusted off his paws, but he was not too startled to forget to say, “This one’s on our side!” Nobody questioned the bizarre creature that had ostensibly joined their ranks. Nobody had a free breath to do so. If anybody was cheering, it was to spill pony blood on the streets of Moscow.

Onyx pulled his weight off the ground and swung his blade to push back anyone invading his personal space. He chuckled. “A dragon betraying Equestria. Hm. I’ve fought you before, have I not?”

Discord pursed his lips. “You have not. I’d ask the same of you, but then I honestly don’t fight all that many masked avengers.”

“As I recall, I won my last battle with your species. I am confident I can win this one.” Onyx was either outright lying or in denial about having lost against Harbinger. Deceit was easier to pull off than his own mask. “When was the last time you had a satisfying meal?”

"Oh, I despise killing. It's barbaric and primitive and all the things that are beneath me. Why end something when you can just come up with a new game for it?"

"I'll be more than happy to end him," Walker said.

Onyx forced a chuckle. "If not for the dragon, I would already have your head."

Discord leaned down to Walker to whisper to him. "I fear he may be right, old bean. Howzabout you tend to his soldiers while I slap a little skin onto skull-face over there?" Discord shook his fist again. Walker swallowed his pride. It felt strange to say the least, trusting in this freakish monstrosity over an enemy that looked to be almost as much a man as he himself was, but the simple logic rang true to him. "Holla if you need me!" Discord called as Walker resigned himself to the outlying skirmish.

"Let the games begin," Onyx said, trying his hardest to sound smug, which didn't take much effort on his part. He leapt the entire way from where he stood over to Discord's position, swinging his sword down as he went.

Discord sidestepped into an air of apathy. "You know, usually I have a whole bag full of props with me for just such an occasion, but it looks like I'll just have to do without."

Onyx swung his blade several more times at Discord, trying out various angles of approach, but the wiry draconequus's lissom frame proved evasive. There was an elasticity to him that Onyx couldn't touch, something from out of this world, just like the ponies. His body bent itself into curvaceous shapes, at once flipping his top half backwards beneath one of Onyx's strikes, then turning into a handstand and continuing onto his feet again. Discord laughed as though he was having a great time. "What falls in pairs and is covered in bears? Onyx's underpants!" He snaked his body low along the ground and yanked at Onyx's trousers, showing off a dirty pair of briefs before Onyx tugged them back on again. He kicked towards Discord who evaded by a hair's breadth, then stabbed his blade forward.

"Let's close the book on this, shall we?" Discord twirled his fingers in blockish angles in the air, then slapped his palms around the end of Onyx's blade. Although Discord did not appear to possess the required musculature, through great exertion he pried the blade upward until Onyx could feel himself lifting off of the ground. Perhaps it was the way Discord coiled himself into a spring that enabled him to pick Onyx into the air from a distance. Onyx released his grip on his weapon and landed on his boots with a thud. Discord balanced the sword on the tip of his finger by its blade, then threw it upwards to catch its handle. "To use such a weapon, one would expect you to be a master of the blade."

Onyx shook a finger at Discord. "You put that blade down! You will die by that blade!"

"Oh really? Here, let's see how you do a second time." Discord sportingly tossed Onyx's sword back towards him. "Come at me, 'bro'. I haven't had a good acupuncture in the longest." Onyx caught his weapon in both hands and took a moment to think. It wasn't a long moment before he ducked down low and swung his sword left to right. Discord jumped in the air and flitted onto the sword's blade, pinning it to the road. He tiptoed along the flat of the blade, his toe claws tapping out a can-can rhythm, and with one fierce high-kick, he struck the douchebag, Onyx, right upside the chin. Onyx fumbled backwards, and Discord once more stole away his blade. "I swear, you ought to keep this thing on a bungee cord."

"Throw me my sword again, so I can take your head!" Onyx said. There was everything wrong with the confidence with which he made this genuine demand. Discord shook his head this time and instead threw the daikatana somewhere into the battle of ponies and resistance soldiers. Someone let out an "Ow!" but it was difficult to say who. "I've disarmed you twice now. Why are you so repetitive? Show me how you fight tooth and nail."

Onyx let out an angry roar and sprinted towards Discord. Like before, Discord dropped almost flat on the ground, and he seized Onyx by one ankle, pulling him off his foot as though stealing a rug out from underneath him. This time when Onyx fell, he landed on his shoulders, and his arms bent back to push himself back off the ground. His feet swiped at Discord as he leapt back onto them. Discord was quick to smack both hands around Onyx's head at the same time, and Onyx could hear a ringing in his ears as both palms smashed around his skull. As Onyx recoiled, Discord swung his right arm around and around, clutched this fist with his other hand as though holding a bowling ball, and he teetered towards Onyx before socking him right in the rib cage with such a punch that it felt as if his ribs were toppling over one another.

Onyx couldn't remember the last time he'd been winded, or he didn't want to. "You're such a hell of an opponent, you ought to *go* to Hell."

"Oh, I don't believe in Hell, or Heaven," Discord replied. "How about this: I'll meet you in the afterlife." With this declaration, Discord clasped both his fists together and walloped Onyx right in the neck, snapping it. Onyx spun around multiple times on the sole of one foot, then dropped to the ground like a dipsomaniac on a light binge. Discord shook his paws as if they were sore, then held his arms out to the procession of combatants. "Who's neck-st?"

The ponies now took notice. If anything dissuaded the humans' wariness towards Discord's unearthly appearance, it was the sight of ponies recoiling in horror at their leader's demise. Celestia's promises of victory must have seemed too far away now to matter, and the repercussions were like dropping a rock into a pond. The ponies ceased their aggression in a widening radius as they discovered this loss. Motivation is a fickle creature, as a mind privy to thought will consider everything that could go wrong. They had been assured victory so long as Onyx was alive to lead them, and truth be told, they must have resented being led by this hoof-less biped. Only a few ponies were able to retreat as the humans exploited their deflated morale and summarily avenged their fallen comrades.

Walker tore his machete from the skull of a pony lying at his feet. "We may have won that spat in the end, but this city's still at war."

Lugo took off his cap to wipe sweat from his brow. "Don't go bringing the mood down, Walks."

Discord strolled over to Lugo and Walker and put his arms around their shoulders. The other soldiers still watched him with apprehension, but perhaps it was their near-death experience that granted him this liberty. The fact he'd donned a fallen soldier's helmet didn't exactly help. "Smell that, men? It's the smell of victory!"

Lugo looked Discord over like a birthday boy who's been entertained by an unfunny clown. "Dude, what are you? Are you naked?" He shoved away from Discord and tried to remove the disgusting image of male nudity from his head. He bumped into Kane, whose human nakedness was evident by comparison, and instantly received an even more vivid disturbing image. "Oh, come on! Put on some clothes!"

Kane bent down to one of the dead human soldiers. "He won't need them anymore," he said.

He was stopped by Lugo again. "What the hell? He's dead, man!"

"Clothing is unable to accommodate my true draconic form."

"And how long have you been hiding out as humans?"

"That is only a recent adaptation not innate to our millennia of existence."

"All that time, and you're not smart enough to invent a way to cover your—ugh—genitalia?"

"In several millennia, how have humans have only grown more squeamish about their own bodies?" Kane turned his gaze onto Discord, but addressed Lugo. "Perhaps you would prefer me in my draconic form?"

"Yeah, I think I would," Lugo said.

Dmitry graciously interrupted this conversation to ask Walker regarding their next move. Walker responded with a shrug while he paused to think. "We make our way deeper into the city, hopefully meet with another platoon along the way. Whatever it is, we gotta do it quickly."

"They were taking civilians to the centre of the city for EVAC. Maybe we could find them and make it out of here," said Zone-Tan.

"What do you mean 'out of here'?" asked Dmitry.

Zone-Tan let out a growl. "Moscow's done for!"

"How can you say that? We are still here, aren't we?"

"Shyeah, but for how long? There's no way Moscow's going to survive this attack. I've never seen this many ponies in my life, and that's saying something. They've never attacked the resistance this close to home during the entire war. They wouldn't be here if they didn't think they could win."

Walker gave a sombre nod. "She's right. Moscow's in no state to protect us anymore. Even if we could fend off the ponies, we've taken too brutal a hit. Our leaders are gone. This city's done for."

Discord next nudged his way in between Zone-Tan and Dmitry, patting each of them on the back. "Come, come! I'll gladly help protect all the little people in their evacuation. Are you going by helio-copter airy-o-plane or hydrofoil?"

Walker sighed. "We're not leaving this city for dead. We head to EVAC and protect its citizens. We protect the human race, as we've always done. The city's gone, and we have to accept it."

Chapter Thirty-One.

What lies below. The Silverbacks pay off.

Irish and Tyrone hadn't found a single survivor in every room of the HQ they checked. "This place looks like a tank hit it," said Irish after having step over a few dozen dead bodies.

"You saw how many of those fuckers left here. I doubt we'll find anyone alive."

"Yeah, well, at least it gets us out of that shit storm outside. The whole city must've been overrun. Those ponies can penetrate anywhere they go."

"Wait what? You were the one praying for this. I thought this would be your wet dream."

Irish shook his head. "I won't lie; I wanted nothing more than to get back into the action. Get back to work, back to killing ponies. But this? This is just a slaughter. We have never seen something on this scale before, and honestly, it's scaring me."

Tyrone placed his hand on Irish's shoulder. "We're going to pull through this, man. Everything's going to be okay."

Irish gave a weak smile and a nod, but their quiet reflection was interrupted by a voice behind them both. "Hey! Oh my god, I can't believe I found someone else still alive in this place!" Irish and Tyrone raised their weapons and spun around to find Andrew Grant had come up behind them. "Whoa! Don't shoot! I'm a friendly," he said, holding up his hands.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Tyrone.

"Andrew Grant. Head scientist for research and development. Sorry, I'm just a bit shaken up." He held out his hand to shake Tyrone's.

"Well, you can relax now, 'cause we're here to help. How'd you survive whatever happened here?" asked Irish.

"What?" Andrew leaned his ear towards Irish as if he had not heard.

"I asked you how you survived. The ponies clearly overran this place and killed damn near everyone here."

Andrew cast a downward gaze and rubbed his toe on the floor. "I hid."

"Well, we got to get you out of here, but we heard a couple of gunshots earlier."

"Oh! I had access to the security cameras from my office. That was just someone putting a poor man out of his misery."

"Really? Show us your lab, science man. We need to see what happened here."

"Well the cameras have gone down now."

"What? It's only been a few minutes since those shots went off," said Irish.

Andrew started to stammer and perspire, but he'd spent a career telling subordinates to do his work for him. He could rustle up a good lie. "That's why I left. To find help. Then I bumped into you two gentlemen."

Tyrone gave a nod. "Right. Okay."

"This might not be the time, but are you guys part of Delta Squad?" asked Andrew, knowing full well they were.

"We're Charlie Squad. We used to be Delta Squad back two years ago," Tyrone said.

"Great! Just the people I was looking for! This is turning out to be perfect!"

"What did you need us for?" Irish asked.

"I need some battle-hardened veterans to try out my new weapons!" Andrew had a sly smile.

"New weapons?" Tyrone asked.

"Oh, don't let me explain. Just come have a look!" Andrew rushed to the nearest elevator that would lead them to his laboratory.

"This guy giving off a weird vibe, or is that just me?" Irish asked Tyrone.

"Follow him, but keep a close eye on him. I don't trust this guy." They were right to be cautious. Andrew was nothing more than a snake: A snake that could very well cost them their lives.

The three descended in the elevator to the lab far, far below. Once Andrew granted them access, Irish couldn't help taking quick glances at everything. There were weird yet intriguing things. Things which couldn't really be explained. There were blueprints strung up for weapons and vehicles, each with their own impressive and detailed designs, but they were all delicate, guarded secrets of the Human Resistance, and to so much as whisper a hint as to their capabilities would pose a grave breach of security. There were weapons more advanced than the Silverbacks and aerial vehicles that would be deployed just in the nick of time by generous allies.

"Everything you are seeing here is top secret. To speak of any of it would be treason! However, desperate times, and all that nonsense."

"You don't have to tell me twice, but during the stone age…" Irish said.

"How long's all this been down here?" asked Tyrone. "And is any of this gonna help us?"

"And can we get some snacks on the way?" asked Irish.

Andrew sighed and blinked. "I believe they started construction down here since before the ponies even invaded. Great timing, if you ask me. Engineering is my forte. In one of these laboratories are two mechanical suits I designed that I like to call 'Silverbacks'."

"Like the monkeys?" Irish asked. "Bloody fantastic timing, anyway."

"Gorillas, but yes," said Andrew. "They are two manually-operated mechanical suits, each with the strength of a Charger and each armed with exciting weaponry!"

"Uh huh." Irish gave a slow nod. "So I take it you want us to operate them?"

"Precisely!" Andrew led them into the empty area of the laboratory where the Silverbacks were kept, and both Irish and Tyrone got their first good look at the armoured suits. They were in awe. They resembled something out of a Japanese television show that had its footage dubbed over and then spliced amidst scenes of Americans pretending to be optimistic teenagers.

"They're beautiful," said Irish.

"Wait. We have no training in using these things," Tyrone pointed out.

"Oh you don't need any! That's the beauty. You control the arms and legs by moving your own! Look, it's complicated to explain, but once you are in them you will see. Now, can we please go? With each moment we waste, good soldiers die!" Andrew spoke quite quickly, but no amount of rapidity broke the pair from their momentary stupor.

"Hey, how far down are we?" Irish asked all of a sudden.

"A good few miles," Andrew replied. "Why? Are you claustrophobic?"

"No, no, I just don't like the idea of being buried alive, that's all."

"Oh don't worry. In the event that the ceiling did collapse under the pressure of the earth, then we would be crushed immediately. None of us would even have time to be buried alive!" Andrew smirked.

Irish threw up immediately after Andrew had finished. "You're an arsehole," he said.

"Indeed, and I'm a fine one at that," Andrew said, inspecting his Silverbacks once more.

Tyrone gave Irish a pat on the back. "Pull yourself together, Irish."

"That guy's a prick," Irish said.

Tyrone chuckled. "You can't blame him for your lack of control over your own bodily functions."

"Fuck you! I'm fully in control of my bodily functions!"

"Really? Because the way I see it, you really don't."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, when we were in that cabin before Germany, you shit yourself. Literally."

"No! I was taking a shit when the outhouse was knocked over!" protested Irish.

"Did you or did you not end up with your own shit on you?"

"Well, yeah, but…"

"Then it counts. Then you pissed your pants in China."

"It was blood splatter on my pants! It was blood! That's manly!"

"Sure it was. And now you have puked over yourself."

"All those times were through no fault of my own!"

"Sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night." Again, Tyrone chuckled.

"For the record, I would greatly appreciate it if you did not relieve your bowels in my Silverbacks," Andrew said. Tyrone laughed harder.

"Fuck you!" grunted Irish.

"So why is this place top secret?" asked Tyrone.

Andrew looked serious. "If I told you, I would have to kill you." Tyrone was stunned by Andrews's words, then guessed he must have been kidding. He gave a modest chuckle. Irish, unsure of what was going on, joined in with an awkward burst of short laughter. Andrew cracked another inscrutable smile.

The men walked right up close to the Silverbacks to get a better impression of their size. They were a couple of feet taller and wider than a grown person, capable of fitting one occupant who would wear the suit like a shell. Irish approached the Silverback designated Ghost 113 and admired its white paint job with the two blue strips. He marvelled at its one blade arm, which was accompanied by a full-auto shotgun on the other arm. "I'm having this one!" he decided.

"Ah, that is Ghost 113. A fine machine," explained Andrew.

Tyrone and moved to the other Silverback with its black paint job with red stripes. He was impressed by its rocket launcher arm and heavy machine gun arm. "What's mine called?" he asked.

"Black Phoenix," responded Andrew.

Tyrone gave him a blank stare. He then said something very strange. "I can't tell if that's it's real name, or if you're just making a failed black joke."

As out of place as Tyrone's interpretation of the PR department's literal take on its paint job were, Andrew said something needless that solidified his status as a raging ass-douche. "No, I'm serious, but now that I think about it, the name does suit it well if you're the one operating it."

Both Irish and Tyrone dropped their jaws at this incredibly stupid thing to say. I don't know why this exchange occurred. I've puzzled over it and asked people about it, but haven't been able to figure it out. I was tempted to excise it, but instead leave it here for you, dear reader, in hopes somebody may decipher the dislodged train of offensive conversation. Tyrone did the wise thing and ignored Andrew's sociopathy.

For once, Irish sensed the awkwardness in the air and changed the conversation. "So how do we get in these things?" He was growing impatient and wanted to try out his new toy.

"Easy. Just flick this switch and crawl inside." Andrew flicked a light switch well-hidden on the Silverback's upper back. A rear panel on the Silverback lowered down, and Irish holstered his gun and leapt into the machine. Tyrone worked out where his switch was and managed to climb into his silver back. Andrew flicked the switches on both of the Silverbacks again to close them up. "There now, you are fully protected and ready to go."

"Awesome! Let's go fuck these fuckers up!" Irish's thirst for pony blood was returning to him.

"Yeah. That's all good, but how do we get out of this underground base in these things?" Tyrone asked.

"Don't worry; I'll show you the way out. The real question is: Are you ready to go out there and fight for the glory of the resistance?"

"Hell yeah!" Irish shouted as loud as he could inside his suit.

"Sure, why not?" Tyrone joked through understatement.

"Good!" Andrew said. "Now it's time for you to practice a scientific hypothesis of kicking some ass!"

Once Andrew disengaged the supports that held the Silverbacks in place, Irish and Tyrone became the first men ever to operate the devices. They weren't the most ergonomic constructs; the insides were padded with hard rubber fringes for shock-absorption, and in order to move the limbs, the minimum amount of forceful effort had to be used. Even being trained soldiers, Irish and Tyrone had to muster some strength to manoeuvre. Just the littlest hair of push behind the mandatory shove would

send the Silverback whirling around on its hips, ready to protect either flank. Its range was limited by the way the operator's body was facing, and it was a tough job lifting one's foot from inside to turn around. Andrew was somewhat distressed to watch two men stamping around like infants learning how to walk inside of his precious devices, but the thrill of wielding this power drove Irish and Tyrone to learn everything because they wanted to learn it. It was this excitement, of wielding such defensible offense, of being the first men ever to do so, that made them want this experience to become natural, and that was why it became natural.

Once Andrew had had enough, he led Irish and Tyrone down a wider corridor so they'd have some more sensible practice in moving. "We made this corridor purposely wider for such times as these. Those are not the first prototypes for the Silverbacks," he said. "In fact, they're probably the tenth or eleventh versions. When this underground lab system was first built the resistance planned many creations like them, but we had a low budget as not many people knew about it. Also, well, they kept blowing up."

"Blowing up?" Tyrone's voice sounded a bit more annoyed than worried through the external speaker.

Andrew shook his hand with embarrassment. "Yes, yes, but don't worry. These ones have been tested. The worst thing you'll receive is probably a nasty shock is all." He turned away so he could permit himself a nasty grin, knowing full well why such a calamity would befall them.

"Well that's comforting," said Tyrone, providing another example of sarcasm.

"Oh, don't be a big baby." Irish laughed as he watched the Silverback's metallic arms stretch as high as they could. He made the elbows pump up and down in a stadium gesture known as "raising the roof".

"Really? This is coming from the guy who less than ten minutes ago was worrying about this invasion."

"Yes but that was before we got these overpowered suits. We are virtually unstoppable! No amount of ponies are going to take us down. Not like this. Hell, we could even be the key to turning this battle around!"

"Believe me, I am sure that you will be a key element to our victory," Andrew said.

"I think that is over doing it a bit," Tyrone said. "We're wasting time down here while more ponies than I've ever seen in this entire war up 'til now march on Moscow. HQ's already been captured. How'd they get so many?"

"Oh, don't be so negative," Irish said, aiming his shotgun arm at several workstations and the coffeepot. He gave a sinister laugh.

Tyrone shook his head. "I swear, sometimes you have multiple personality disorder."

"Yes, and I embrace it."

"Black Phoenix is right. There's no time like the present," Andrew said. "I wasted too many years designing holographic communicators and being asked to dabble in biochemistry. Engineering is my forte, and before this city falls, everyone will see the culmination of my life's work!" By that time, the group reached another set of double doors where Andrew entered another security code. Irish and Tyrone followed him into what appeared to be an empty room with a control panel in the middle of the floor. Andrew walked over to this panel and began inputting more code. "Come over here," he said with a clear hand gesture.

Irish and Tyrone obeyed, positioning themselves in the middle of the room. It slowly dawned on them that they were standing on an enormous freight elevator. Andrew then entered another code on the control panel and steel barriers rose up from the floor in a rectangle formation. "I advise you keep all hands inside the lift at all times," said Andrew as the ceiling opened up above them. Irish and Tyrone looked up in awe as a huge tunnel leading right up to the surface appeared above them.

"This is some next level sci-fi shit," said Tyrone.

"Oh, God bless humanity," said Irish with a smile. Then the lift set off at a high speed. Irish and Tyrone got a slight scare as the lift leapt off of the ground and shot up towards the opening in the surface. They each had an uneasy feeling, but it soon gave way as they remembered the charnel battle that awaited them. They tested their limbs, turning their wrists, flexing their elbows and legs. In a matter of seconds, they reached the surface, ready to dispense some heavily-armed justice upon some Fascist pony scum. When the pair looked around, they found themselves standing just around the back of the HQ's outside.

"Damn," Tyrone said.

"That was awesome!" Irish squealed.

"Indeed. Now I would advise you two split up. You will cover more ground and eliminate more ponies, helping more of our soldiers in the process," said Andrew. Tyrone and Irish, drunk on power, were only too eager to spread their wrath upon

as many Equestrians as possible. They would know the punishment for felling Moscow. When the pair stomped off of the elevator, Andrew descended back underneath the HQ.

What next ensued was an adrenaline-fueled rampage of newfound ability. Irish and Tyrone lost sight of one another almost straight away, but it seemed as though the wages of war had left them. The two armies had scattered, and while almost half of the Human Resistance was heading towards Moscow's EVAC point, the Equestrians dispersed themselves in the wake of their commander's defeat. They fought aimlessly where they encountered humans, reverting to an assault equivocal to a riot, which is a word for when ordinary people typically protest crime by committing crimes. Another word for this is "hypocrisy". It was not, therefore, difficult to find ponies, many of whom were ganging up on human stragglers who foolishly thought they might hide out the siege.

Irish had spent the better part of an hour roaming around in his Silverback, taking out enemy squadrons and having the time of his life doing it. He felt totally invincible, stamping on puny ants. He felt almost like a god, but he lacked one thing; an appropriate challenge. He kept stalking around in search of signs of wanton destruction, and he lucked out when he found just what he wanted: Three Chargers were grouped together. "Get a load of this, you dumb animals!" he shouted, brandishing his weapons at them. Unlike their quadrupedal pony brethren, the Chargers knew no fear. They snorted and flared their nostrils and turned their bestial gazes upon him. Metal suit or not, they hungered for Irish's blood.

Intel knows them by the following monikers: Black Ice, Fire Red and Grendel Snatcher. Each was as tall as Irish's Silverback, and their strength had never truly been gauged to more than a theoretical limit. This would be the first true test of the Silverbacks in a field situation. The Chargers were especially confident in their own abilities, but were at least flattered the humans had conscripted something their own size to pick on. "Fire Red now make you dead!"

"Three on one? Seems a tad unfair don't you think?" asked Irish, still managing to sound cocky. Fire Red took four lumbering steps forward and emitted an intimidating sound between a roar and a whinny, like a rust-coated car being forced into operation. "Well that was scary. Wanna hear my scary noise?" Irish raised his left arm, which had his full-auto shotgun attached to it, and smiled. "Eat lead, Fire Red!"

Unfortunately for Irish, his gun was empty. The three Chargers laughed at Irish's "intimidating noise".
"Hey! There's no need to laugh. I'm just having some performance issues, that's all. It's no big deal! It happens to every guy!" said Irish. The Chargers continued to snicker at the puerile humour as Irish reloaded and cocked his gun. "Okay, this time, you die!" said Irish.

The berserker's fell silent as he raised his gun once more. This time when he fired, his gun jammed.
The Chargers started to laugh again. A sense of humour had never been observed in them up until this point in the war. "Argh! Look, this has never happened to me before, so I think you should show a little compassion. A little understanding." Irish grunted as he fought with the controls. He then lifted his blade arm. "I was hoping we could be grownups about this."

He let out a battle cry and charged at Fire Red, who stopped laughing. His last utterance was a confused grunt before Irish swung his massive blade around and decollated the Charger on the spot. The other two Chargers stopped their laughter as Fire Red's head bounced along the ground. "Oh, I'm sorry, did I just kill the mood? Oh no, that's right, I just killed your friend!" Irish's mood began to swell again. Black Ice and Grendel Snatcher stalked around either side of Irish, once again looking as pissed off as Chargers always did. "Come on, lads, I know it was a bad joke, but there is no need to get restless."

Grendel Snatcher let out a roar and charged for Irish who swung with his blade. Grendel snatched the arm of Irish's Silverback, catching the heavy blade. "Bollocks!" Irish said as Grendel grasped the chest plate of the Silverback with his free arm and lifted him off the street. The veins in his muscles bulged as Grendel Snatcher hurled Irish into the air. As he came back down, Black Ice thrust his shoulder into him and sent the Silverback skidding along the tarmac. The body work now had deep scratches marring the paint job. Now Irish began to panic, because he couldn't quite figure out how to get himself up off the ground. He tried to wiggle his legs, and his weapon arms didn't seem to have all that much control to them. The cushioning inside of the Silverbacks wasn't that comfortable to be shaken against. "Okay, that hurt. So maybe I offended you with my bad jokes, but did you really have to play so rough? I just had this spray-painted."

Black Ice charged Irish once more, but this time Irish lifted one leg up and jammed it against the Charger's stomach. He'd thrown his entire weight into the run, and even his hardened abdominals couldn't absorb the shock that sent him reeling back. Irish raised his other leg, kicked both down against the road hard enough to crack the pavement, and in this manner, he managed to pull himself onto his feet. He lifted his blade arm over Black Ice, but was tackled from behind by Grendel Snatcher. He grunted and jolted again as he hit the ground face-first, thinking he might shoot out of his container like cooked bread from a toaster. Grendel pinned down the blade arm and began to punch the headpiece of the Silverback. Irish's body was throttled inside, but the pain of hitting metal must have pained the Charger more; his knuckles bled.

The visor of the Silverback cracked against the ground. Irish had to act fast before the visor smashed and his face would be turned to finely ground meat. He rolled onto his side and clubbed Grendel upside the face with his shotgun arm. The

beast let out a pained whinny as its face received a bloody gash, and it released Irish to cradle its injury. Irish followed through with plunging his blade deep into Grendel Snatcher's stomach. The Charger let out a gasp as he felt his stomach bag, along with his smaller and larger intestines rip open.
Irish let out a battle cry as he pulled the blade across, ripping it through the Charger's body until it broke apart his lower rib cage. Grendel's life left his body as he fell back with a crash.

"That was disturbing," said Irish, missing the point that it was he who perpetrated the violent act. He stood himself up again and wiped bits of the Charger's internal anatomy off on a nearby car. Before he could react, Black Ice had grabbed one of the Silverback's legs and was straining itself to spin the machine body around and around. When he let go, Irish was sent flying smack dab into a lamp post which bent from the force and collapsed upon him. Black Ice stomped towards him when a loud bang went off. The Charger's had exploded, and his body hobbled sideways.

Irish was more than thankful to see Tyrone there in the Black Phoenix. "Need a hand?"

Irish once again struggled to stand himself up again with unsteady aid from Tyrone's gun arms. His head was aching something terrible. "Cheers, mate," he said to Tyrone.

"No problem. You looked like you really could use the help."

"Damn these things are strong." Irish moved the arms of his Silverback around and admired how they still worked.

Tyrone gave a nod in agreement. "They sure are. Look at you; you were beaten by three Chargers and all you have to show for it is a bit of scratched paint."

"Cracked my windshield, though," Irish said.

Tyrone sucked his teeth. "Still, luck of the Irish, right?"

"Not *the* Irish. Just Irish." Irish grinned at his boastful joke, and Tyrone gave a slight chuckle. Ordinarily he might have responded with a quip that Irish's attempt at paronomasia only meant bad luck, but not this time. This time he didn't tread on Irish's moment. Perhaps it was because he feared for his friend's life. Perhaps the two men recognized that war had changed them, and things would never be the same. They weren't ready for that, so Tyrone changed the subject.

"Yeah. Maybe we should move out."

"Sure. Where should we go? These pony bastards don't seem really organized. It's hard to tell what's going on."

"Yeah, I know. We gotta find more resistance soldiers and find out what the heck's going on." Tyrone looked around to see so many tall buildings spewing deep, black smoke like the fumes of a toxic oil plant. It was a sorry sight, and he knew at once the city would be in worse shape than it looked.

Irish felt just as hopeless. "Hey, I bet everyone's evacuating. Maybe the Human Resistance is meeting up at EVAC. It's the civvies we gotta protect now!"

"Excuse me," a voice said. Irish and Tyrone turned around in their mechanical suits and pointed their barrage of deadly weapons upon a scrawny-looking man with reddish-brown hair and a bleach-blonde goatee. Having so many enormous guns and a giant blade pointed at him was probably startling to say the least, but Irish and Tyrone got their own start to notice the man was stark naked.

"A human! Who the hell are you?" asked Tyrone.

"And why are you buck naked?" added Irish.

The man appeared reasonably nervous. "I was sleeping when the ponies attacked. They bombed my home. There was nothing I could do."

"Oh man, that sucks. Irish, give him your shirt to tie around his waist," Tyrone said.

"No! Fuck right off! He's not putting my belongings near his genitals!"

"Excuse me, but I have something important to say," the man said. When Irish and Tyrone apologized, he continued. "The army's been telling all the humans to meet at the Moscow city centre where the evacuations are taking place, and they want everyone gone within the hour. They feel that this city is truly done for."

Tyrone and Irish turned to one another. "Looks like you were right. We better get a move on. Those ponies are sure to swarm the place just like they did HQ," Tyrone said.

Irish nodded, then turned to warn the nude man off, but he'd already gone. "Hey, you should—Well where the hell did he go?"

"I don't know. That's weird, but let's just get going. We don't want to be left behind."

Chapter Thirty-Two.

Still half asleep. Stable and able.

In rest, Daniel didn't feel any better. He'd had enough rest to last him a year. Upon waking on the couch in the Andersons' apartment-cum-clinic, he actually felt worse. New aches now dwelt in joints he hadn't realized he'd injured. His gut now wrenched with inopportune hunger, but as he sat up, he was presented with an opportune bowl of borscht, which is a kind of delicious soup made from beets, and may contain various ingredients such as diced carrots or mushroom ravioli. Like many obstinate people, he didn't care for beets, but like many hungry people, he didn't care. He was slurping down the broth before he even recognized Amy, who had brought him the dish, which tasted a bit bland because she had watered it down to ration it.

"You feeling okay?" She'd taken a seat on the sofa.

Daniel wiped a rivulet of red broth running down his chin and nodded. He swallowed and smacked his lips. "I ache all over, but I'm fine. Apart from that, all I seem to be doing since getting out of my coma is passing out."

Amy took his news of a coma in stride. "Don't worry; that's pretty common. Give it a few days and you will be right as rain."

"Thank you for everything. Without you people, me and my friend would probably be dead."

Amy gave a smile. "No problem. All we've been doing since they attacked is saving people."

Daniel took a look around the room. He and Amy were the only ones there. "Where is everyone?"

Amy gave a nod to two bedroom doors across the room from them. "Rachael is in there watching over your friend," she said, pointing at the door on the right. "And Lauren's back in the room on the left with another wounded soldier. The children's parents took them to the evacuation zone."

"Who is the soldier?" asked Daniel, taking another slurp of borscht.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not too clear on his name. Also, my husband, Ian, the man who shot your friend, he has gone out looking for some sort of help."

"He went out there? Alone?"

"Yeah. I told him it wasn't safe to, but hey, what do I know, right?" Amy rolled her eyes.

Daniel set the near-empty bowl on the coffee table and tried to stand up. "Do you mind if I check on my friend?"

"He is most likely still unconscious, but sure, I have no problem with it."

Daniel gave a nod and walked over to the bedroom door. He opened it and stepped in. He was immediately met by Rachael who was sat near the door watching over Tom. She gave him a weak smile and a gesture to keep quiet. Once he moved over beside the bed, he asked, "How is he?"

"He seems fine," Rachael said.

"Thanks for keeping an eye on him."

Rachael smiled. "Don't worry. It's no skin off of my back."

"Hopefully he will be fine."

"I'm sure he will. Do you mind if I ask you something?"

Daniel nodded.

"Why was he trying to kill you?"

Daniel opened his mouth without saying anything. He paused to think. For some reason, he felt a bit embarrassed. He brushed aside the thought that Tom had justification for his actions and instead worried that his friend might be considered too dangerous by his allies. "He, um. His girlfriend and little girl were killed by ponies. Blown up or burnt or something. It was horrible. After that, he sort of lost his mind a bit."

Rachael reacted as though she'd seen it all before. Her empathy was fluid and jumped on the heels of Daniel's words. "Oh, god. That is horrible. The poor man. How old was his daughter?"

Daniel again paused. "I, um. I'm not sure. She couldn't have been more than a year or two, I think."

"That is just sick! How could anyone do such a thing?"

"The ponies have no boundaries. No shame. They are the epitome of all that is evil and dark in the world. They will go to great lengths to secure what they want, and unfortunately for us they want nothing more than to destroy us all." Reciting this reminded Daniel of what he needed to do. In the silence that followed, he added, "I'm all Tom has left in the world now. Whatever happens from here on out, it's him and me."

"Well, look. I'll keep an eye on him. I will come get you if he wakes up," said Rachael. "This man sounds like he has been through a lot. Least I can do is try and keep an eye on him. Maybe I can make him feel better."

"I appreciate that, but I have a feeling he is a long way from feeling better." Daniel said.

"Well, I have time. Not like I got anything better to do. No soldiers have arrived apart from you three since the last load were shipped out."

Back in the other room, the door slammed open. There were hushed voices again, but Daniel could hear Amy's chiding cut short by Ian's dire warning. When he managed to catch his breath, he was able to repeat it for Daniel who emerged from the bedroom. "They're coming!" Ian said. "The ponies!"

Daniel spent a second damning his circumstances. "How many? Have you got any weapons?"

Ian shook his head. "Not sure. Maybe two dozen at least. All I've got is my riffle."

"Didn't you bring your weapon with you?" Amy asked Daniel.

Daniel's face went hot. "I dropped them before escorting Tom here." All Daniel had to work with was gathering more intel. "Which way were they coming?"

"This way!" Ian repeated.

"Yes, I got that. Did they see you?" Daniel asked. Ian breathed heavily and waited for Daniel to ask again before he confessed that they had spotted him as he was running. "This just gets better and better."

"What are we going to do?" Amy asked, fidgeting where she stood. "I think the soldiers forgot about us!"

Everyone turned their gazes on Daniel. "We helped you! Now you need to help us!" said Ian.

"I'm thinking!" Daniel snapped.

"Well think harder! We haven't got much time!"

"Ian Brandon Anderson, stop it!" Amy barked. "Adding more pressure to this situation really is not helping! Let the man think!"

Ian went silent, blinking asynchronously behind his thick glasses, but he continued to give Daniel a disappointed look.

"Couldn't we just kill them?" asked Rachael.

"Not enough weapons," answered Daniel.

"What about the other soldier we helped? Does he not have any weapons?" asked Rachael.

"Which one? Tom? He didn't when we brought him in," said Amy.

"God damn it! We save three soldiers, and not one of them has a fucking gun!" Ian said.

"Ian, I'm warning you! Quit it!" On his wife's command, Ian once more went silent.

"How many rounds does your riffle carry?" Daniel asked Ian.

Ian gave his wife a quick glance to see if he was okay to speak now. Amy gave him an approving stare and a nod. "Five, but I have twelve rounds left in total."

"And are you any good with that thing?" asked Daniel.

"No," said Ian honestly.

"Damn it."

"What about you? Are you not trained to use weapons?" asked Rachael.

Daniel shook his head. "No, I'm trained in other forms of weaponry. There is a special skill needed when handling a riffle of that calibre. I unfortunately don't have any training with such a weapon." He didn't have time to explain all about the specific licensing and specialised training required. "Tom does, though."

"The unconscious guy?" Ian asked. "Well that's just fucking marvellous."

"Ian! For the last time, stop it! Talk when spoken to or unless you have anything helpful to contribute to the conversation," Amy said. Ian bit his bottom lip in anger and remained silent.

"How about the other soldier? Does he have any experience with that type of weapon?" asked Rachael.

"I don't know who it is yet. Could we ask him?"

Ian rapped on the other bedroom door. The third woman, Lauren, emerged to hear his request. "Ask that soldier if he has any experience with hunting riffles," Ian said.

"What? Why? In case you didn't notice, he is in no shape for hunting anything, let alone riffles."

"No! It's not for hunting, god damn you! We have ponies on their way here, and we could really use someone who knows how to fire this thing!"

"I thought you did! I mean don't you?" asked Lauren.

"No. I'm a terrible shot," Ian said, raising his lower lip. "I don't know why I even bought it."

"But you hit the other guy in the neck."

"Exactly. I was aiming for the head."

Lauren furrowed her brow. "Okay, well, I'll ask him, but I'm sure he is in no condition to fight." Lauren then disappeared back into the room and emerged a short while later. "He says he's never hunted a riffle before, but he is great with that type of weaponry. However, you guys will need to help him get into a good position."

"Oh thank God," said Daniel with a smile as he moved towards the room.

Ian stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "We still only have one gun with a few rounds in it, a few nurses, and a pair of wounded soldiers and a stray Siberian wolfhound. Do you at least have a plan?"

Daniel smiled. "I do now."

It had been a while since Daniel had laid eyes on Soap, way back during the briefing for the failed defence of Hainan, but he thought the man looked a little familiar, which was far less a surprise than his missing right leg. Soap was pushing himself upright, and he looked far more surprised at seeing the leader of the Human Resistance here to greet him with a stray dog laying its chin and one front paw on the foot of his bed. Before he could say anything, Daniel spoke. "The ponies are coming, we've got twelve bullets, and you're our best shooter. Are you sure you're up for this, soldier?"

"Of course he's ready. Look at him; he's raring to go," Ian said.

Soap gave a nod. "I'm Captain Soap MacTavish of Task Force 142 and later 143. Trust me, I got whatever you need under control." He'd wanted to say no. Wanted to say he wasn't ready even to go on living without his leg. That he cursed all of humanity in its inability to grow back lost limbs. But he couldn't bring himself to turn down this young man who'd asked him a question on behalf of the entire army.

Daniel took Soap's left arm over his shoulders and slid his free hand under Soap's left thigh. Ian did the same, though of course Ian had to be more careful as to not disturb Soap's wound, or rather stump as the lower half of his leg was gone. Daniel asked Ian, "On the count of three?"

Ian gave a nod and started the count down.

"One."

"Two."

"Three."

The two of them lifted Soap up off of the bed and moved him out of the bedroom with the Siberian wolfhound following them. "Where are they coming from?" asked Soap.

"You can see them from that window I think." Ian pointed to the window which looked out into the street from the front of the building.

"Good. Set me up there," Soap said. Amy acted on initiative and moved a chair in front of the window so that he would have somewhere to sit. Daniel and Ian moved Soap over to the window and sat him down onto the chair. "Get me the riffle." Soap held out his arm and peered out of the window to the street below along with Daniel. Ian fetched the riffle from where he'd leaned it up beside the door. For being several stories up, he had a pretty clear view of the area outside the building entrance, but they still didn't like what they saw. There were ponies marching down the road, and far more than two dozen. By Daniel's count, there was at least double the amount. Daniel and Soap exchanged morbid looks.

"So, what's the plan?" asked Soap. "Not enough ammo to snipe them all."

"Okay. Okay, you start to pick them off one by one as they come closer. Meanwhile, I will go down into the alleyway. If you can, you need to shoot at least one or two as close to the alleyway as possible. Then I will run out with Ian, most likely, and you cover us as we drag a couple bodies back here. Then we will strip the bodies and hopefully get enough fire power to take down the rest of them." Daniel was out of breath by the time he finished his hasty diatribe.

Soap gave him a look. "So lure the ponies to the alleyway so you and Ian can loot them."

Daniel blinked for a beat. "Uh, yeah."

Soap looked back out the window and ground his teeth. "Crazy plan, but it might just work."

"Yes, hopefully, but are you sure you're up for this?" asked Daniel.

"With all due respect, I should be asking you the same question, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"What, you think I don't know who you are? Everyone knows who you are, and by now, everyone knows what happened to you. Last I heard, you were in a coma."

"Yeah, well, I decided it was time to get up."

"When?"

"Less than a week ago."

Soap gave a short, breathy laugh. "Well then, looks like we both might not be in our tip-top fighting shapes, but I ain't going to let that stop me. Are you going to let it stop you?"

"Never." Daniel looked over his shoulder toward Tom's room. "I've got too much to keep going for."

"Well then, let's kill some ponies or die trying."

"I don't have any plans on dying."

"And I didn't have any plans on losing my leg. Shit happens that we can't stop from happening, and the truth is, if I die here today, then at least I go down feeling like a man, rather than living out my life feeling like half a man." Soap looked down to his stump. Daniel didn't know what to say, so he said nothing.

Ian ran over to Soap and handed him the riffle. "Okay. it's got five shots loaded into it, and I got you the rest of the ammo, too." Ian stopped to root around in his coat pockets, pulling out seven more bullets which he lined up on the windowsill like little soldiers. "There. That's all you have."

Soap looked at his low ammo count and sighed. "Better than nothing, I suppose."

"All you need to do is get one or two ponies close enough so that we can grab them," said Daniel.

"Wait, what do you mean 'we' can grab them?" asked Ian.

Daniel frowned at Ian. "I need your help out there. Sorry.

"What? No! I can't leave my family here!"

"Your family will be safe with me," Soap said, polishing the spout of the riffle with some pool chalk. Ian went silent for a moment. He did not know what to say.

"I need you down there with me. It's the only way your family makes it out here alive," Daniel said.

Ian turned his head to his wife and two daughters who were all looking scared. They didn't want him to leave. He didn't want to leave, either, but if he wanted them to be safe, he would have to go out there. He gave a nod. "Okay, I'll go. For you, heart-sweet."

"Wait, Ian, no!" Amy was distraught.

"Amy, I have to. He is right. He won't be able to do this alone."

"Ian, no! I am not losing you."

"I'll be safe, Amy, I promise." Ian shot her a half-smile.

Amy rounded on Daniel. "You keep him safe!"

"I will."

"No, I mean it! We saved your friend, now you make sure you return the favour!"

Daniel gave a strong nod. "I promise I will, but we also need to get a move on."

Amy ignored him to hug and kiss Ian. "Be safe."

"I hate to be a dick, but you might want to wrap this up quick. These ponies are coming in hot." Soap cocked the hunting riffle.

Daniel gave Ian a pat on the back. "Let's do this."

Ian pulled away from Daniel's hand. "Lead the way." He and Daniel rushed down the apartment building's stairwell and came bursting out into the side alley via a side exit. Ian threw some tape on the door so it wouldn't lock shut automatically. Both of them scurried behind a dumpster to wait in silence. They could hear the uniform hoof beats of the Equestrian battalion marching their way in search of Ian, and in their own heads, their minds reeled with pre-emptive regrets of what alternatives they might have had. They could just run. They didn't need to make promises they couldn't guarantee. They could've taken their loved ones and tried to make a break for it, but that would have ended in inevitable failure and dishonoured them to boot. "When do we go?" Ian whispered.

"When Soap starts to fire."

"And if he misses?"

Daniel looked to Ian. "Then I picked the wrong man for the job."

Inside and upstairs, Soap looked down the scope of the hunting riffle. The stray wolfhound walked over to him, raised its front paws onto the windowsill, and panted as it gazed out the street. It emitted a low growl at the encroaching pony army. "Down, boy." Soap patted the animal on the head, then spoke to himself in a hushed tone. "Come on, Soap. You got this." When the head of a pony found itself in his line of sight, Soap took a deep breath, then tugged on the trigger. The riffle let off an ear-piercing bang, and the pony had no time to react. The bullet split its cranium in twain, and it collapsed to the ground.

"Okay, go!" Daniel shouted as the ponies panicked and returned blind fire all around them. They hadn't seen where the shot had come from, and they, too, were fooled by the echoes reverberating off of the buildings like a pinball machine. Ian took a moment for a silent prayer and charged forward with Daniel.

Soap lined up another shot as a pony came close to the alleyway. He smiled, cocked the hunting riffle, and pulled the trigger once more. Another loud bang went off, and this pony dropped like a sack of hammers. Down below, Daniel ushered Ian to rush the fresh kill. "Quick, grab it!" Luckily the other ponies were too busy searching up high for the mysterious sniper that they did not notice as Daniel and Ian dragged the pony into the alleyway. The two moved the corpse behind the dumpster and began to strip it of its weapons: An MP40, a Unishot, and two grenades.

"What the hell is this?" asked Ian as he held the Unishot, and unwittingly pointed it in Daniel's direction.

"No! Get that away from me!" cried Daniel as he remembered back to the battle of Berlin, and he remembered just how powerful the small handgun actually was. Ian lowered it with an apology, and Daniel explained. "It can kill someone instantly, no matter where you hit them with it. REDCOM[23] suggests it enforces excruciating pain on its victim. You could shoot yourself in the toe with that thing and it will be lights out. It's been a long time since I've seen one of those in action."

Ian delicately placed the weapon on the ground. "I don't think someone who is as inexperienced as me when it comes to fire arms should be allowed to use it then."

"A thought we commonly share," said Daniel. He handed Ian the grenades. "When I say, you throw these out into their group, then I will open fire on them."

"What, on the grenades?" Ian asked.

There was a long pause. "No," Daniel said. "On the ponies. We'll move out the dumpster for cover."

[23] Research, engineering and development command.

Soap was now onto the fourth bullet, and so far he had landed a perfect headshot on every enemy he fired at. He cocked the riffle again and smiled as he took aim. "I still got it," he said to the stray dog beside him before pulling the trigger once again. Once again, another pony dropped to the floor. The Siberian wolfhound had sensitive ears, but didn't shy away from the sound of allied gunfire. Soap continued to smile as he cocked the riffle once more. As he was about to line up another shot, he was spotted by a pony.

"Third floor! Two windows in from the left," cried the earth pony, Peeping Tom, before Soap put a bullet through its head. The damage had been done, however, and now the ponies knew where it was that Soap was hiding.

Outside and below, Daniel and Ian had moved the bin close enough to the end of the alleyway so that they could get some good shots. "Did you hear that? They've found him! They'll kill my family!"

Daniel grasped Ian's wrist. "Just calm down! We'll protect them, too!" But Ian ignored Daniel, and instead he pulled the pin on both grenades and threw them into the pile of ponies at the same time. In a couple of seconds later, they went off. The explosion of both grenades combined managed to take a good chunk out of the ponies' numbers, but it still was not enough. The ponies still outnumbered them, and now, to make things worse, they not only had the location of Soap, but they also had the location of Daniel and Ian. Things were about to get a whole lot harder.

The ponies now turned their fire to Daniel's and Ian's location. Ian quickly grabbed Daniel by the collar and dragged him into full cover behind the bin. This potentially saved Daniel's life as the bullets narrowly missed him. "I, I'm sorry," Ian stammered, realizing what he'd done and that he was now unarmed. Daniel gave him a swift glare, then went down into prone and rolled out of cover from behind the bin. He fired off his MP40 with an off-putting battle cry. There had been a total of three ponies which had ventured down into the alleyway to claim Ian and Daniel's lives, all of which were instantly shot down by Daniel's sudden attack.

Daniel rolled back into cover and gave a laugh. "Didn't see that one coming, hey? Hey, did ya? You fucking animals!"

"I don't think now is the appropriate time for a victory gloat!" Ian said.

Daniel ignored him as he reloaded the MP40 with one of the last two ammo clips he had scavenged. He attempted his roll-out tactic a second time, and this time he found half of the ponies firing up at the apartment and the other half firing into the alleyway. Somehow, the three dead ponies provided adequate cover for him, absorbing whatever bullets did not ricochet off the dumpster or the brick walls. Daniel returned fire, this time hitting only two ponies, and only one of which was fatally wounded. The other, Limp Biscuit, was shot in the hoof and knee.

Meanwhile, up in the apartment, Soap and the rest of Ian's family had taken to the floor to avoid the swarm of bullets coming up into the apartment. Given the angle, most of them only perforated the awful popcorn ceiling. A popcorn ceiling is a terrible style of ceiling that has little beads texturing it which nobody likes because they attract dust like nobody's business. Everyone was afraid to move, but Soap had been in many positions like this before, and he knew it was better to do otherwise. The wolfhound, too, showed a keen awareness of the situation, and he tried to usher the nurses as far from the window as possible before returning to Soap's side. Soap looked to his left to find the rest of the shells he had for the hunting riffle which had been blasted onto the floor when the ponies returned fire. Luckily for him, they remained in good condition, so he scooped them up and placed them in his shirt pocket.

He then crawled commando-style towards Amy, Rachael and Lauren with his riffle held out in front of him. "You all need to move out of this room, now!" he shouted over the deafening symphony of gunfire.

Amy shook her head. Her eyes were filled with a deep fear. "No, we can't!"

"Yes you can! You have to do it!" Soap said, but Amy shook her head, so he addressed Lauren. "Get your mother and sister into the bedroom! It's the only safe place for them!"

Lauren gave him a worried look herself. But then she gave a firm nod. "Okay. Mum, we need to move now! Please!" Amy looked into her daughter's face, tears streaking her cheeks. She looked as though she still had no intention of moving, but then the Siberian stray leapt up and started tugging on her shirtsleeve. At its behest, she fearfully crawled off to the bedroom along with her daughters to where Tom still lay. Lauren turned her head back to Soap. "What about you?"

"I'll be fine! Just go!" he said. As Lauren crawled off into that room, Soap looked to the apartment door which had been left open. He again mustered his muscles by chiding himself, but it was the sight of that dog charging out the door first and keeping watch over the stairs that guided him onwards. The mutt looked over its shoulder at him, wagging its tail, then gazed down the stairs as though keeping a lookout.

Soap allowed himself a laugh of relief as he dragged his body out of the doorway and crawled towards the stairs. The dog licked him happily and bandied about in place. "Thanks, pooch. After we get through all this, you and me should go for a drink. What do you say to the name 'Soap Junior'?" The canine wagged its fluffy tail, and Soap gazed up the stairwell. He

looked down to where his right leg used to be and how he had come to lose it. "This would have been a lot easier if you were still here." He sighed before crawling his way up the stairs to gain a better vantage point.

Daniel's ammo clip ran dry. He cursed to himself and shimmied his way back behind the dumpster. Once there, he threw out the empty and slipped in the last clip he had.

"How many more are there?" asked Ian, who had spent the entire time hunkered down behind the dumpster.

"Too many. This last clip ain't going to cut it."

"So what now?" asked Ian.

"I need you to help me bring another body over." Daniel knew he wouldn't like that.

Ian shook his head. "No. No way am I going back out there. It's way too dangerous now!"

Daniel gave a nod. Instead of reminding Ian that their predicament was partly his fault, he handed the MP40 to him. "Take this, then."

Again Ian shook his head. "I'm terrible with firearms. What the hell am I going to do with this?"

"You don't need to be a good shot. Just open fire on them to suppress them whilst I run over and grab another body."

Ian reluctantly took the weapon. "Fine, but you'd better hurry!"

"Believe me, I don't want to be out there just as much as you. I'll be quick. You want to go on the count of three?"

"Oh, fuck the count of three! Just go!" Ian popped up from behind the dumpster and opened fire on the ponies. Daniel quickly darted out of cover and towards the bodies of the ponies that had collected nearest to him. He grabbed one by the hoof with both hands and heaved it back towards the dumpster. For a moment, this plan seemed to be working. Ian's incredibly bad aim intimidated the ponies as they did not quite know who was going to get the next bullet, if that makes any sense. Hell, Ian even managed to take a couple of them down, since with the spread provided by an automatic weapon, aim isn't that necessary, but he ran out of ammo when Daniel was still only halfway to the dumpster.

"Hurry up, I'm all out!" said Ian. Daniel looked up at a pony who had recovered from the sudden suppressive fire, and now it had its weapon raised and pointing straight at him. It gave a smile tainted with pure evil that made Daniel realize this was the end for him and his gutter-crawling. Just as it was about to squeeze the trigger, a bullet zoomed through its head.

Daniel gave a laugh, "Hah HOH!" and quickly made his way back behind the dumpster with the pony carcass.

"Tango down!" Soap had made his way up to the fifth floor and had lifted himself up onto the windowsill of the landing window. This was now his new vantage point. He cocked the hunting riffle and lined up another shot, took a deep breath to steady his aim, and pulled the trigger. Of course he managed to strike another superb headshot. Soap cocked the riffle again, lined up another shot, landed another headshot, and then cocked again. He continued to repeat this process over and over. At this moment in time, he was allowed to feel like a soldier again, like a real man.

Daniel quickly scavenged three more ammo clips from the dead body he recently had acquired. He took back his MP40 and loaded the fresh ammo clip in. Ready for action once more, he peeked his head up above the dumpster and smiled.

"What is it?" asked Ian, thinking Daniel must have gone insane.

"It's working. Their numbers are dwindling!" And it was true: The ponies were nearly all dead. Just as if it was a gift from God, the sound of a car horn rang loud in the streets, followed by a wave of bullets which came flooding down and managed to finish off the last of the ponies.

Soap looked through his scope to find out who had just come to the rescue. He gave a joyful laugh as he saw Captain Walker hop off of a transport truck with Yuri and a few other soldiers. "Well I'll be damned."

Daniel and Ian emerged from behind the dumpster to meet their mystery saviours. "Oh, you guys! You guys are just fantastic," Daniel said.

"I can't believe we made it," Ian said. He hurried back inside to fetch his family.

"You best believe it, son," Yuri said. "Now come on. Let's get you out of here and get you somewhere safe. You're going to live to fight another day, comrades."

Chapter Thirty-Three.

Back in black. Pony tales nobody asked for. The fourth commandment.

A group of fourteen pony infantry soldiers returned to the street where Walker and his men had their stand against the Equestrians and been saved by Discord. The street was like any other street in Moscow at this point: coated with the dead soldiers on both sides of the war. The ponies moved through the street, constantly stepping over their fallen allies and making sure they purposely trod over the dead humans to add one final insult. They were here for one reason only: To find and revive Onyx so that he could help make the final push to take over the city of Moscow.

"Where did you see him last?" one pony asked another who had taken part in the very battle in which Onyx had fallen.

This pony, a unicorn named Pokey Pierce with a safety pin cutie mark, pointed over to near a pawn shop window a few feet down the road. "Over near that area, I think."

"You think? He'd best be. If he died, and we lost his body, then we will all be in big trouble when Kaiser Celestia finds out," said the first pony again, an earth pony mare with a light purple pelt and the name Sour Grapes.

"I think it's weird," said another, older earth pony mare by the name of Milano Mash, who was following the other two ponies close behind.

"You think what is weird?" Sour Grapes asked.

"How he can just die, and then be revived by a simple injection," responded Milano. "Magic was banned, yet we use chemistry far more potent than any magic spell I've ever seen a unicorn cast."

"Indeed!" Pokey shouted. "It's creepy. We have to concentrate really hard on a specific spell, but these tinctures and unguents of resurrection and brainwashing require no effort on our part by contrast."

"Nothing creepy about it. It's Guardian technology is what it is," Sour Grapes said with confidence.

"Guardian Technology? Please tell me you don't believe in the Guardians!" said Milano with a patronising tone.

"They are real! Of course they are! Who do you think created us, and how else do you explain this 'liquid' that can heal any wound and revive a dead man?"

"Gee, I dunno, maybe the same science which explains the rest of the universe?" said Milano.

"Who are the Guardians?" asked Pokey Pierce. Being younger, he had no idea what these two seasoned soldiers were talking about. Being a very gullible pony, they sure sounded interesting to him.

"You must know who the guardians are!" insisted the first pony.

Pokey shook his head patiently. "No, I'm afraid I don't."

"The Guardians are nothing but a myth," answered Milano.

"They are no myth," said Sour Grapes.

"Really? Do you have any proof of their existence?" asked Milano, knowing full well that she did not.

"No, but I don't need it! I know they are real! It just makes sense that they would be!"

"No, it really doesn't," said Milano.

Like so many conversations on the internet, others had digressed into a disingenuous argument to smother the asker. "You still haven't answered my question!" interrupted the second pony as he grew ever more curious.

Milano sighed. Again like an online conversation, she was prone not to answer. "It does not matter. They are but a myth."

"No, they are not!" Sour Grapes stamped her hooves, then turned to Pokey Pierce. "The Guardians were the first ones to ever live."

"The first ones to ever live?" Pokey Pierce repeated unnecessarily.

"Yes. They came before us, and before the humans. In fact, they came before every living thing. They are the race who created all other life forms."

Milano let out a patronising chuckle. "You see how stupid it all sounds? They created us all? Ha! I highly doubt that!"

"They did!" snapped Sour Grapes before turning back to the second pony. "Look, I'll tell you about it some other time. One where Milano here isn't spewing a bunch of blasphemy!"

Milano laughed. "Yeah, go ahead. Fill the boy's head with Breezy tales."

It was a small mercy that Sour Grapes spotted Onyx's body, because then the three of them could shut up about interrupting one another just to answer one idle question. Onyx was still lying on the pavement, dead as a doorknob. Sour Grapes smiled to Pokey Pierce. "Looks like you were right."

"I knew I was." The unicorn smiled in triumph. The ponies rushed over to Onyx's body and examined it first. Pokey picked up a stick and jabbed Onyx's stinking carcass.

"Yep, definitely dead," said Sour Grapes.

"No shit, Marelock," said Milano, which was the pony version of the human saying, "No shit, Sherlock." Sour frowned at Milano, then knelt down next to Onyx and took one of his injections from his belt. She popped the cap off and pushed the needle into his chest. She then pressed down on the plunger and the liquid entered his body. A few seconds passed before Onyx gasped and shot up straight. The sight scared Sour and Pokey, whilst Milano just watched with amazement.

Onyx cracked his neck side to side before addressing the ponies. "How long was I out for?" he asked.

"No more than an hour or two," Pokey said.

"An hour or two? What took you so long to get me up? I suppose I missed us eradicating the rest of the citizens."

"Uh, not exactly, sir. We were repelled back and had to retreat," Pokey said, stuttering.

"Wait, you retreated?" Onyx said.

"Yes, but only a street or two. The humans ran off afterwards."

"But I thought we were winning?"

"We we're. We still are," said Sour.

"It's just, you're our commander, and you were dead, so…" Pokey trailed off.

"Right. So where are the humans now?" Onyx asked.

"We are still yet to find them," Milano answered.

"Well what's taking us so long?" Onyx asked.

"We were waiting for you, sir."

"What? Why?"

Milano gritted her teeth. "You are our leader, sir," she said slowly.

"So?"

This time all three ponies gave him a worried look. They were not worried he would punish them. "So we wanted your orders," Sour Grapes said.

"Just because I'm leading this battle does not mean I have to hold your hooves through the entire thing!" snapped Onyx, who was still feeling sour that he lost a hand-to-hand engagement, and was now taking it out on these three ponies. He also might have been a little bit retarded.

The three ponies raised one brow each. "Uh, we're sorry, sir?" Sour Grapes said after a pause.

Onyx jumped to his feet and picked up his sword. "Just forget about it. We need to find the humans, and fast. Luna and her mother want as many humans dead this day as possible, and I for one am glad to be graced with such an order."

"Yes, sir, me too," said Pokey Pierce, who was a sycophant as much as he was gullible.

"Good. Now let's find the rest of these humans. I could use a good slaughter."

Not everyone was ready for a good slaughter. Some people would even go so far as to say that the phrase "good slaughter" is an oxymoron in terms, because it combines two words which inherently contradict one another. As you perhaps are aware, the word "slaughter" has nothing to do with laughter and instead refers to the brutal harm of another living creature. It is a slaughter when two warring factions murder a plane full of innocent civilians. It is an unfortunate fact of omnivorous or carnivorous biology when animals are slaughtered for food. The word "good" is harder to define due to its subjective nature

steeped in qualia, but unless you are a psychotic edge lord, a slaughter is not something you would say is good, because you would not want to be slaughtered yourself.

Daniel and his comrades did not want to be slaughtered. In point of fact, many of them did not even want to slaughter the ponies at this point, because they wanted this bloody war to end and to return to the pieces of their daily lives, but like the puzzle of this entire war, from the day the Equestrians first emerged from their hoary portal to the nefarious, ugly tower that would soon stand upon the ruins of the HR HQ lorded by its new master who had fooled everyone, and even beyond that, there were pieces missing that could never be recovered.

"We are leaving Moscow?" Daniel asked Walker. Ian's family, along with Tom and Soap, were to be escorted to the evacuation point. What shattered fragments remained of the Human Resistance had agreed the city had fallen. Daniel accepted this grievous news, but knew he had to look forward. "Very well. Me and my father shall talk over where we shall go."

Daniel became concerned when Walker lowered his head in a sombre gesture. "Your father is dead."

Daniel gasped and tears began to fill in his eyes. "How? How did it happen? The ponies got him?" For a minute, he couldn't breathe. Every word sucked another drop of life from him into the intransigent ether that had claimed his brother, James.

"I don't know. The HQ was surrounded and taken over my ponies. I lost some of my best men there."

"You didn't see him? You didn't see his body? He might be alive!"

Walker shook his head in doubt. "No, there is no way he survived that." Seeing a different sort of disbelief in Daniel's face, he elaborated. "Half of the upper floors were blown apart along with one of my most loyal men. There were at least a thousand ponies there. God knows how they all fit. Your father's either dead or captured. There's no way he made it out alive and unnoticed."

Daniel refused to believe his father was dead. "Maybe he hid. Maybe they didn't find him. We need to go and find him!"

"Even if he did hide, there would be no way we could get to him. I had a hundred men at least with me, and we got repelled back. Hell, we would have all been slaughtered if it were not for backup arriving at the last second." Walker decided to leave out the part of explaining to Daniel that he had allied with dragons, so that he would not have to explain that he had allied with dragons. It could potentially be a touchy subject.

"I could sneak in there! One man could easily go unnoticed."

"Sir, we have an entire city of people to look after."

"I'm one man, Walker! I don't need your permission! I have lost too many people that I hold close to heart, and I am not, I repeat, *not* leaving this city without knowing for certain if my father is dead or alive!"

Walker let out a heavy sigh. It had become painfully obvious to him that Daniel was not going to just leave the city without seeing his father's body, whether he was still breathing or not. "And what of the legacy of the Williams family? They've led all of humanity throughout this age."

"Maybe humanity doesn't need a leader," Daniel said.

Walker stared at him a while. "I won't let you go alone."

Daniel shook his head. "I can't let you risk your life for me. I know the chances of my father living are slim, but this is something personal."

"This isn't up for debate. If you're set on leaving, then I'm coming with you," insisted Walker.

Yuri and the soldiers followed Ian up into the apartment building and to the correct apartment, in case you had any doubts. Ian flung open the door to find his wife and daughters standing there, hugging each other with huge smiles on their faces. Amy leapt forward and wrapped her arms around Ian. "We made it!" she cried with joy.

Ian's cheek bulged as he smiled. "I told you I would be coming back." Lauren and Rachael both hugged their father.

"Is this all of you?" asked Yuri.

"No. There is a wounded soldier in the bedroom," said Rachael.

"And there is one upstairs who might need a little help getting down," said Lauren.

Yuri nodded to two of the soldiers behind him. "Go get the soldier in the room. I'll help the one upstairs." The soldiers both responded with, "Da sir", before disappearing into the apartment and entering the bedroom.

That is when Soap's voice came from behind Yuri. "I may be one legged, but I'm still capable of getting down the stairs." Yuri and Soap had not yet noticed each other as Yuri had his back to Soap, and being that they were in Moscow, most people spoke with a Russian accent so Soap just assumed it was another soldier. Yuri turned to see Soap crawling along the floor, dragging his one leg and his stump behind him and carrying the hunting riffle on his back.

Yuri gasped as though opening his favourite Christmas present. "Soap?"

Soap, who had not thought to look up at the soldier, decided to when his name was spoken. He smiled. "Well I'll be damned."

Yuri turned to Ian and the one other soldier he had with him. "Quick, help me get him up," he ordered. Yuri took hold of one of Soap's arms and Ian took the other, with the other soldier placing his hands on the bottom of Soap's thighs. They all then lifted him off of the ground.

"You haven't seen a dog around, have you?" asked Soap. "A Siberian wolfhound."

"Uh, no. I haven't," said Yuri. "But I can't believe you're alive!" Yuri did not mention Soap's missing leg as he thought it would be a sensitive subject at this time.

Soap knew that Yuri had noticed the leg and was not mentioning it, so he didn't mention it either. "I could say the same for you, you sly bastard!" Soap looked to his stump. "Honestly, I've been out of the action damn near this entire battle, believe it or not."

"Yeah, well, I clearly have not," Yuri said. The other soldiers came out of the apartment carrying Tom by his arms and legs.

"Be careful with him," said Rachael as the soldiers seemed to not be taking too much care with him. They accidentally bumped his head a few times trying to get him through the doorway, but all he did was let out a soft groan.

"Sorry, ma'am," said one of the soldiers.

"Right, men. Let's get these people out of here," Yuri said.

Walker approached Yuri as he exited the building with the other soldiers carrying Tom. Ian's family followed close behind. "Yuri, I need you to take all these people back to the evacuation zone. Daniel and I have something we must do first."

Ian and the soldier continued to carry Soap to the truck with Walker following along next to them. Yuri tilted his head at Walker. "Okay, but is it really that important? I mean, what if we have to leave before you make it to extraction?"

"Yes, this is important. If you have to leave, just do it. There is an old abandoned railroad terminal about ten miles north of Moscow. Take everyone there. If I don't turn up by the next morning then try and get the people to the nearest army outpost you can find. Do you understand?" explained Walker.

Of course Yuri understood. He'd been speaking English for quite some time. Ian and the soldier were showing extreme difficulty in hoisting Soap onto the truck, so he paused to help them before turning his full attention back to Walker. "I understand, sir. Good luck out there." Walker gave a nod and a salute. Yuri returned the salute before banging the back of the truck. "Let's get ready to move out!" he shouted to the driver. Ian and his family started to climb into the truck next to Soap and Tom, who had just been placed in.

Rachael was about to climb in when Daniel stopped her. "I'm sorry, but I need another favour from you," he said.

Rachael turned to him and feigned a smile. "Sure. What is it?"

"Can you look after Tom for me? I will be joining you soon enough, but could you just watch him until then?"

Rachael gave a nod. "I won't leave his side."

Daniel smiled and thanked her. He reached over to grasp Tom's hand, even though his friend remained out of sorts. He mouthed the words "thank you" again to Rachael, then backed off. Rachael climbed back into the truck and Yuri gave one final salute to Walker from the passenger seat before the trucks all pulled off and Daniel and Walker were left alone. "Come on, let's go find your dad," Walker said.

Andrew strolled out of the HQ with a huge smile plastered across his sick and twisted face. To him, this was a glorious victory, and it was made ever more sweet by the hundreds of dead resistance soldiers that lay at his feet. He enjoyed the sound of the fragments of glass scrunching underneath his shoe. Andrew stopped and took a deep breath, then he gave a sigh of relief. "You got to love the smell of victory." He then burst out into song about how spectacularly evil he was feeling. It wasn't a very clever or subtle song, and it was noxiously repetitive, and there is no need to transcribe it here, but some of the lyrics include: "Evil without a reason, evil without a cause, I am so transparently evil just because, because, because." He was thinking of

walking over to the evacuation zone and stealing candy from civilians' babies with the resistance soldiers watching him, but he realized he had work yet to do.

He allowed himself to practice cackling and twiddling his fingers openly, then approached a dead pony and began to search the body for a radio or some sort of other communication device. He was planning on getting an evacuation of his own, into Equestria. Unfortunately for him, the pony body had no sort of communication device. Andrew sighed and moved on to another pony body. He then began to search it, and his mind began to wonder off into its own world. He thought about how the Equestrians would worship him and crown him a hero for his cunning and very skilful infiltration on the human resistance, and how it single-handedly brought them to their bitter end. Andrew also thought about what had been promised him: his own plot of land in Equestria with his own group of Equestrian guards and his own group of human slaves, and the slaves would have to tend his every want and need, and he could take days off whenever he wanted and even wear mismatched socks. He continued to think of the slaves, and how he would have mostly women so that they may tend to his more personal needs, and how they would have no choice in the matter. Andrew wasn't satisfied that these thoughts made him unpleasant enough, so he continued to think on until he was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Andrew Grant, is that you?"

Andrew froze for a moment before turning his head to see Walker and Daniel standing a few metres away from him. He just stared at them. He did not know what to say. Daniel had been the one to call his name and he made another attempt to communicate with him. "Andrew Grant, it's me, Daniel. Are you okay?"

Andrew snapped out of his frozen state and gave a nod. "Yeah, I know. Sorry, I'm just a bit shaken by all this mess," he lied as he tried to manipulate the minds of the two soldiers.

"What are you doing?" asked Walker.

Andrew realised that they had caught him searching a pony body, and he quickly tried to make up an excuse. "I was searching for a weapon," he said.

Walker looked around at the many weapons that had been dropped by the dead and now littered the grounds of the HQ. "Don't seem too hard to find a weapon."

Andrew gulped, even though he had a ready excuse. "I am a scientist. This is a ready opportunity to inspect enemy technology. I'm not feeling quite right. Like I said, I'm a bit shaken."

"It's okay. There is no need to worry. We will get you to safety," Daniel said.

Andrew forced a fake smile as Daniel stepped forward, but Walker lingered back and studied Andrew. "How did you survive?" he asked.

"I hid until they all just left."

"They just left?" repeated Walker, turning Andrew's statement into a question.

"Yes," Andrew said straight away.

As Daniel scoured the building's exterior, he found the body of Ezio, but he chose to ignore it as he did not know the man and felt he needed to find his father, even if that meant he found only a body. He needed to know, one way or another. Daniel filled with hope at what he overheard and turned to Walker. "That means my father could still be alive!"

Walker still was not convinced by Andrew's story. "I don't know. It seems a bit too lucky."

"I'd say! I damn near shat myself," said Andrew following through with a nervous laugh, he was not dealing well with the pressure which Walker was putting onto him. Daniel was too blind-sighted by his quest to find his father, so he wasn't picking up on the signals which Walker was picking up on.

"Come on! Let's search the building! He could still be alive!" said Daniel who was already making his way through the door.

"I didn't see him," said Andrew. When he noticed Walker's unconvinced stare upon him, he added, "but we could check." Andrew hoped he could weave through Walker's suspicion that he knew more than he was letting on. The pair of them followed Daniel inside. Walker was the only one who was properly armed with an M4 Carbine, although he had given Daniel his Beretta, so he made sure he was always behind Andrew, just so he couldn't try anything. When the three men entered the lobby of the HQ, they were immediately met by the cold dead body of Sergeant Johnson whom Andrew had dragged downstairs and posed. Daniel gasped and moved forward to the body.

"It's such a shame to see a good man like Johnson fall." Daniel took to one knee and ran his fingers down across Johnson's face, closing his eye lids over his staring eyes. They eyelids flipped back open a moment later, like birthday candles you just can't blow out.

Walker sighed and gave a nod. "He was a good man," he said, putting on his sad face. Andrew concealed his grin. He found it humorous that both men thought of Johnson as a hero, as they both did not know what he had done. Walker looked to Andrew and could easily identify that he was hiding something. "You wouldn't know anything about what happened to him, would you?"

Andrew was caught off guard by Walker's question. "Wait, I'm sorry, what?" he stuttered.

"I said, 'You wouldn't know anything about what happened to him, would you?'" This time, Walker's tone was a touch more stern, like a kindergarten teacher.

Andrew began to sweat. "No, of course not! He was dead when I got here. I mean, not when I arrived to work this morning, but when I left my hiding place."

"And you didn't think to mention that he was dead, given his high status among the resistance?" asked Walker, continuing to press Andrew.

Andrew frowned. "We spent less than a minute talking outside before we all came inside. You found out before I could break the news."

Daniel interrupted the conversation between the two men, to which he hadn't really been paying much attention. "Come on, my father's office is not too far from here." He climbed to his feet and made his way up the stairs to the left-hand side. Walker gave a nod to Andrew, which was a silent order to follow after Daniel. Andrew gave another gulp before joining their small procession up several flights of stairs to Peter's office. The sight they beheld made Daniel sick with dread. The bodies of ponies and resistance soldiers were spread throughout the hallway, and the walls were torn to pieces by bullets and slashed by Onyx's sword. As Daniel moved to the open door of Peter's office, he gave a silent prayer with each step that he would not find his father dead, even if that meant he would not find him at all. Walker had no false hope as he looked at all the bodies. He knew what they would find in Peter's office, and the thought saddened him.

Walker knelt down next to Sergei's body to take his dog tags, laying his M4 Carbine on the floor whilst Daniel disappeared into Peter's office. Andrew took a step back so that he was behind Walker and looked to Walker's weapon. *This is it,* the voice inside his head said. *The gun; take it.* Andrew stepped forward and was getting ready to grab Walker's weapon when Daniel's cry came from inside the office. Walker snatched his M4 Carbine from the floor and darted into the office.

Inside the office, Walker stood behind Daniel with his head lowered. Daniel was on his knees, sobbing and cradling his father's cold, dead body. Walker stooped to place a hand on Daniel's shoulder, but his choked apologies could not bring Peter Williams back. He regretted that they did not have the time to mourn. "Sir. Mr. Williams. Daniel, we need to get going." He squeezed Daniel's shoulder as if to wake him.

Andrew rolled his eyes. "This is pointless. We should just go."

When Daniel remembered to breathe, he let out a deep sniffle. He'd seen many people die, but seeing someone he'd known so closely now a lifeless, hollow object was too much. To compare this to his brother's death would have been wrong. He'd been close with James, but hadn't witnessed his grisly demise. He'd heard rumours of what the ponies did in those days, and guessed that Twilight Sparkle would have devoured him, but he could always pretend that James had still just gone off to war and was out there, somewhere in the world to be found, fighting and surviving. His father was here, and only the most important part of him had gone away, leaving nothing behind but a figment of the man he once was. Daniel's eyes wet themselves with tears when he wondered how much of who his father was he had ever once known. "I couldn't protect him. I'm the leader of the human resistance, but I couldn't do my job!"

Walker shook Daniel. "Your job is to protect those thousands of civilians at the Evac zone from the pony scourge that could return at any moment. It is a tragic thing which has occurred here, but the longer we wait here the more likely it is that we will be found. We need to leave now."

Daniel let out a gasp of shame. Such a thing strikes one like a phantom sock in the gut. He stammered to rectify himself. "Okay. Okay, let's get going." He nodded and swallowed as he remembered to breathe. With a sigh, he took one more look down at Peter's pale, pained face, and said, "Goodbye, Dad. I'll never forget you. I love you."

Walker rose to his feet, before helping Daniel to his. "And he loved you."

Daniel turned his head to Walker and forced a weak smile. "Thank you, Walker. I know this seemed like a pointless mission to you. I just needed to know. I appreciate you coming with me."

Walker gave an understanding nod. "There is no need to thank me. I'm just so sorry it turned out like this."

Andrew struggled to hide his boredom as he did not care for either men involved and did not seem to understand their sadness, but he knew that he would have to pretend. Just to avoid further suspicion, Andrew put on a fake frown and gave Daniel a nod. "I am so very sorry for your lots."

Daniel nodded in silence. Walker raised his M4 Carbine and moved to the doorway where he peeked out into the hall to make sure it was clear. He led the way through and down the stairs with Daniel next after him and Andrew at the back of the line. Andrew smiled. This was his chance. The men made it to Johnson's body when Andrew pulled out the six-shooter from his pocket aimed it past Daniel. He posed no threat at the moment, so he instead lined the iron sights up with the back of Walker's head. His thumb eased back the hammer so as not to make too much noise. Neither Walker nor Daniel noticed the slight click it made. Andrew's smile grew three sizes that moment.

Walker stopped in the doorway and realised that he had let Andrew fall behind, and as he still did not trust him, he turned to summon him. Walker turned his head back to Andrew and was about to give him the order to come forth when he saw the six shooter aiming in his direction. Walker froze and stared at Andrew.
Andrew had been planning to just shoot Daniel and Walker in the back of the head, but now Walker had spotted him before he could. Andrew decided to have a little fun first with Daniel and also with Walker.

"Drop the gun!" said Andrew before Walker could react to the gun being pointed at him.

"I knew it." Walker tossed his M4 Carbine to the floor with a clatter.

Daniel turned his head to Andrew and gasped. "Andrew! What are you doing?"

Andrew kept the gun pointed at Walker. "Drop your gun, Daniel, or I swear I will shoot him!"

"Don't do it," Walker said to Daniel. Daniel had the Beretta tucked in the side of his belt and he did not know if he would be able to pull it out fast enough to shoot Andrew before he could kill Walker. Daniel had had enough of the death as it was. He didn't want Walker's blood on his hands along with everything else that had happened that day. That would have been awkward.

"I mean it! Drop it!" Andrew said again,

Daniel slowly reached for the gun with one hand. "Okay, I'm going to slowly take it out of my belt where I can't get at it in time because you have the draw on me, and I'm going to put it on the ground. Just stay calm—"

"Stop!" Andrew interrupted.

Daniel stopped. "What?"

"Use only your thumb and your index finger to pull the gun out. If I see you grip the gun properly, I will pull my trigger and take down Walker with me!"

"Don't listen to him, Daniel," Walker said. "Just shoot him! I doubt he could hit me from there anyway."

"Shut up! Daniel, drop the gun now!" Andrew said instead of just shooting them. Daniel did as he was told. He took out the Beretta using only his index finger and thumb before tossing it over to Andrew. Andrew leant down and picked up the Beretta with his free hand whilst still keeping the six-shooter and his eyes on Walker. "Good. Now, Walker, go back against the far wall."

Walker didn't budge at Andrew's command. "Do you think I won't shoot you? Because I fucking will, you dumb shit!" Andrew said, calling Walker some bad names instead of just shooting him.

"Do it," said Walker.

"Oh, don't tempt me."

"Go on. Do it, you coward."

Andrew was about to squeeze the trigger when Daniel spoke up. "Walker, just do as he asks. Too many good people have died today. I'm not letting you be one of them." Walker rolled his eyes and moved back to the wall and pressed his back against it.

"Why thank you, Daniel," said Andrew, waving his gun towards the wall to direct Daniel instead of just shooting him outright. "Now you too. Go to the wall." Daniel was allowed to give Andrew a foul look before moving over to the wall where he stood beside Walker. "Good. Now both of you sit down." Walker and Daniel did as Andrew told them. "You see? Now that wasn't that hard, was it?" Instead of shooting them at this opportunity, Andrew walked over to a deceased pony general on the floor, keeping his eyes set on his helpless hostages.

Walker shook his head. "I knew I should have put a bullet in you whilst I had the chance."

"Yes, you really should have." Andrew chuckled and searched the pony general for a walkie-talkie. Andrew then found what he was looking for. "I found what I was looking for," he said with an evil grin. He rested Daniel's Beretta on the floor next to the dead general and took the walkie-talkie as Daniel and Walker craned their necks to watch.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Daniel.

"Oh, I'm so glad you asked," Andrew said, stating the obvious. It seemed he enjoyed hearing the sound of his own voice more than preserving his own life against two hostages who would likely kill him given the slightest provocation. "You see, I was planning on killing you both right here, right now, but now I have a better idea. If I radio a pony patrol to come over here and capture you guys, then we can all return to Equestria together! I would receive an even better reward for capturing Daniel Williams and Captain Martin Walker than I ever did hiding in a basement tinkering with lights and drugs and robots. Of course, no one really cares for you, Walker, so you will probably just be shot, but you, Daniel, oh will they have fun with you!"

Daniel shook his head. "Equestria? You have been there?"

Andrew shook his head. "Nobody's ever been there. Another dimension would be the holy grail of scientific endeavour. The very laws of physics we take for granted probably mean nothing over there, especially to spawn such piggy little creatures."

"They would not let you," Daniel said. "The ponies betray everyone. They always operate here on Earth. The world's greatest scientists have tried to devise ways of reaching Equestria, and none of them ever succeeded. Even you couldn't do it!"

Andrew fired the Beretta off at the ceiling to demonstrate his anger. "I simply lack the technology! A little antimatter, a particle collider, and all I need are the coordinates for the Einstein-Rosen bridge. That's a wormhole, for you plebeians."

"The ponies would never dare let us invade. They could do it, but you could not," Daniel said.

Andrew shook his head. "The ponies have magic. They have means we don't. When I'm heralded as a hero over there, I'll be the greatest scientific mind left alive."

Daniel shook his head. "How could I ever have called you friend?"

"Oh don't be like that! We had some good times did we not?" Andrew asked. Daniel didn't respond. Andrew let out another chuckle. "Not going to talk to me, huh? Oh well, that's just fine. I mean, I would be a little mad if I was too stupid to notice a spy. Old Walker here clocked on right away. Anyway, there is no need to feel bad just yet. There will be plenty of time for that when I hand you over to the ponies, and they will have their fun with you. Again, if I've heard the rumours right." At this, Andrew gave a sick little grin. "Believe me, when I say you will die, and it will be slow and painful!"

Daniel remained quiet. He knew his end was coming. He would soon join his loved ones that had perished. There was no denying that now. He just wasn't certain whether he would die at the hooves of the ponies or at the hands of this raving lunatic. Magic? It all sounded a bit lame to him. Andrew apparently believed in it and showed signs of delighted as he tuned the radio he'd found to a channel he knew to be secure. "Sorry this'll take a bit long, lads, but don't worry. You'll be dead soon enough. Well, Walker will, anyway. Daniel, you have a very good chance of living for a long time. Torture does take finesse, after all."

Andrew depressed the talk button on the radio and cleared his throat. "Hello, this is Agent Dragonwatch. Serial number is 6251. Is anypony out there?"

There was a moment of silence. "Looks like no one is answering," said Walker.

"Shut up!" said Andrew. He spoke once more into the radio. "Hello, this is Agent Dragonwatch. Serial number is 6251. Is anyone out there? Over!" Again there was silence.

"This really isn't working out the way you thought it would," said Walker.

"Shut up, or I swear I will kill you!" said Andrew, who had not killed them yet.

Walker chuckled. "According to you, I'm already dead, which means I guess I got nothing to lose."

"How about a knee cap? Because if you don't shut up, I will shatter yours with a bullet! Now shut up!" Andrew was losing his temper and losing his sense of etiquette. Walker went silent to bide his time, and Andrew continued to fiddle with the radio.

As this exchange went on, Onyx was mobilizing out on the streets with a group of twelve ponies. Milano approached to trot beside him, which was risky given his penchant for using body shields. "I have to say, I find your abilities quite disturbing," she said.

"You ‘have to’? What abilities?" asked Onyx.

"Yes. Your ability to rise from the dead is just unnatural.”

"Not just unnatural, and it’s not an ability. It's a curse."

"A curse? Why would it be a curse?" asked a pony soldier who decided to invite himself into the conversation.

Onyx turned to this soldier even though he continued walking in the same direction he had been. "Do you know how many times I have died? A few hundred, and each time I meet my end in an agonising and brutal way. No one seems to just put a bullet in my head, and despite what you might think, that still hurts. A lot. Trust me, it's a curse.”

"But you never have to fear death. Besides, you act like you love inflicting pain,” Milano said.

"You'd be surprised.”

"What's it like?" asked Milano. “Death? What happens when you die?" Onyx went silent. "Sir?"

"Nothing. Everything goes black, and it’s just nothing,” Onyx said. Milano gave a heavy sigh, as though it was raining after she just had her wagon washed. "What? Was that not the answer you wanted to hear?" asked Onyx.

"No, it's the answer I was afraid of hearing," responded Milano.

Before another word could be spoken, a voice came through on Milano's radio. "This is Agent Dragonwatch, serial number 6251. Is anyone out there? Over."

"Who is that?” Onyx asked.

“I think it’s a spy on our secure channel. The number checks out,” Milano said, leafing through a book as she gave the radio to Onyx.

Onyx took the radio and stared at Milano. "How did you get hold of this radio? I thought only generals were on this radio frequency.”

"They were. They are. Our general died pretty early on, so I took his radio for him.”

Back and the HR HQ, Andrew had noticed how silent Daniel had become, and didn’t like the way he was glaring at him, like a spoiled child refusing to eat his lima beans. Those harsh, reddened eyes were putting Andrew on edge, and Walker’s frequent pestering wasn’t mollifying his mood any. He had to speak. "What? Quit staring at me! I get your hurt I betrayed you. Boo-fucking-hoo. Get over yourself!"

"Was it you?" asked Daniel in a quiet tone.

"What? What was me?" Andrew grimaced.

"I asked was it you!” Daniel said. "Was it you who robbed my father of his life?”

Andrew broke down into a chortle. "Oh, god, no. He died way early on. I was still pretending to be on your side when he died. Does it really matter? I mean, it's not like you’re going to get to avenge him anyway."

"I wouldn't count on that!" Daniel said.

Andrew was about to threaten Daniel when Onyx's voice came through on the radio. "This is Commander Onyx of the Equestrian Armed Forces. I am responding to Agent Dragonwatch. Are you still there? Over!"

Andrew jumped on the spot with joy like he’d caught his first ever Frisbee. "Yes! I told you they would answer!" Responding to Onyx, he said, "Yes. Yes, I'm here! I got two prisoners! One is Daniel Williams, and the other is a captain for the resistance! I am requesting evacuation back to Equestria!"

Walker leaned into Daniel. "I can take him.”

Daniel spotted that Walker was reaching for his own knife. "He has a gun,” Daniel reminded him.

"He is distracted. This is our last chance.” Walker rose to his feet, pulling his knife from its sheath.

Onyx’s voice on the radio was reporting that he was no more than two minutes away, although the static made it sound as though he’d said “minuets”. Andrew was smitten with himself. "Well, boys, it's been a pleasure.” As he faced his captives again, he was tackled to the floor by Walker. Andrew let out a cry for help as he crashed to the floor. Lying on his back with Walker looming over him, Andrew raised his pistol to fire off a shot, but Walker batted his hand down. The shot fired instead lodged itself into a wall. Walked raised his knife and plunged it deep into Andrew’s gut like a rabbit leaping onto his lap. Andrew’s face wheezed in a girn of sweaty pain as the cold steel made everything hot in his midsection. Walker tore the blade

from his flesh before ramming it straight back in. Andrew let out a frail scream before coughing up a good amount of his own blood. Staring into Andrew's fearful eyes, Walker yelled, "Was it worth it?"

Daniel walked over to stare down at Andrew and into the dying face of the man he suspected had a hand in his father's murder. Sure, murder was perfectly okay during wartime, but this was sneaky and underhanded. He couldn't write off this wrong under the same header. "Dew it," Daniel said. "Keel heem." His voice slurred with emotion.

Walker waved the bloodied knife in front of Andrew's eyes as though conducted a drug test. This was a tactic to strike as much fear into him before his death, and not an attempt at puppet plays. "Feel the pain and fear hundreds of thousands have felt this day thanks to you!"

Tears swelled up in Andrew's eyes. "P. P. Please. Pl. Please. Let. Let. Me. Let me. Live."

"No. You don't get to live." Walker turned his nose up at Andrew then plunged the blade deep into his chest. Andrew let out a gasp that sputtered into a gurgle as he felt the blade slip in between his muscles before piercing his heart.

Daniel rested his hand on Walker's shoulder and smiled. "Let's leave him here to die."

Walker smiled and nodded back, then moved away from Andrew who was still struggling to hold on for life. He wiped the blood from his knife and hands onto his combat trousers before picking up his M4 Carbine. Daniel watched in amazement as Andrew sputtered bubbles of blood from his lips as though trying to say something. Listening closely, he heard Andrew say, "I should have cured you."

Daniel's face screwed up in angered surprise. He couldn't fathom why Andrew would bother with a confession this late in the game, so he responded with, "Yeah, you should have. Now go to Hell, you piece of shit!" He spat on Andrew's face.

"Daniel, we have to leave fast. He told them of our position. They will be on their way, and we don't have near enough ammunition or firepower to take them down," Walker said.

Daniel remained silent as he retrieved his Beretta. He just stared into Andrew's eyes until the dying man gave his final death rattle and his life fled from his body. Only then did Daniel turn to Walker with a nod. "Lead the way."

Walker moved to the door, then let out an expletive. "Is there another way out of here?" asked Walker.

"There must be a side exit," Daniel said. "Why?"

Walker didn't have to answer him. Daniel followed his gaze. Outside the main HQ stood Onyx with Milano Mash and eleven other ponies by his side. Onyx had his sword raised towards Walker and Daniel. "We take them both, dead or alive!" he shouted. The ponies readied their weapons. This didn't look good for Walker and Daniel.

"I don't like those odds," Daniel said. "What the hell's up with that human? Another species traitor?"

Walker's eyes were wide as dinner plates as he stared at Onyx. "The one with the sword. I saw him die."

Daniel cocked a brow. "I guess you were mistaken."

"No! I saw him die. It happened right in front of me."

"Come out now, and everything will be fine!" Onyx shouted. He forgot to add "for me".

"He looks fairly alive now," said Daniel. "What do we do?"

"Drop your weapons and come out, and you can keep your lives," Onyx lied. Negotiations weren't really his thing, given his penchant for antisocial behaviour, but he didn't feel like coming in there after them.

"We can't go out there," Walker said. "He will most definitely kill us, even if it's not today."

"Couldn't we turn ourselves in and get the jump on them when they least expect it?" Daniel suggested.

Walker shook his head. "No, I have seen this guy fight. He will end both of us in a matter of seconds."

"You have 'til the count of three! Then we open fire, and we won't stop until you are both dead." Onyx felt this sort of dialogue was a bit more his style.

"Well now I feel a little insulted," Daniel said. "We need to think of something quick!"

"One!" Onyx said.

"Where is that second exit?" asked Walker.

"Two!"

"Down that corridor." Daniel nodded to the left.

"Move to it!" said Walker.

Onyx paused for a moment to think. "Three!"

"Now!" Walker pushed Daniel aside and lifted his M4 Carbine. He opened fire at the ponies as he ran to the left.

"Kill them both!" roared Onyx. "That was three!" The ponies returned fire with a swarm of bullets that rushed through the HQ lobby. Daniel and Walker took cover behind a wall and stayed close to it to avoid the barrage of deadly projectiles.

"Go!" roared Walker over the sound of all the gunfire.

"What about you?" asked Daniel.

"Just go! I'll be right behind you!" Walker waited for a break in the swarm before poking back around the wall and firing off a few shots of his own. Onyx ducked down and a spray of bullets flew over his head and struck two of the ponies behind him. Milano bravely moved beside him and opened fire at Walker in return. Walker dodged back behind the wall and released the empty ammo clip from his M4 Carbine before pulling out the last spare ammo clip he had on him. This was known as "reloading".

Onyx held up his hand to signal his ponies to stop firing. "Take four soldiers and flank around to the right," he told Milano Mash. "There is another exit there. Make sure they don't make it out."

Milano took four ponies at random rather than picking them from nearby and moved off toward the door. When Walker peeked around the corner again, he saw Onyx marching towards the HQ with his remaining five ponies. Twelve minus two is ten, and ten minus five is five. Walker was about to pick a few more of them off when Onyx gave them the order to fire three quick round bursts at Walker to keep him suppressed behind the wall. This was called "suppressive fire". Walker pulled his head back behind the wall just in time to avoid a few rounds from striking him in the forehead.

All the while, Daniel had been sprinting down the corridor, and he was close to a single fire exit door which led out of the HQ. Daniel grasped the door and rattled it in his struggles to get it open. It didn't budge, but on closer inspection, it was a push door. He threw himself against the metal bar which released the hatches. The door swung open, and Daniel tripped on the bottom of the door frame. This potentially saved his life as a burst of fire from Milano's dispatch just narrowly missed him. Daniel threw himself onto his keister and crawled back like a pet scooting in reverse at a great speed through the door frame and into the HQ. Climbing onto his feet, he readied his Beretta.

Walker hustled over to Daniel. "We got to move out now!"

"We can't! They are out there!" responded Daniel. Walker turned back around towards the way he'd come from and dropped to one knee. "What are you doing?" Daniel asked.

"They are coming from the front as well. Guard your door, I'll guard mine, and maybe, just maybe we can get lucky here," Walker said. Daniel took a deep breath and faced his door with his arms stretched forward and his Beretta aiming forward. There was a moment of complete silence as Daniel and Walker awaited their enemies' approach. At both sides, the ponies were creeping towards them. The atmosphere became so intense a knife could cut it.

Silence. Then came the head of one of Milano's ponies peeking in through the door. There was a slight delay of reaction on Daniel's part, but he still managed to pull the trigger just in time to send a bullet flying forward into the pony's head, which is what happens when you fire a gun. The shot caught everyone off guard, including the ponies. At that moment, Onyx's ponies came rushing around the corner.

"Daniel, stay low!" Walker yelled, opening fire on Onyx's ponies. Daniel did like Walker said and took to one knee to make himself a smaller target. Walker fired off just under half of his ammo clip, and with those rounds, he killed two of Onyx's ponies and injured another. The other two leapt back around the corner and used the wall as cover, whilst the injured pony lay on the floor squealing in pain. The other two ponies poked their weapons around the corner and fired blindly. Walker and Daniel had to duck their heads extra low as bullets randomly bounced around next to them. Two of Milano's ponies rushed through the door at once. Daniel quickly put two rounds into one of the ponies' chests but didn't need to take out the other one as one of Onyx's ponies that were blind-firing managed to accidentally put a bullet between its eyes. Feeling particularly vindictive that day, Daniel laughed at the sight.

Walker raised his weapon and fired back at the two ponies around the corner. He fired seven rounds in one quick burst, and one of those rounds slammed into one of the ponies' hooves. That pony screamed in pain, dropped its weapon, and jerked forward, rendering the side of its head partially visible. Walker took advantage and fired another single shot which found its way into the pony's skull. The pony's body flopped forward, dead. The final pony on Onyx's side that was still alive and was not wounded continued to fire blindly around the corner. One of its lucky bullets found its way straight into Daniel's left thigh.

Daniel let out a cry of pain and fell to the floor. This is when another of Milano's ponies rushed in. Walker spun around to find out if Daniel was still alive and managed to just catch Milano's pony with a quick burst of his M4 Carbine. He then looked down to Daniel.

"You okay!?" he roared over the sound of constant gunfire.

"Yeah! Fucker got me in the leg, that's all!" responded Daniel. He stayed lying on the floor, but kept his Beretta pointing out the door. The pony on Walker's side stopped its blind fire to reload.

Onyx sighed. "What is it sir?" asked the pony, whose name just happened to be Blind Fire.

"This is never going to work," said Onyx, shaking his head.

"Do you have another plan, sir?" asked Blind Fire.

Onyx gave a nod. "I do," he said. He nodded again, pointing to himself. "This nod means that I do."

"Okay, I know what a nod means," Blind Fire said, shortly before saying, "Augh!" Onyx had plunged his sword into the pony's gut and pushed it all the way through its body and out of its back. The pony gasped and dropped its weapon.

Onyx positioned the pony in front of him and took a deep breath. "Great, now I'm out of ponies. Here we go again."

Walker and Daniel waited again in silence. "What's going on?" whispered Daniel.

"I don't know" Walker said, just as quiet.

"Did you kill them all your side?" asked Daniel.

"No, there should be one more."

"There should never have been any at all," Daniel said. He kept his eyes on the door in front of him as his heart pounded in his chest like hail on a windshield. This was bad and made even more so by the fact that Daniel was now losing blood at a faster rate. The silence continued, and the men sat waiting. Neither of them moved an inch, and they refused to even blink. Their eyes locked in front of them and were wide open (because they were not blinking) and drying out.

"Did he get them?" asked Milano's final pony soldier.

"I dunno," Milano Mash said.

"Should we check?"

"Yeah. You go ahead."

"And what about you?" the pony asked, not understanding how a commanding officer works.

"Don't worry, I'll be right behind you."

"You promise?"

"Yes, I promise," Milano Mash lied. The pony gave Milano a nod and crept around the corner. Daniel spotted it immediately and fired off two more shots, both of which struck the pony in the head. Milano watched as its body collapsed, and she shook her head. "No way I'm going in there!"

Onyx darted out into the hallway with the pony held out in front of him by his sword like a wad of cotton candy. Walker set his M4 Carbine to burst fire to save his last remaining bullets and took careful shots in an attempt to hit Onyx, since that was his enemy. Walker was failing in his attempt as his bullets always seemed to find their way into the dead pony at the end of Onyx's sword, not unlike a rigged carnival game. Onyx continued to press forward with ease, and soon enough he was only a couple of steps from Walker and Daniel. This is where Walker's M4 Carbine stopped releasing bullets every time he pulled the trigger and instead just made a clicking sound. This is known as being "out of ammo".

Walker cursed to himself for about the zillionth goddamn time. "Daniel, we got a problem!"

"Please don't say that. There are too many rejoinders for that line right now," Daniel said.

Onyx raised his leg and placed it on the torso of the dead pony at the end of his sword. He kicked the carcass off of his daikatana, sending it flying towards Walker, who tried to bat the body out of view with his M4 Carbine. However, there was a slight second when the body flew at Walker, where it created a blind spot. That split second is all Onyx needed to make his move. He jumped up and kicked a leg forward. His foot connected with Walker's face, and it sent him rolling backwards. Daniel turned to Onyx and fired off the last two remaining shots he had. Onyx dodged both shots with unfair ease before quickly slashing his sword down. Daniel cried in pain as the blade ran down across his right hand, cutting it open and severing his little and ring fingers off. Daniel clutched the two bloody stumps on the end of his hand as he fell back and let out a pain-filled cry

that echoed throughout the streets. Walker leapt to his feet in that moment and grabbed his M4 Carbine with both hands: One hand was placed on the stock and the other on the barrel. He held the weapon out in front of him as a sort of melee weapon.

Onyx let out a chuckle. "You know how many people have tried that?"

"You were dead! I saw you die!" said Walker. “Now play fair!”

"Indeed you did, but there is one thing you should know by now: Evil never stays dead, and I am the earthly presence of all that is evil," responded Onyx in his gravelly voice. It was a bold set of words for a man who’d been criticising the tactics of Joseph Kony not too long ago.

"I'll take your head! Then let’s see you come back!" Walker said with a growl.

"You'll take my head? With what? I'm the one with the sword.”

Walker tossed his M4 Carbine to the floor and smiled.

Onyx chortled. "I'm glad you came to your senses, and instead of fighting a battle you cannot win, you let me take your life.” Walker shook his head and reached back. He then pulled out his Machete which he still had in its sheath on his back. Onyx let out yet another guffaw. "Funny, I seem to recall us doing this before, but this time you won't have a dragon here to fight your battles for you.”

"I won't need one.”

"Oh, you don't know how wrong you are.” When Onyx laughed, his belly shook like a bowl full of jelly. Walker let out a well-chosen battle cry before lunging forward with his machete. Onyx simply took one step back and swung his blade across to block Walker's attack. Walker was knocked slightly off balance by Onyx's block, so he had to regain it before making his next attack.

This time, Walker let out another cry then swung his blade downwards. Onyx blocked it with ease just like last time. Walker pressed his attack, swinging the machete from left to right as fast as he could multiple times. Onyx blocked five of these hits with ease before ducking under the sixth and final one. After ducking, he quickly darted forward with his sword held out to his side and he slipped past Walker. Onyx's blade slipped across Walker's lower torso and it cut fairly deep into the flesh. Walker let out a cry of pain and stumbled forward into the hit. Onyx then stood up straight and gave another giggle. The two of them had now swapped positions, for those of you playing along at home.

Daniel sat and watched this fight whilst clutching his wounded hand and trying to fight his pain. There was nothing else he could do at this point aside from pick up his two useless, severed fingers. He had no weapon and no possible way of fighting efficiently. Walker took a moment to deal with the pain in his lower torso, clutching the wound and feeling his own warm blood rush through his fingers. After a few seconds, he took a deep breath, straightened his stance, and turned to face Onyx.

"You should give up now. I'm growing tired and don't have the time for this. Drop your blade and both you and you wounded friend will be spared for now."

"’For now’! So you can just kill us later!" Walker said.

"I ain't going to lie. Yes, you will be killed later. Possibly I'll even be the one to do it. Who knows? But at least it will be a few more days of life. It doesn't have to end here.” Onyx had probably once been fired from a suicide hotline.

Walker shook his head. "I will not give up!"

Onyx sighed like a teenager full of himself. "Fair enough. Come on, then. We have wasted enough time here as it is."

Walker took a deep breath and waited a few seconds to try and catch Onyx off guard, then he let out one final battle cry before darting forward and swinging his machete across. Onyx parried Walker's attack, then he performed a very quick attack. He spun around so his back was to Walker, turned his blade round, and stepped back, plunging his sword deep into Walker's gut. Walker let out a painful gasp. Daniel cried out. Onyx tore his sword from Walker's gut and moved forward. Walker collapsed to his knees and stayed there in shock for a few moments, then his body tumbled over on to its back. Onyx stepped towards Daniel with his sword dripping with Walker's blood.

"You bastard!" cried Daniel. “Your parents were never married!”

"I warned him. You even heard me. If anyone asks, you have to attest to that.”

"I'll break you dead!" said Daniel.

Yet again, Onyx sighed as though he was being nagged by his parents rather than facing the outrage of someone whose ally he’d just butchered in a very selfish and perverse manner. "Oh dear god, shut up! You literally just heard your friend say that before I took his life. Don't be a fool.”

"Just kill me now, or I swear I will have your life!" roared Daniel.

Onyx let out a “tee hee” laugh. "You’re Daniel Williams, right?” He had forgotten to make absolutely sure before killing that other man.

"I am, and if you know me then you probably know I am not to be fucked with!" Daniel said.

"You know how to put up a fight, I'll give you that. a trait you probably inherited from your father.” Onyx moved closer to Daniel who was still on the floor, clutching his wounded hand.

Daniel realised what Onyx had said and he responded aggressively. "What did you just say about my father?"

Onyx flizzened. "Oh, I'm sorry. How rude of me not to say anything. You see, earlier this day I robbed your father of his life. He put up one hell of a fight though. I'll give him that." Daniel let out a roar of anger and lunged forward. Onyx slammed the hilt of his sword into the side of Daniel's head, knocking him unconscious. "You people never seem to learn that you can't beat me," Onyx said to himself in a cocky tone. He was a little disappointed he had nobody to threaten now. He sheathed his sword and knelt next to Daniel's body to pat him on the back. "Don't worry. This will all be over soon, and then you can join your father in death.”

Chapter Thirty-Four.

Onyx’s motivational lessons. Frankenstein’s paradox.

“Okay, so now what?” Milano Mash had joined Onyx in the hallway behind the HQ’s lobby.

"Now I rally all remaining troops and push on through the city, like I *was* doing,” Onyx said. He nodded to Daniel. “As for him, I'm going to call a unit over. Then you and the unit are going to take him back to Equestria." Onyx pulled out one of the unexplained and highly convenient black boxes and handed it to Milano. “Kaiser Celestia handed me the last one, so don’t lose this.”

Milano huffed. “But I was hoping to help you take this city. I can actually fight, you know.”

"You’re not needed. I got thousands more ponies just like you here already. Just take him back and you will receive a medal. I am sure of it.”

"But I don't want a medal for escorting a prisoner back to Equestria!” Milano Mash whined. “I want to help bring Moscow down!” She stamped her hooves and bawwed.

"That's just tough then, isn't it? Because I have given you your orders. Now you can sit here and argue with me, which I would like to point out that will resort to me taking your head, or you can take him back. Receive a medal, and you get to say you were at the battle of Moscow and that you survived, unlike hundred even thousands of ponies which have come here today.[24] So what will it be?"

Milano lowered her head and sighed at the big baby who always got his way. "Fine.”

"Good! See? I knew you would come around," said Onyx with a patronising tone. He turned on his radio and started to broadcast his voice to every pony radio frequency. "Soldiers of Equestria: This is your grand high leader for life and death, Onyx. I need you all to report back to the main HQ building of the resistance. Don't worry, it has been taken over for quite some time now, and trust me, they are not getting it back. I need you all to get back here so we can regroup and continue on as a single, effective strike force, since frankly, you’re all lost without me. This city has fallen thanks to my direction, and now all we need to do is eliminate any remaining resistance soldiers. If you have any prisoners of war, bring them here for ritual execution. Equestria will surely be pleased with having some more humans to torture. That is all, and hurry. Wouldn't want any of you to miss out on all my fun.” Onyx turned off the radio and slipped it into his belt.

"So that was your plan? Go to the HQ, leave the HQ, come back to the HQ. What if someone from the resistance heard that?" asked Milano.

"They might just come for us." Onyx returned to the main lobby with Milano following him.

"That isn't something to be happy about! Me and you[25] could not possibly take out a squad of resistance soldiers.”

"I could," said Onyx matter-of-factly.

"Yes, you could, but I would be killed almost instantly!" cried Milano.

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[24] Sic.
[25] Sic.

"You’re getting all worked up over nothing. The resistance are probably too little in number to come for an attack of their own. If anything, they’ll notice all the ponies withdrawing to this point, and are using this time to escape." Onyx kneeled over Andrew’s body.

"You don't know that.”

"Look, quit your moaning before I seriously consider taking your head. I’m always right. Get that through your skull and into that steaming dung pile you call a brain.”

Milano Mash just gaped at him for a long moment, perhaps even less sure of what ideas were tumbling through her head than we can be. As a mother, she must have wondered who could raise such a spoiled brat. As a pony, she must have wondered why this humanlike biped was commanding the Equestrian forces. As an Equestrian, she must have questioned the loyalty to the crown of someone so impertinent. As an educated pony, she must have questioned the sanity of someone so high on themselves. As a veteran, she must have longed for the days when Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash commanded her army. As an occupant of the same room as Onyx, she wondered something else, too: "What are you doing with that body?"

"It's fresh, and has one of our radios, so that means this is most likely our agent,” Onyx said.

“A human? He’s obviously not a slave, and they were never much use in combat situations. Anyway, I doubt he’s much use to us now, except for food.”

"Shut up. Don’t care. I was briefed that Agent Dragonwatch, who I never personally met, but I assume it is this guy as well, had created a device that could take down a new weapon that the resistance have.”

“Great. The humans have been allowed to create a new weapon in our absence, and our unicorns still can’t use magic,” Milano said. "Even if we do find the device, how will we know when to use it?"

Onyx felt something in Andrew's breast pocket. "I think I found the device.” He reached into Andrew's breast pocket and pulled out a black device with a red switch. The switch had two settings: “Make Dead Now” and “Don’t Make Dead Now.” It was currently set to the latter.

"Is that it? The key to taking down whatever new weapon the resistance holds is that little thing?" asked Milano. “Such technology makes magic appear cumbersome by comparison. You’ll have to excuse my lack of faith, I hope. I mean, that is nothing.”

Onyx touched his blade's handle and rounded on Milano. She could tell he was glaring behind his mask. “Don’t you ever tell me what I have to do. Never, ever, ever! You’re so stupid, you stupid moron idiot doofus. You underestimate something you have no knowledge of. That is a dangerous flaw.”

"Fine, whatever you say. Let's just hope it works.”

"It will. Now go tend to the prisoner’s wounds. We don't want him to bleed to death before we get him back to Equestria, now do we?”

"No, I suppose not, but I'm not a doctor. How am I meant to patch him up?" Milano asked.

“Doctors always do it wrong,” said Onyx. “The correct way is to put the blade of your knife into some flames and leave it there for a few minutes. Then just press the scolding blade against his wounds, and there you have it; he is all patched up.”

Milano blinked at him. “Okay, well, back in Equestria, any doctor would just sew his fingers back on and send him on his way. What you’re suggesting doesn’t sound too appealing.”

"Well, yeah, now, okay, I mean, now would I, well, look, Milano, I couldn't really give a shit if it's appealing or not. Celestia will be happy to have him. If he dies, well, then I have no real use for you, do I?"

Milano let out a sigh. The constant threats from Onyx were getting old. "Fine, I’ll do it.”

"Good. All anyone ever needs to do is just listen to me all the time. Oh, and you might want to tie him down. A man in pain is a dangerous one.” Onyx keaked.

"Tie him down with what exactly?"

"I don't know. You'll work something out.”

Milano let out her loudest stress sigh yet and moved back down the corridor towards Daniel's unconscious body, leaving Onyx to Andrew’s. "This better work, or I swear I will revive you, just so I can kill you slowly," said Onyx as he patted Andrew's lifeless chest. So many things had gone wrong today that he had half a mind to revive absolutely everyone just to start the battle of Moscow over from scratch *his* way.

When Daniel awoke with a groan, he lamented that this was the probably the third time he'd been unconscious throughout this battle. He was worried he'd start to lose count given how much was going on. He soon realised he had worse problems; he was still in the corridor of the HQ building. He tried to move but couldn't; something was keeping him pinned against a radiator which was attached to the wall of the corridor. He looked back to see both his hands were tied to the radiator by thick wires which looked to have been torn out of the wall from the back of a computer. It was a PATA cable and a USB cable; even after the pony holocaust, the latter was still being overused. He started to struggle in an attempt to break free of his bonds, in case you thought he might be trying to struggle for any other reason, but of course he was too weak at this point from the blood loss he had suffered. He said a bad word upon realising his attempts were now futile.

Daniel searched not too slow around his immediate location for anything that he could use as a tool to aid his escape, but there was nothing but the bodies of several ponies and, of *course*, Walker as well. Daniel lowered his head upon seeing Walker's body. "I'm sorry. I should have listened to you," said Daniel as he shook his head. He thought about Andrew's betrayal, and how it wouldn't have amounted to much at this point. The ponies would surely have double-crossed him in Equestria or something.

"Yes, you should have!" came Milano's voice from the end of the corridor. Daniel's head immediately darted to her direction, and he began to squirm as he saw her balancing a knife with her hoof. The blade was glowing a strange orange &/or red colour. "I mean, I have no idea what you're talking about, of course, but I assume it's to do with a decision you made which resorted in your friend there dying. Am I right in suggesting that to be the quintessence of your self-mortifying rhetoric?"

"Get away from me!" said Daniel as Milano knelt down in front of him, with the knife held up near his face. Daniel tried to move his head back but didn't get far as it bumped into the wall behind him.

"Don't tell me you're scared. That would be pretty pathetic if you were. Relax, this isn't for torturing you. This is for helping you, believe it or not."

"What are you doing?" Daniel asked as she moved the blade closer to his two bloody finger stumps.

"You see how the blade glows orange?" started Milano.

Daniel nodded. "Yes, I see that."

"That means that for the past ten, maybe fifteen minutes, I have been holding this in an open fire. This is so hot that when I press it against your wound it will essentially 'meld' your flesh together, therefore sealing your wound. Really, you should be thanking me." All through Milano's explanation, she held a constant smile, which remained when she pressed the scalding blade against the stump of Daniel's right ring finger. Daniel let out a scream of pain as his muscles and loose nerve endings in the stump were melted together. The strong and sickening smell of burning flesh joined Daniel's screams in filling the air.

Milano let out an *evil* laugh. "See? It wasn't that bad, now was it?" Milano moved the blade over to the stump that was once Daniel's little finger.

"Go to hell, you fucking whore!" Daniel broke down into a slight whimper.

"Hey, you ought to be nicer to a mare with a blade. I could do a lot worse with this, trust me!" Milano pressed the blade down against the little stump. Daniel let out yet another desperate cry of pain, and once again, a mix of Daniel's cries and the smell of burning flesh filled the air. "Oh, I'm sorry, did that hurt? Well, we still got one more to go!" Milano chuckled as she moved towards Daniel's thigh with the blade.

"You sick fuck!" Daniel shook with tears. "What kind of sick person revels in this sort of thing? Who in their right mind would make another human being endure this kind of needless torture? What sort of child cannot lack the scruples to know when a line has been crossed and this gratuitous exploitation has gone beyond excessive? Just kill me! Just fucking kill me!"

"Now why would I do that? I wouldn't want to miss out on all this fun, now would I?" Milano hovered at Daniel's thigh for a moment. Her mind raced through a number of sick and twisted thoughts. Then the most evil smile Daniel had ever had the displeasure of seeing appeared on her face. "I suppose a little added extra pain wouldn't do too much damage." She laughed as he moved the scalding blade over to Daniel's crotch. Daniel shook his head and continued his futile begging, a sorry sight for the saviour of the human race. "No point in begging. Once my mind is set, it isn't easily changed."

"No! Please no! Don't!" Daniel cried as the blade got closer to his trousers, and just when the blade was about to press down on them, Daniel was saved. Milano had a full-sized, CRT computer monitor with a CGA chip smashed over the top of her head. This knocked her unconscious (go figure), and caused her to drop sideways, the blade still suctioned to her hoof. Daniel could only look in awe up at his mystery saviour.

Onyx marched down the streets of Moscow with around seven hundred ponies that had answered his beck and call as planned. Their destination, as the ponies had pieced together, was the evacuation zone, where the human resistance had gathered in the very centre of the city. Onyx, ever the erstwhile sadomasochist of a failed janitor, wished the sweep up the dregs of the human population under the foetid rug of his boot. The situation was looking grim for our species, and perhaps I needn't remind you of the travesties faced, huddled like rats in a maze with but a sparse contingency of soldiers as protection from the hungering predators that lurched ever nearer. Johnson had been the one to designate the evacuation point under the guise that the centre of Moscow, while the worst place ever to be if you want to leave Moscow by any rational person's thinking, would be the easiest place for anyone in Moscow to reach and thus not be left behind just because their housing was chosen to be on the outskirts.

Of the menial assets that the Human Resistance had left at their disposal, it must have been a relief to see Irish and Tyrone tromp into the EVAC zone in their powered suits, once the shock of seeing such unusual technology wore off. There were hundreds of civilians all piling into buses, cars, trucks, anything with four wheels or more and enough space for at least five to six people. The Moscow circus clowns piled into a quadricycle and tooted loudly before driving away, although when they were seen again, they would be changed men and women. Among the hundreds of civilians there were only around one-hundred and fifty, maybe two-hundred able-bodied soldiers, along with another astonishing three-hundred wounded and two-hundred dying. If anything could quash Irish and Tyrone's feelings of invincibility, it would be the sight of Moscow's refugees and their escape clogged with quandaries choking for freedom. Only doubt managed to squeeze between the throngs of panicked civilians, whispering to some lingering pocket in their chests whether their city, or more rightly the people in it, would ever recover.

Irish spotted Yuri commanding some soldiers, and he pointed him out with his Silverback's arm. "Let's see what we can do to help!" As they approached, they found Yuri along with Lugo and the remainder of Charlie Squad, Dmitry and Zone-Tan. The four were embroiled in a frustrated debate over how many men should be loaded onto which vehicles, and most pressing, what to be done about the wounded.

"We can't just kill our own soldiers," said Lugo, who was shocked to even hear this subject being brought up.

"I'm not saying I want to do it! I'm just saying we have next to no medical supplies as it is. We don't know when we will find another resistance base. We need those supplies for people who have a chance of making it. The ones who are more than likely dead already need to be left behind, or better yet, put out their misery," said Zone-Tan.

"You heartless bitch!" growled Lugo.

"I'm not being heartless! I am being reasonable! Those men will slow us down greatly and consume supplies which would be better off being saved for those who still have a chance. If you won't let us kill them, then the only other option is to leave them behind," said Zone-Tan.

"No fucking way!" said Lugo, using his practiced debate skills. "We are not leaving them for the ponies to just roll up and take. They will be tortured!"

"Zone-Tan is right. We can't take them with us," Dmitry said. He gave a stern look to Zone-Tan. "We're not killing anyone, but we have to leave them behind."

"We are not leaving our own men for dead, and we are not killing them!" said Yuri.

"Who the hell put you in charge? Last time I checked, I outrank you, meaning I am the one who calls the shots here!" Dmitry raised his voice, getting a bit short with Yuri's impotent protests.

"I don't give two shits about your rank! In case you hadn't noticed, we have lost every good leader we had! There is no one to court-martial me, so therefore there is no punishment for me disobeying orders! I straight up refuse to leave these men behind or take their lives!"

"I guess then we do this the old fashioned way," Dmitry said.

"I wouldn't if I was you!" said Lugo as he stepped forward to back up Yuri.

"Back off, little man!" Zone-Tan hissed, moving up behind Dmitry.

By this point, Irish and Tyrone reached to where the confrontation was boiling to a head. "What the hell is going on here?" Irish asked.

All four of the soldiers looked up at the pair of Silverbacks in shock. In fact, just about everyone else was staring at the pair of robotic suits until Irish and Tyrone remembered they were wearing. It seems like a silly thing to forget, but they'd just been having so much fun using them, they started taking them for granted. "What the hell is that thing?" Yuri asked. For the moment, their childish bickering had stopped.

Irish looked at himself. “Oh, right. This is a prototype weapon. Pretty cool, right? Check out my metal robot butt!”

“Damn. We need one of those for every soldier,” Dmitry said.

Then Tyrone ruined everything, because some people are impressionable and some people can’t leave well enough alone. “You didn’t answer his question,” he said.

Lugo stuck his thumb at Dmitry and Zone-Tan. “These two sickos want to leave the dying soldiers behind. It’s despicable. You don’t know what it means to be left behind, abandoned by your own country. I used to be a Soviet soldier until my comrades abandoned me to die. I’m only here because of the U.S. military.”

“Zone-Tan there wants to kill them,” Yuri said.

“Hey, survival of the fittest! That’s social Darwinism in action.” Zone-Tan clenched her fist.

“They’ve got a snowball’s chance of surviving this hell! We can’t afford to keep them with us. It’ll cost the lives of the small amount of men we still have,” Dmitry said. “We have to leave them behind.”

“You’re right,” Zone-Tan said to Dmitry. “Killing them is a waste of time”

“We are not leaving these men!” Lugo shouted. “What if you were in their shoes?”

“Guys, I don’t think we even have time to argue over this,” Tyrone said. “I know it sucks, but we should already be getting the healthy evacuees out first before worrying about triage. That’s how it is in war."

Nobody was listening to Tyrone. “We’re getting nowhere here! We can just keep going around in circles all day, and it won’t change anything. I’m going to give the order to load the dying men up into the trucks. They’re coming with us.” Yuri turned to leave. “Those injured will still be valuable people when they get better—“

Dmitry cocked his Makarov pistol which he aimed at the back of Yuri’s head. Lugo was shocked, but not too much to forget to whip his Beretta out at Dmitry. Zone-Tan turned her Makarov on Lugo, and Yuri turned around, pulling out his father’s revolver tucked into the front of his belt, and aiming it at Dmitry. He then aimed at Zone-Tan instead. Someone ordered someone else to drop their weapon, and pretty soon all four of them were yelling and screaming similar orders until nobody could tell what anybody else was saying, nor whose spittle was getting on whose face. They’d become like irrational, rabid hounds, even baring their fangs at one another.

“I’m getting these people out of here!” snarled Yuri.

“Lower your weapon, or I’ll put one between your eyes!” Lugo growled.

“What in the fuck are you guys doing?” yelled Irish, but he too went unheard.

“I won’t be disobeyed! They die, or they get left behind!” barked Dmitry.

“You wanna join them? Zone-Tan howled.

“Guys, we have already got way too many problems to be dealing with! Ain’t nobody got time for this shit! We don’t need to add killing each other to the list!” Tyrone said. He and Irish both had the same thought: If only their Silverbacks had something to quell this situation. If only instead of these guns and this blade for arms, Andrew Grant had devised some other sort of tool, a device that could make people put their weapons away and listen to other people, even for a moment. Even getting in between them would require shoving someone aside, and then they’d only move around them to get at each other. No one was easing up. **They all believed they were right and no one was prepared to step down.**

"Last chance to back down, soldier." Yuri turned his aim back to Dmitry and Lugo shifted his to Zone-Tan. Zone-Tan aimed at Yuri now, and Dmitry instead aimed at Lugo. They shuffled their weapons, pointing nozzles here and there, at one another, even on their own ally or their selves.

“I will not back down!” Dmitry was saying. “I am your commanding officer, and you have three seconds to lower your weapon, or I will fire mine!”

Yuri shook his head. “It ain’t happening.”

“One!”

“Don’t go down this road!” Lugo said.

“Guys, come on! This is not how this needs to go down!” said Irish.

“Two!”

“Sir, stop this!” Tyrone said. Yuri’s and Dmitry’s eyes locked together. Neither of them so much as blinked.

“Thre—“

A bullet dug straight into the back of Dmitry’s head. The sudden gunshot and the sight of his body collapsing, eyes shut, led Zone-Tan to think Yuri had shot him. She fired two shots from her Makarov, striking Yuri in his left shoulder. Yuri stumbled backwards, then fell on his hip. Lugo lodged a bullet smack dab between Zone-Tan’s eyes. Her body collapsed to the floor, and after a breathless moment, Lugo dropped to Yuri’s side.

This shocking exchange was the least of their worries, because the Equestrians had come within sight of the evacuation zone. They opened fire, and they had been the ones to snipe Dmitry. Irish and Tyrone stood there in shock, unable to believe what they’d just witnessed: Soldiers, fighting for the same side, but turning on each other. For a second, they imagined the ponies were unnecessary for the humans’ destruction.

“Get the civilians out of here!” Yuri said, even though he was in excruciating pain.

Lugo put pressure on his wound and tried to escort Yuri. He addressed Irish and Tyrone. “You’ve got to help us hold them off! You’re our only hope! I’ll radio in the order when to retreat.”

“No,” Tyrone said. “You need to tell them to retreat now. They should have retreated hours ago.”

Irish and Tyrone snapped out of their stupor, and the two turned to face the ponies, their true enemies. They headed out into the charge along with two-hundred able-bodied soldiers. Onyx was leading the charge against them. “Trot closer!” he said. “I want to hit them with my sword!” He lifted his daikatana and gave his last intended command for the final battle of Moscow. “Kill them all!”

This was it. The defence of Moscow was a failure. The human resistance was faced not only with the hordes of the Equestrian menace pinning them in like they were pigs in an abattoir, but also with the folly of their own stupidity, hiding the evacuation in the midst of the city with no word given yet onto the civilians’ survival. Johnson and Andrew, both spared from answering for their crimes, had enacted their most potent weapon in sabotaging the survival of the human face: Bureaucratic bumbling. Good soldiers kept their courage closer than their briefs, but they neglected focusing on protecting the civilians.

Irish and Tyrone raged onward, either hoping they would be enough to take the brunt of the enemies’ offensive. They weren’t. Onyx had already chopped ten more people up like loose meat sandwiches. An explosion went off beside Irish, and he remarked with surprise that he barely felt it. Still, the debris of burst tarmac and soldiers’ limbs flying at him was distracting, not to mention disturbing. The ponies’ disregard for life was just as demeaning as the prospect of not inch of Moscow being left undemolished by their dastardly doings. If only they had more soldiers. If only they had more Silverbacks. If only they had more ammo. If only they had more time.

The instant the ponies had opened fire, the civilians had exploded into a furore like a potato in a microwave. The buses were already packed like sardine cans, and the perspiration didn’t smell any better. Military personnel were ordering people off to keep under their maximum occupancy laws. People tried in vain to cling to the sides of vehicles, and many more people just started running amok, as if escaping by foot was a viable option. Children cried out in sheer fear from the horrible ponies that attacked them. Their mothers cradled them, but could do nothing to calm them. They couldn’t even calm themselves. The men of the families fought through the crowds, dragging their loved ones behind them. Somebody screamed at the top of his lungs, “Everybody needs to calm down right now!” Then he started blubbering inanities and was lost among the stampede.

Lugo bent his ear to try and hear what Yuri was telling him. “We need to get the drivers to start moving on.” It was very difficult to speak, and he was losing a lot of blood.

“Everyone is not on the trucks yet,” Lugo told him.

“Lugo,” Yuri wheezed out. “Don’t be a fucking imbecile. As soon as a bus is full, it should be leaving out of here. Letting them pile into trucks that have no room left will do them no good.”

Lugo gave a nod and started to push his way through the swarming crowd, carrying Yuri against his shoulder. "Move! If you want to make it out of this alive, you need to calm yourselves!" Lugo yelled as he made his way to the front of the trucks. Someone yelled back at him not to yell at them. The trucks were all lined up in a row, and each one had two drivers in them. Overall, there were around thirty trucks, and each could hold about twenty people at most in the back. Yuri already knew all this, and in his head, he did the quick maths. Thirty times twenty equalled six-hundred. Looking over the ocean of people, there were a lot more than that.

At the front of the trucks was a small group of soldiers. One had a microphone connected to two large speakers, and he was trying to calm to people down by telling them everything was going to be fine. They knew fine well that it wasn't going to be fine at all. “Stop trying to cram the irony down our throats!” a man in the crowd shouted.

"You need to tell these trucks to get out of here!" Lugo told the soldiers.

"No!" Yuri said, even though he probably shouldn't have been speaking. "Tell them to load up all the women and children first, then the men if there is room. We need to prioritise."

Lugo gave a nod and turned to the soldiers. "You hear that? We need to prioritise! Put some objectives ahead of others, and then we can get everything done in order!"

The soldier with the microphone scratched his head. "Gee, what do we do if there is not enough room for all the men?"

"We will worry about that if it comes to it," Yuri answered.

The soldier frowned and looked over the crowds. "It's come to that now," he said.

Lugo's shoulders were aching, so he rested Yuri against a nearby crate. "Just rest here. You *should* be safe." Less than a rugby field's length away, ponies were gunning down humans left and right. Lugo then darted off to collect his AUG before joining in on the battle. "I'm prioritising!" he said.

Meanwhile, Irish and Tyrone had gotten into the thick of the actions. "Take this, you shit stains!" said Irish as he opened fire on a group of advancing ponies with his mounted heavy machine gun. The ponies were all rushing forward with overwhelming numbers, but so far the resistance had managed to keep them at a short distance away. However, the ponies were still advancing inch by inch.

Tyrone raised his rocket arm on his Silverback and fired a rocket shell into the tide of ponies. The rocket shell crashed into the floor and exploded, releasing a huge burst of flames and tiny little silver pellets. The force of the explosion enabled these pellets to pierce the ponies' armour and flesh with ease. That one rocket managed to kill a staggering thirty ponies and critically injure twelve more. "Whoa, yeah! How you like me now?" asked Tyrone.

Irish turned to Tyrone. "Damn! Why the hell don't I get one of those?"

"You couldn't handle a weapon this big!" responded Tyrone in a joking tone before firing off another rocket.

Onyx stood on top of an abandoned car and watched from the far back of his army with pride. He saw how the ponies charged forward without fear, even as the humans mowed them down. It was truly a testament to their courage and their honour, which itself was a testament to his own leadership. "We got this, boys and girls. We got this," Onyx chuckled to himself. In his eyes, the battle had already been won, which was probably a fair approximation ever since HQ fell and the resistance leaders had been killed, and now all there was left to do was to slaughter the last little bit of resistance which fought at the end of the road. Onyx unsheathed his sword and leapt off of the car. "Slow down, boys! I can't let you have all the fun!" he called out, following through with a burst of laughter. He loved to laugh, long and loud and clear. Onyx then let out one of his more enthusiastic battle cries and charged in to battle with his army.

"I'm running low!" called out Irish as his ammunition dwindled down for his Silverback's heavy MG.

"You're not the only one! I haven't got much rockets left!" Tyrone fired off one of his last few remaining rockets.

"They need to get those trucks out of here so we can get to retreating! There is no way in hell we are taking all these fuckers down!" Irish didn't have to yell all that much over the sounds of war because he and Tyrone could communicate wirelessly via their suits.

"It would work out better if we had some more help!" Tyrone could be a master of stating the obvious sometimes. When their help arrived, however, they did not recognize it in the form of a black and red-scaled dragon swooping down from the skies overhead. This was an odd sight, but more than that, a terrifying one, because it carried on its wings the massacre at Hainan and the desecration of New York. Irish had not been present to the latter, but in both battles, dragons had rendered defeat inevitable. The sight of this, once again, was still an odd one, made even more so because the beast carried on its back Discord, clad in only a leather jacket and a pair of shades, and wielding in either mismatched claw a tire iron and a length of heavy chain. For the first time since donning their metal warriors, Irish and Tyron felt vulnerable.

"Dragons!" Tyrone pointed upwards, although everyone had noticed a sight most unusual for Moscow's skyline. "They have dragons! I wish I'd saved more rockets!"

"No, they're with us!" Lugo had caught up to the pair with his AUG. "It's a long story, trust me."

Kane crashed down upon a platoon's worth of ponies. "Time to brighten this battle up!" Discord announced. He hopped off of Kane who let out a burst of brimstone across a swathe of ponies, and walked in slow motion towards Irish and Tyrone while twirling his weapons in his paws. "I'm selling these fine leather jackets, gents!" he announced, before departing somewhere into the fray, and despite being an inhuman creature that stuck out like a sore thumb even among Equestrians, he disappeared just as suddenly as he had emerged.

When Kane inhaled, the carbon dioxide from the air reacted with a chemical in his dragon lungs, causing an internal fire to start inside the beast which somehow did not count towards the flammability of dragons. Kane fanned out the flames from his breath, and the cries of ponies were harrowing, ringing loud over their gunfire as the flesh was burned from their bones. Some ponies focused either on avoiding this fiery blaze, splitting their army to sidewalk clusters. Their offensive had switched from the humans to this dragon, when really they should have been wary of both. They showed about as much success in harming Kane as the humans did of fighting the dragon in Hainan, which is to say none at all, and it was as if the tables had turned from that misfortunate island in China, because the human resistance could pick ponies off at leisure. Irish, Lugo and Tyrone swallowed their disbelief and fought to guard the tail end of the dragon, although given how that spiny, thrashing appendage battered about ponies, it wasn't half bad, if they could keep out of its way.

Over by the trucks, no evidence had been posited that the evacuation was yet under way. Yuri detested his own clenched groans of pain as a medic tended to his wound. Two bullets to him shouldn't have compared to the more grievous injuries of the wounded he'd seen. He didn't deserve to feel pain. "Sir," a soldier was saying, "we need to move you to where the other wounded are."

Yuri's eyes widened. "What? No! I need to ensure these civilians make it out of here."

Already more soldiers crowded around him to cart him away. "Sir, just relax. You're all going to be okay. The civilians will be evacuated. There's nothing for you to worry about anymore."

A chilling thought raced through Yuri's mind of the argument he and Lugo had been having with Dmitry and Zone-Tan not long ago in front of all these evacuees. He didn't want to go with the wounded. He tried to focus his eyes on the soldier hovering over him, but couldn't read his nametag. "What's your name, soldier?"

"My name is Private Michael Townley, sir."

Yuri gave a nod to the other three soldiers, one of which was holding the microphone and speaking to the crowd to sort them into the trucks all by himself. "And them, are they in your squad?"

"Yes. The man with the microphone is Sergeant Simon Riley, the one to his left is Randall Wayne, and the one to the right is Adam Jensen. The latter both just signed up today to fight once the ponies arrived."

Another belt of pain coursed through Yuri's arm, as though it were gnawing the limb right off. "If all these people don't make it out of here, then I am personally holding all of you responsible."

"Yes, sir, of course, sir," Michael said as he turned to his three squad mates. "Randall, help me out over here." Randall complied, picking Yuri up off of the stretcher he'd been laid on, and wrapped Yuri's right arm around his shoulder. Michael was about to take Yuri's left arm before he realised it wouldn't be a good idea, given Yuri's wound. Instead he placed one hand around Yuri's waist and the other on his back. The two of them helped Yuri to his feet and guided him towards the truck filled with wounded soldiers.

Irish let out a fierce and cocky battle cry as he leapt up in the air and sliced three ponies in half with one single swing. Tyrone stayed in line with the resistance soldiers and helped them by using his heavy MG on groups of ponies that did manage to get somewhat close. For the first time since the battle for Moscow had begun, it actually looked like the resistance might "win". Sure, they'd already lost the city, lost their leaders, and lost so much that could never be reclaimed, so in a way there was no hope of victory because retreat was the only thing they had to gain, but they had far lesser numbers than the ponies. It was the Silverbacks and the dragon that were carrying the tide of this battle. The ponies were too focused on the dragon and the Silverbacks to even give a damn about the infantry. Since Kane had landed, only five humans had fallen, whereas the ponies had already lost an easy hundred.

Onyx ceased his charge when he witnessed this turn of events. "No! That's not fair!" he bellowed. "You're cheating! Stop cheating!" He twirled his daikatana in his hands and resumed his path through the fighters, not caring whether he had to cut down human or pony to pave his way. He spotted Discord amongst the crowd, using two trash can lids as cymbals to flatten pony skulls. He glowered at Kane who crunched a pony between his jaws and gluttonously smacked down the body more or less whole without closing his mouth to chew. He wanted that dragon's head. He wanted its horns to decorate his next helmet, but Irish in his Silverback was too nearby to get at him. He pondered if this metallic suit was the weapon he'd been warned about. He pulled the kill switch from the pocket of his leather duster and clutched it in the palm of his fingerless glove. He had no notion of what this device would do, nor how. For all he knew, it could set off a bomb that would destroy the entire city, but he couldn't think of an outcome that he particularly cared about. He wasn't considerate about the feelings of others. Besides, nothing was as important as him winning, and if everyone else lost, then that meant he won by default, even if he hadn't been participating. He wiggled the switch from side to side. It felt pretty solid. Then he flicked it.

Irish had been halfway through slicing up another cluster of ponies when he was hit by a paralysing pulse of electricity. His entire Silverback had been electrified, and his skeleton was turning visible! Nobody noticed his agonized screams amidst

the hectic battle they were submerged in. Kane heard him, but ignored him. He couldn't let his guard down for a lowly human. Tyrone had a brief moment where he turned to Irish and saw his Silverback shaking about uselessly. Before his mind clicked that something was wrong, he too was thunderstruck by his Silverback short circuiting. He and Irish had become hulking, screaming statues, unable to move of their own accord. The voltage filled their joints via the path of least resistance, following their spinal columns and pouring into their cerebral cortices like glasses of water being filled. Their bodies went into shut down!

Onyx's ribs were tickled by this turnabout, but he didn't have time to stand there and fleer at others' misfortune like a hypocritical sociopath on the internet who didn't want people to laugh at *him*. He flung away the device and charged for Kane, waving his daikatana over his head like an umbrella in a bluster. Kane was too busy focusing on the ponies he was slicing apart or swallowing down in bunches that he didn't even realize Onyx was charging in from his left flank. Kane had clutched a couple of ponies in his right hand, and they were trying to squirm out through his fingers as he devoured a second handful alive like grapes. He needed to fuel his fire which taxed his metabolism. Onyx leapt into the air and swung his sword down as he landed. It took a moment for Kane to register what had just happened. One minute he was popping ponies like a prostitute pops morning after pills, and the next his right paw felt cold. He looked at his wrist, but his mind couldn't make sense at first of the blood-gushing stump that was now there. He looked to Onyx in horror.

"Polished dragon bone, bitch-tits," Onyx said, brandishing his reflective blade. "Now bleed out and die because your daddy told you to." Kane was indeed bleeding out, but not because anyone told him to. He thrust his wing out at Onyx, but Onyx ducked underneath and sliced along the tender inner membrane. He leaped onto Kane's shoulder and clambered behind his head, seizing the dragon by his left horn with no problem. He then sawed through the bone with his weapon, cutting through the nerve ending within like that in a tooth. Kane shrieked in pain, a noise totally unlike anything a dragon ever sputtered before, and his head grew heavy with unimaginable pain. His chin thudded on the ground as his body twitched and spasmed while Onyx set in on sawing through the other horn. Kane could no longer fight back as hundreds of ponies gunned him down like police officers. The human resistance did little to help, for it was their inclination to shy away from the monster, even if that monster was their boon.

The electricity running through the Silverbacks finally overcharged and diffused. Both fell over like collapsible toys. Tyrone's Black Phoenix cracked the tarmac as he crashed down on his front side, and Irish was trapped when his fell upon its back, pinning the escape hatch underneath him. Both occupants were paralysed; neither could blink nor even blink. All they could do was lie there and listen to the deathly screams of the resistance soldiers. Everything always proved fruitless for them, it seemed. Their lives had been disrupted by war and their families torn apart. Their leader, Daniel, had been abducted and brainwashed. Ever since the first dragon in Hainan, they'd suffered loss after loss, like a curse. Even when they had new artillery at the forefront of military technology and dragons on their own side, it all fell apart with awe-inspiring ease. Fate kept a cruel bias in store for them.

Tyrone heard a tapping on his suit and dreaded to know the ponies had gotten hold of him, but Lugo's voice was the one that called to him. "Tyrone, you still in there, buddy?" Tyrone couldn't answer, no matter how much he wanted to. "If you can hear me, I'm going to get you out of there!" Lugo said. He looked over his shoulders to be sure nopony was coming after him, then scanned the Silverback. He found the switch to open it up tucked beneath the rim of the neck and tweaked it. The Silverback's hatch flipped open and Lugo reached in with both hands, wrapping them around Tyrone's midsection. Using all of his strength, he pulled Tyrone out and laid him on his back on the pavement. He examined Tyrone in haste, but could see his lack of response was dire. He murmured in despair, then held a scope beneath Tyrone's nose. The lens fogged, and a tiny shimmer of hope returned to Lugo's face. "You poor son of a bitch. Don't worry, I'm going to get you out of here." He lifted Tyrone up across his shoulders, and with a deep breath, he struggled back towards the evacuation trucks. All those large muscles made Tyrone a heavy lift, but whether due to maddening good luck or adrenaline, he mustered the job.

"I need you to take him!" Lugo told Michael and Randall, who'd just moved Yuri into the truck of wounded.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, sir, but there isn't any room left," Randall said. "This truck's reached its legal load limit."

Lugo could very well see that the truck was jam-packed with wounded, including Yuri and Soap. Yuri slid himself to the back and asked, "What's wrong with him?"

"He's paralysed or something. He can't move an inch," Lugo said.

Yuri was going to leap off the back of the truck, but his arm ached so much he only slid off. "I've only got two holes in my shoulder. I can still walk well enough. Load him in my place. I can always leave when the soldiers retreat."

Michael and Randall exchanged knowing glances and lifted Tyrone into the truck onto a pile of other bodies. Yuri stood there and looked at all the casualties. Just standing there, he felt another pang from his injury nearly floor him, but he grabbed onto the back of the vehicle to remain on his feet. "I'm fine," he muttered. "I'm getting better."

Lugo saw Yuri's pain and took hold of him, walking him back over to the crate marked "turtles". "That was a noble thing you did, giving away your seat for the less fortunate," Lugo told Yuri. "It's such a relief that we didn't decide to leave them to die."

"Yeah, yeah it is," Yuri said, avoiding Lugo's eye.

Yuri addressed the trucks next and shouted, "Okay, I guess we've waited around long enough. Get these three out of here!" Lo and behold, three trucks of civilians got a wave from Adam before pulling off. Half of the trucks had been dispatched to the terminus drop point, and yet there were still women and children that had not been loaded onto trucks.

Michael and Randall were quickly moving from truck to truck making sure they were filled with women and children as they had been made top priority now. "Men, please remain calm! We will be sorting out evacuation vehicles for you as well. However, your wives and children are top priority right now!" Michael tried to dissuade the crowds of men who were getting aggressive due to the fear which ran through them.

Ian's family was now being loaded into a truck. There was much wailing to be had, and grinding of teeth. Amy was adamant about not leaving her husband behind, despite his repetitive pleas for her to shut up and board the vehicle. His daughters, Rachael and Lauren, peeped at him like hungry chicks, even though they'd already boarded. Their protracted familial drama was holding up the entire proceedings, endangering Moscow's refugees with their bickering. Very few opportunities arise in life for arguing couples to actually see the damage their incessant, selfish altercations cause to those who bear witness to them, but Michael had a job to do, and he couldn't get that job done if they didn't shut the hell up and let the trucks go.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to wait until we have evacuated all the women and children before you get in one of the trucks," said Michael.

"I know that! I'm trying to convince them to leave without me!" When Ian summed up their plight, his family started in again, and their lengthy conversation started all over from scratch. It was so tiresome, it almost made the war pale by comparison in terms of its arduous qualities.

"I am not going without him! I refuse!" Amy snapped several times.

"Look, you leave now, or you wait with the men and get evacuated last! You do know that if you turn your head and look down the street, you'll see people actually dying, right?" Michael asked.

"Fine, we will stay!" Lauren said.

"I think they should all stay behind, too," chimed in one of the passengers.

Amy gave a heavy sigh as if she was the one who was exasperated and not everyone else around her that she was holding up. "Girls, just get in the truck," she said, even though her daughters were adults and therefore properly referred to as "women" and she herself was a woman. "You know your father! He is too stubborn! We won't be winning this argument any time soon."

"Winning arguments should be about being right," Ian said. "Not forcing the other person to repeat themselves ad infinitum." Lauren and Rachael both boarded the truck like children rightfully dreading their first day of school. Amy remained where she was, however.

"Now or later! Chose quickly We don't have time for this!" said Michael. "See that? Two more people just died. Two more people died waiting for you to move your fat ass. What the hell is broken about your fight or flight instinct that you won't fucking move?"

"I'm staying with my husband," Amy said. There were many annoyed groans.

Michael quickly turned and pointed to three young women and a mother and child. "You, on the truck! Now!" A glint of satisfaction tickled him.

Rachael and Lauren gasped. "Mum, no!" The women that Michael had selected climbed into the truck and Michael quickly slammed his fist against the back of the truck three times. This signalled the driver to make a start off. He threw away his cigar and folded up the wanted ads section of the newspaper he was reading, then set the vehicle into motion.

"I love you girls! Be safe!" Amy said, but they couldn't hear her. She turned to her husband. "I can't leave you, Ian. I had to show you that I love you."

Ian turned his head back to the battle that was going on behind them. The ponies were clearly winning, and the number of resistance soldiers that were left was dangerously low. He looked back at his wife and cocked his brow.

Onyx was thinking about taking a leak on the dead, wounded dragon when Discord appeared behind him as if out of thin air. "I can't let you get away with this, you realize."

A pert smile tugged across Onyx's misshapen lips. "Make me," he said.

"Oooh!" Discord cupped his paws over his jowls. "What attitude. May—" In the middle of a word, a bullet went whizzing towards Discord. He curved his rubbery torso out of the way just in time, then continued speaking. "Maybe next you'll—" Another bullet skidded past him, and a third nearly struck Onyx. "Maybe you'll tell a 'yo mamma' joke about me next," Discord said. A bullet ricocheted off of Onyx's blade and Discord yanked his tail out of the way of yet another. "You know, the middle of a battlefield is no place for pause for thought. What say we take this symposium to a higher level?"

"Shut up and die, stupid pussy," said Onyx, who threw a broken scale of Kane's at Discord and missed. Discord flapped his wings and launched into the air, even though they hardly looked aerodynamic enough to support him. He wove through the air like a dancer's ribbon, floating over behind Onyx the way a worm tunnels through dirt. He seized Onyx beneath his arms and carried him off of Kane's corpse and into the air. "You will not take me that easy, beast!" Onyx fidgeted and fought against him, but soon Discord was too high off the ground to drop him. Somewhere in the lift, Onyx flailed his arm, trying to strike Discord with his blade, but he only ended up wrenching his arm and losing hold of his sword. He flew way above the skyscraper tops, then arced and turned downwards.

"German suplex!" Discord shouted, slamming Onyx's head down onto the top of a building, splitting one of those weird rotating vent thingies.

His skeletal mask split in twain, revealing his hideous puzzle-piece face. He could feel warm blood pouring down his face and into the valleys of his scars. Onyx was pissed, and he inhaled deeply before spouting his tirade. "You broke my mask! How dare you break my mask? You'll never understand the real pain of loss!"

Discord didn't really care. He girned in disgust at the sight of Onyx's face, and his own was no beauty pageant winner, either. "Ew. Your face looks like something I'd pull for a prank back in Equestria. But more to the point, didn't I kill you once before already? I could swear I did. I'm usually good about remembering that sort of thing."

"You only beat me because you're a dragon," said Onyx, wiping his own blood from his face.

"No, I beat you because you're slow and arrogant when you fight. You're really not as good as you think you are, not even by a fraction. You may come back from the dead, and think yourself fairly intimidating for that reason alone, but I know the truth about you."

Onyx clenched his fists. "Whatever you think you know, you're wrong. I'm no longer a part of them and act of my own volition." He ran after Discord, but he didn't run to catch up to him. He ran to stomp hard on the roof, to let his heavy footfalls rock the building beneath him as if he could squash it like a bug.

Discord leapt away like an acrobat and jumped to the top of a ventilation chute. "Part of who? I could care less about your fragile affiliations. My dear rock-head, the only powers your immortality grants you is the ability to *lose repeatedly."*

Onyx bellowed in rage. "What did you say? What did I hear you say?" He began lashing out at the ventilation unit with his fists, knowing full well Discord was too high to reach. The draconequus bounded off of the chute anyway and leapt onto another rotary turbine vent, allowing himself to turn around and around in place. When Onyx got close, Discord jumped from that onto the roof access doorway. Onyx slammed his foot through the turbine vent. If he couldn't hit Discord, he was at least going to give him a stern talking to. "I am unbeatable! You, however, have the *unfair* advantage of enhanced speed, something I was not expecting the first time. I thought you were just a mortal, so my guard was down. Trust me, I won't be making the same mistake again."

"And I thought that *I* was unstable," Discord said. "You're more loco than a train!"

"I'm not crazy, you're crazy!" Onyx said.

"You're something alright, though. What are you?"

"What do you mean, 'what am I'? I am just a man," Onyx lied.

"No, I've been alive for a very long time. I felt your pulse come to a sharp halt as I snapped your neck. I twisted your head practically the whole way 'round. And come to think of it, you've got quite a few bullet holes in you. When your bones knit, how does your head turn around the right way? How do the bullets crawl back outside of you? Even if you were using steroids, that's a bit preternatural, just as it would be if you were using some concoction of dragon's blood and phoenix down."

"I guess I'm just special, then," Onyx said.

Discord looked unconvinced. "Oh, yes, I agree, you're special alright. Truly an exceptional individual. What you aren't is human, unless Picasso was a realist and you were his model."

Onyx tempered his rage for the moment and looked over the edge of the building and down at the battle. It was clear his army was winning. “Why do you fight with them?” he asked.

“I may be a creature of chaos, but I have a sense of honour. It’s honourable to fight to survive. It’s cowardly to follow orders from someone hiding in the shadows.”

Onyx pointed at Discord. “Ha! Got you, stupid, dumb monster! Both sides are just as bad as the other. The humans are no better than the ponies.”

Discord had been reclining, but he arched his back. “I have no respect for the humans, but you’re quite wrong there. The humans, for all their faults, are not as evil, sick and twisted as the ponies. I’ve seen things from both sides throughout history. For a Guardian, you aren’t very well-informed.”

The word triggered Onyx. He leapt against the side of the roof access exterior and his hands nearly grasped at Discord’s ankles. Discord tumbled back off of the top in surprise and landed on his back on the other side. Onyx was quick to circle after him where he grabbed a hold of Discord’s head. He slammed the draconequus’s skull against the concrete with all of his strength. The first strike alone disoriented him, making it easy for Onyx to repeat. Discord could still speak, however. “Don’t confuse alchemy for chemistry!” he hissed, one of his paws clutching hard at Onyx’s jacket.

The second time, Discord’s vision blurred as his head cracked open. Onyx let out a scream of “Ha!” and kept at it, slamming Discord’s cranium into the floor over and over again. “See? See that?” Onyx stood and started kicking Discord’s unconscious, limp body. “I’m the winner! I’m the winner! I told you I was unbeatable! I win I win I win I win I win I win I win!” Victory didn’t make him feel any better, though. I wanted to gloat and yell some more. He wanted Discord to cry, but Discord wasn’t crying. Even worse, his face looked like a smile. He hated smiles.

He walked over to where his broken helmet lay and picked it up by one of its horns. “I know how to kill a dragon. All you need to do is sever the head. That’s the only thing that can’t grow back.” He returned to Discord’s side and grabbed him by his antler with his left hand. “I know this because I have the blood of a dragon running through my veins.” He stabbed the blunt horn into Discord’s neck, which took all of Onyx’s strength. The rest was still a chore, but doable, and all the while he worked at tearing the furred and scaled flesh apart, he spoke as if Discord could hear him. “I am the ultimate soldier. No man, pony or living creature can end my life. Not permanently. But me? I end all those who oppose me!” He severed Discord’s wind pipe, vocal cords, and spine cord, then dropped the bloodied horn. With both hands he grasped Discord’s horns and twisted his head around, tearing all the muscle and flesh that kept it attached to his body. With one vicious pull, he removed Discord’s head.

Onyx stomped over to the edge of the roof, doing so slowly so as to savour the moment of victory. He raised the head in one hand. “I am God!” he shouted, then he tossed the head to the ground far below. “I’m God and you’re not! You will all die!”

“Get this truck out of here!” Lugo said. The last truck full of wounded soldiers finally pulled away with a sputter. Lugo turned to Michael. “Take your two guys with you. It’s time this all came to a close.” Michael responded with an affirmative salute. Lugo turned back to the ponies who had already reached the civilians. He lifted his AUG to his shoulder and fired at the Equestrians, but of course, he was only one man. It was impossible for him to take on an entire army by himself. For every ten to twelve he did manage to take down, twenty more took their place. When his ammunition depleted, he threw his weapon to the ground and decided to address the drivers that were still waiting to leave.

“Why haven’t we fucking left yet?” the civilians were screaming.

Lugo banged on the side of the truck to chastise them, then told the driver, “Alright, get out of here and get to the rally point!”

“Sir, do I tell the others to come back once they dropped off their people?” asked the driver.

Lugo looked back at the civilians currently being attacked by the ponies and tilted his hat back to think. “Nah. They’ll all be dead by the time anyone gets back here. Just tell them to stay put.” By an amazing turn of events, all the trucks had left. Less amazing was the sight of half of the remainder of civilians lying on the ground, motionless. The ones that weren’t dead clung to their loved ones, hoping for a swift end that would be anything but. There was no mercy from the Equestrian army. They were butchers. Ponies wrenched apart any humans that showed signs of affinity for one another, and dragged them far apart. The soldiers were shown a cruel mercy, taken hostage if they weren’t killed. He’d heard stories of the soldiers who’d been captured, and knew that death was a blessing by comparison. He waited patiently for the next group of ponies to come his way, demanding him to kneel before them.

“Go to hell.” Lugo smirked and drew his M9 Beretta from the back of his belt. Before he could pull the trigger, the ponies shot first. Lugo flinched. His whole body jolted back as bullet after bullet sank into his body like high divers, splashing blood down himself and throwing him to the floor like an overpowering current. He never knew if his body let out a few

involuntary shots. If he did, nothing came close to striking a pony. He slammed into the cold, hard road, coughing and spewing his own blood. He twitched for several long seconds before going limp. His eyes rolled back in his head.

To make sure he was deceased, a pony put a bullet through his forehead. Her friend next to her said, “Hey, I wanted to do that!” They agreed the latter pony could do the next one, and they trotted gaily off to claim more victims.

The streets of Moscow were slick with blood which squished under the ponies’ hooves when they searched through the dead after the battle. They checked for ammunition and personal possessions that might be valuable. One pony came upon the dead bodies of Ian and Amy who had not been separated for whatever reason. The pony knelt down, placed its MP40 on the ground, and pulled out its knife. It severed off their ring fingers and took off their wedding rings to admire. It smiled at the pretty shine before grabbing its MP40 and moving on.

Onyx moved through the field of dead with two motives: One, he wanted to find his sword. Two, he was hoping to find someone who was not yet dead so that he could show them his exposed, disfigured face, and die from shock. Even the ponies turned in disgust at the sight of him, which made his smile widen and further crease his hideous visage. Not only was he a leader, but he was a feared one, and that meant more power.

It took Onyx a few minutes before finding his blade lying on the side of the street, coated in dried blood. He guffawed as he picked it up and admired how beautiful it looked, stained by blood. The amount of lives this blade had claimed in this battle alone was an achievement in Onyx's eyes. He sheathed his blade, keeping the dried blood on it as a memento, then turned to admire his army as they scavenged from the dead.

Just down the street on the opposite side was a group of five ponies struggling to flip over Irish’s Silverback. One of the ponies who had a captain’s iron cross on his overalls was trying to entice the other ponies into a count of three. One of the ponies under his command asked, "Can't we just go loot the bodies like the rest? This is just too heavy!”

"No! Think of how much we can sell whatever is in here for. You’d best find the strength, because none of you are leaving until we flip this. Now, on the count of three.”

"Eins!”

“Zwei!”

“Drei!”

The ponies struggled and groaned, but they could barely lift the Silverback. After continuing a moment longer, they dropped it again. “Need any help?” Onyx asked them. The ponies turned and grimaced at the sight of him.

“Uh, no, thank you, sir,” the captain said.

“Nonsense. I shall help you,” Onyx said, using his creepiest grin. He enjoyed watching them squirm from looking at his ugliness. At the same time, his voice was calm, like a sitcom father imparting valuable life lessons. That’s how he saw himself: Like an omnipotent benefactor to those around him he did not slay. He laid his hands upon the Silverback and tried out his creepiest tone of voice. “Give us the count, Captain.”

“Yes, well, okay, here we go. Maybe I should count to four instead. That might help us lift better. No? Alright, three it is.” The captain cleared his throat again and barked out another count. The ponies gave their best strenuous groans, but for the moment, Onyx was only pretending to help, instead snickering at their plight. Just before they gave up, Onyx pulled his weight and helped them lift. The Silverback flipped over onto its front with a loud clang.

“Now to get it open.” After a spot of wonder, the captain noticed the lever. Perhaps it wasn’t as well hidden as they all thought, but Onyx had to flick the switch for them using his fingers. The rear hatch on the Silverback flipped open and the ponies crowded around. There was Irish, still immobilised. “Go on, get him out,” the captain ordered. This time, Onyx stood back and watched as they hoisted Irish’s body out and tossed it to the ground before searching the empty Silverback for anything worth looting. The captain, however, searched Irish himself.

Irish’s hand clutched around the captain’s throat. His other hand dug his combat knife right into the pony’s gullet. The captain let out a squeal, and before his squad could rush to his aid, Irish swivelled to his feet and threatened the unarmed ponies with his bloodied knife. “Stay back, all of you!”

One of the ponies shook her head. “Think about this. There’re four of us and one of you.”

“You think you can take me? I dare you to try!” Irish said as much, but he was backing away. Somehow, Onyx admired his courage. Here he was, surrounded by hundreds of ponies, and yet he still acted as though he had any numerical chance of winning at all. Irish let out a raspy battle cry and dug his blade deep into the nearest pony’s chest. The pony screamed, flailed her front limbs, and fell backwards. Irish fell with her, and the other three ponies stamped on Irish with their hooves, knocking

the wind right out of him. The ponies didn't let up for a full minute. Irish rolled off of the pony he'd just killed and onto his back, and they still curb stomped his rib cage.

Onyx got bored and pushed the ponies off of Irish. "Enough of this!"

"But sir, he killed our captain!"

"Get over it. He's probably taken down more soldiers held in much higher regard than your boring old captain."

Irish didn't wait to pick himself up and spit blood at the ponies that had beaten him. "Yeah, I have, as a matter of fact!"

Onyx snorted. "Even after that beating you took, you're still going to act all cocky?"

Irish did indeed look woozy and bruised. "Do you really look like that, or did they give me a concussion?"

Onyx laughed for about the billionth time today and patted Irish on the back. "You will live for a few more days. Then, an envoy will come here from Equestria so that our fearless leader can observe our victory in her name. Then, the survivors will be put to a very painful, very slow death." Onyx placed his hands on the back of Irish's head and pulled it straight into his knee, knocking him unconscious. Irish's body swayed to the ground like an accordion.

"Take him, bind him, then take a good whiff of that air. That's the smell of victory and the end of mankind."

Part IV: Red Zone, World's End

Chapter Thirty-Five.

The sixties were a long time ago. Landfall. The welcome wagon.

All times are times of war. It is like a game of hide and seek. It is like the tax collector. When it finds you, it is only natural for thoughts to spin on mortality like a lazy Susan. There is the fetishism of Rowling, the irrelevancy of Moffat, and the propaganda of a dozen identical crime dramas. There may be people reading these historical accounts and wondering if they've read about the deaths of someone they know. When the ponies invaded, they slaughtered all but a tenth of the human population, so it's very likely. Even Fidel Castro, infamous Communist dictator of Cuba, was poring over a copy of his autobiography, *History Will Absolve Me.*

His son, Raul, a waxen-faced male damsel, watched from the chaise-lounge as his father mouthed the same words over and over again. The pair was sitting in Castro's office on the fifteenth floor of the Havana Air Base. The building was used to train men and build weapons, especially those of the nuclear variety. They could even build custom tanks and armour, although their resources were limited and conditions were not ideal. "What are you thinking of, father?" Raul asked.

Fidel set down the manuscript and sighed without looking at his son. His leathery face was weary with contempt. His bushy beard, once resplendent like the deathly smoke of fine cigars had clung around him, was now like a matted nest of hair from a bathtub basin. "I am thinking about the days we could just trade for more weapons from Colombia. I am thinking about Reinaldo Ruiz and exportation. I am thinking about Kim Jong-Il financing his country." He looked at the ticking clock where the cat's tail and pupils move from side to side.

Fidel pounded his desk. "I am thinking those reinforcements from Moscow should be here by now!"

"Father, there is nothing we can do. I sent a car to pick them up. They said they arrived, and Bravo Squad was not there," Raul said.

"Maybe they were killed or injured in battle! Did your men check the casualty list on Twitter?"

"Yes, Father. They asked around, and Bravo Squad had been seen walking around after the battle. They most likely thought it was best to seek you out rather than wait."

"This is just great! I have ponies as well as pirates or bandits at my doorstep, and to add to that, the resistance send a squad to 'keep an eye on me', and that squad can't even follow orders! I am not surprised if I end up in the afterlife sooner rather than later!"

"Please, Father, don't say that. You are not going to die, and I don't see why you won't let me and my men protect you. We are more than qualified to."

Fidel looked at his son then to give him a strange look. "'Not going to die'? Do you know when Che and I ousted Batista?" The office was neat and tidy. There were bookshelves filled with books containing strategies of war and the odd cookbook. The room had a deep blue carpet with a white pattern making the Cuban coat of arms. In the middle of the room was

a white marble desk with two leather chairs on either side of it. Behind the desk was a bulletproof window which overlooked Cuba. The view was amazing. Castro opened a dark brown wooden box which was on his desk. Inside were the finest Cuban cigars the world had to offer. Castro took one out, handling it as if it was a delicate piece of glass. He brought it up to his nose, sniffed it, and then lit it with a silver flick up lighter. He then inhaled a puff of smoke from his cigar. "You know why I can't have your squad looking after me. It's good for the men's morale to see you out in the field with them. I can't risk taking that away. We need morale now more than ever!"

Raul gave a glum sigh and looked at the floor. "Don't you think it would also be good for morale, possibly *better* for morale, if the men saw their leader fighting alongside them? Show them you're just as willing to die for them as they are for you."

Castro grunted. "My fool son wants to get me killed. Then when Cuba's busy trying to elect a new leader to make all its decisions, the ponies tighten their chokehold. I'm too old for all that now, my boy. I would die within minutes of battle."

Raul let out a louder stress sigh and shook his head. "No, you were once a great soldier. A few numbers to your name won't change that. Why don't I gather my men, and we can go search for this squad in the woods, with you by our side?"

"Don't be stupid, son. The woods is Vaas's territory. If they are there, then we won't be able to get them with a few men. Plus I will be gunned down on sight!" Castro leaned towards his son. "You're not trying to get me killed, are you, boy?"

Raul once again shook his head in disappointment. "Father! No, you won't. Trust me, we can go out and scout Vaas's camp. My men do it all the time and nothing ever happens to us. We always return, and you will too if you come with us. Please, Father, just come this once. Don't tell me you're not eager to fire your old service revolver."

Castro sighed and stood up. "Fine, we can go, but if you're mother were here, she'd be on my side. Now, what have you found out about these 'Iron Wolves'?"

The Iron Wolves were a group of lifers hiding out in Cuba's jungles, raiding villages and kidnapping people to torture them. They were headed by the fearsome sibling duo of Vaas and Citra, said to employ only the most brutal tactics for the most whimsical of ends. Rumours abound that they stole their best ideas from the Equestrian invaders.

Citra walked through the main campsite of Vaas's men, located deep in the jungle, and there were over ten-thousand tents and huts, each containing three to four men each. Vaas's tent was located in the middle of the camp, and she was on her way to deliver the news of incoming resistance soldiers. As she approached her brother's tent, the noise of a woman crying and screaming grew louder. Citra pulled back the front flap of the tent to reveal her brother and a young girl, no older than sixteen, with long, blonde hair. She wore a white t-shirt which had been torn open to reveal her brassiere, and a pair of jeans halfway down her legs and rumpled over a pair of brown boots. She was sobbing and crawling away from Vaas.

Vaas had his trousers unbuckled and was feeling his bottom lip, which had been split open. He drew his knife. "You bitch! I need to teach you some manners!" It would have been a difficult lesson for him. The girl crawled towards Citra, begging for help. Vaas moved up behind her and grabbed her by her long, curly hair. "Fucking whore!" He placed the blade on her throat, and with one quick movement, he cut her throat from ear to ear. Citra rolled her eyes and looked away as the girl squirmed around, holding her squirting neck.

"Fucking whores don't know how to appreciate a real man," Vaas explained in greeting to his sister.

"When you are done killing whores, maybe you would like to know about the resistance soldiers working their way here," Citra said.

"Fucking resistance! Where are they coming in?"

"They plan to attack through the beach."

"Of course! Crafter bastards, coming to an island by the beach. Send some men to take care of them! You pick how many. I need another whore."

Citra gave a nod and left the tent to assemble the men. An hour later, she returned with good and bad news, but first she had to wait as two girls, younger than the last, left. "You really are an animal," Citra said.

Vaas had a drunken grin plastered across his face. "So, baby sister, tell me of our victory."

Citra shook her head. "There was none. We were defeated."

Vaas started yelling out all the Spanish words he knew, since they all sound like swears.

"Calm, brother," Citra said.

"Don't tell me to calm!"

"There is good news. There's a special forces squad out there."

"Oh great, one squad!" Vaas was being sarcastic.

"Yes, but not just any squad. These guys are ones are here to stand at Castro's side. They'll have just what we need." Citra smiled and languished her forearms around Vaas's shoulders.

Vaas continued to perspire happily. He bit his fingernails and gazed upward. "Where are they?"

Out on the beach, Nick emptied his canteen of water into his mouth like a man intent on undrinking himself. It'd been days since the alcohol ran out and they made landfall on Cuba's shores, but the hangovers remained. The water was still cold, so Nick's gasp of relief became a sigh of regret upon finishing the contents. They found shade against a destroyed Humvee, accomplishing as much as they appeared to be while they waited for orders. The heat was oppressive enough that Philip had to expel some of that hot air in a vocal complaint. Wallcroft seized the opportunity to chastise him breaking the ice, but Becky pressed the issue.

"He's got a point, sir. When can we leave this beach and take to the shade?" she asked.

"When we are called upon by Castro," Wallcroft said.

"We don't all need to standby, do we?" asked Nick. "I could refill our canteens."

Eddie pulled out a pack of cards from his trouser pocket and shuffled them like a smoker chewing gum. "Anyone up for some Texas Hold 'em? It's all the rage with broskis." Everyone just shook their heads, so Eddie put the cards away again. "Worth a shot."

The squad spent the next hour in irritated boredom, not speaking to one another. By that time, half of the soldiers (easily about five-hundred men) had been given orders to set up guard posts throughout the city in case of attack. Philip grunted under his breath that they were lucky bastards, to which Nick told him to calm down. A half an hour ago, Wallcroft had left to go get orders, and Becky asked aloud where he'd gone. Eddie was of a similar mind-set. "Getting orders shouldn't take this long."

"Just be patient. I'm sure he is on his way back now," Nick said. Even as he said the words, an armoured Humvee pulled up a little ways away from them. It bore a Cuban coat of arms on the driver's door, indicating this was one of Fidel Castro's army transport vehicles. Three guards emerged from the vehicle.

One of the guards stepped forward and asked, "We're told you're Bravo Squad, yes?" He then stepped back in line. Nick nodded in reply.

The second guard stepped forward. "We were sent to get you." Then he, too, receded.

"We can't leave without our squad leader," said Philip.

The third guard stepped forward and examined a piece of paper he was holding. "Your squad leader is Sergeant Wallcroft, correct? He is currently sat down with Castro. We were sent to collect you." Like the others, he also took a step back. Eddie was examining the three guards carefully. They were all wearing cargo shorts and old grey, tattered shirts.

The first guard stepped forth, repeating this trend. "Castro needed to brief him first make sure his squad was up to the task. Castro sent us to get you after they were finished talking it over."

"Well why are we sat here in the sun talking when we could be inside a good villa with air conditioning?" asked Philip. Becky and Nick were inclined to agree, and were eager to leave this beach, but Eddie needed to voice his thoughts before he could go anywhere with them.

"If you're Castro's men, then why are you not wearing uniforms?" he asked.

The three guards stood in silence. For a moment they even seemed to be shocked, but then one stepped forward. "We were playing a game of football. That's when Castro called us off our break to come collect you."

"Really? Seems kinda pointless to change out your uniform, don't it?" Eddie asked.

"Oh, come on, Eddie. Just shut up so we can go," said Philip. "I'm sure they didn't want pit stains running down their ACUs."

The second guard opened the back door of the Humvee and clicked his tongue. "Come on, in you get."

The men began to pile into the Humvee. As Nick passed Eddie, Eddie whispered something in his ear. "I don't like the look of these guys."

"Then keep your eyes peeled. If something seems off, or we find out they are not who they say they are, we will kill them!" replied Nick in a low enough tone so that only Eddie could hear him. Then the two of them climbed into the Humvee.

Over ten minutes had passed, and the guards had taken Bravo Squad into the jungle. Philip's own suspicions were piqued like Eddie's. "I thought we were going to see Castro."

"Relax. Castro is hiding out in the jungle. That is where Wallcroft is too," said the second guard. Nick and Eddie gave a glance of suspicion towards the guards.

Suddenly, a voice of another "guard" came from the radio of the Humvee. Most of Bravo Squad could not understand what the guard on the radio was saying as he spoke in Cuban. Only the three guards and Eddie could understand what was being said. "Have you got them with you?" asked the guard on the radio.

"Yes, they fell for it," replied the third guard (also in Spanish) with an evil chuckle.

"Vaas will be pleased," said the guard on the radio, before going silent.

Eddie understood the entire conversation. Now he knew the guards were not working for Castro. "If you're taking us to Castro, then why will Vaas be pleased? Oh yeah, and who the fuck is Vaas?" asked Eddie.

This took the first guard, who was driving, by surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Don't play games! I know Spanish. Fuck I am Spanish! Now who the fuck is Vaas!?" Eddie was now demanding answers.

Nick noticed the third guard slowly pulling out his combat knife. "Eddie, look out!"

When the third guard lunged, Eddie grabbed the guard's wrists and struggled to keep him from plunging the knife into his chest. Nick wrapped his arms around the third guard's neck (which was the one who was sat in between him and Eddie and was also trying to stab Eddie) and put him into a sleeper. The second guard turned around in the passenger seat and pulled out a six-shooter. Becky saw this and quickly unholstered her M9 Berretta, then fired off two quick shots which struck the second guard in the chest. The second guard let out a cry, then a gasp, and then slouched into the chair, unconscious. The first guard (who was still driving) cried something out in Spanish, grabbed the second guard's six-shooter from where it fell upon some McDonald's wrappers, and began to blindly fire at the back seat. The first shot missed Becky's head by an inch. The second shot off Nick's left ear lobe, causing him to cry out in pain, and to release the third guard. The fourth shot struck Philip in the shoulder, and he cried out in pain. The next two shots shattered the back window of the truck, and the final shot struck the third guard in his temple. This is when Nick pulled out his M9 and let off five shots into the back of the driver's seat. All five shots made it through and dug their way into the first guard's back. The guard's limp, still warm, dead body slumped over the steering wheel, causing it to pull to the left. The vehicle spun, smashed through a metal railing on the road, and went rolling down a hill before slamming into a tree. Nick hit his head and his vision blurred before going black.

Nick awoke after being knocked unconscious for 30 minutes. He had a broken nose, his head felt several sizes too big, and on top of that, his left ear was still bleeding, which was expected considering he had lost the lobe. The Humvee was still deep into a tree. The bumper was badly dented in so much it had pretty much destroyed the engine, and the windscreen was completely shattered. Your typical mechanic would charge as much as a small nation costs to fix it. Nick took a moment for his vision to correct itself before taking a look around the Humvee. To his shock, his squad was not there. They were gone, which explained this phenomenon.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" called Nick hoping that maybe they were nearby, or even better just outside of the Humvee. But no one replied. Because no one was there.

"Is anyone there?" he called again.

Again silence. Nick now knew something was wrong. His squad mates wouldn't just up and leave him, would they? Would they? He decided his best course of action would be to get the hell out of the Humvee and back onto the road. Maybe he could find a trace of his squad to help him figure out where they went, and if not, then he was almost certain he would find his way back to the beach. He let out a heavy sigh as he started to climb over the dead body of one of the guards.

Nick opened the Humvee door and came crashing out onto the dirt floor. He let out a groan of pain before struggling to his feet. He looked up at the bright blue sky, and a heavy beam of sunlight shone down onto him. The light was almost blinding. He then took a moment to survey his surroundings. He saw nothing but trees. He then looked up the grass slope in front of him which led to the road where the Humvee had come spinning off of. He crawled up the slope as he had no energy to run up it. Once he reached the road, he tried to call out for his squad mates once more. "Hello? Is anyone there? Becky? Eddie? Philip?"

Again there was no reply. "Where is everyone?" gasped Nick as he took deep breaths. Nick looked around for clues leading to his squad. There were none, so he decided the best thing for him to do was to take the road back to the beach. Maybe

they were taken back there, even though they'd been taken from there, and there was only sand and not a hospital or a clinic or even a police station let alone a military base. Maybe they thought he was dead so they left him.

Nick stumbled down the road, heading in the direction which led to the beach. After a long, tiring walk, he reached the city. Soldiers were set up along the streets and outside of store fronts. He glanced towards every shop in hopes to find his squad, but he could not find them. He was starting to become weak. This was due to the exhaustion and the amount of blood loss he had already suffered. He aimlessly wandered the streets. His mind blank, his body heavy, until eventually he fell unconscious in an alleyway. His vision went black for a second time, but before he passed out, he heard the words: "Quick, get him in the truck before anyone sees us!"

Two hours later, although he had no way of knowing this, Nick was brought back from his unconscious state by a bucket of ice cold water being thrown onto his face. The bucket hurt and clanged to the cement floor. He gave a startled cry as his body shook from the sudden, dramatic change in temperature. It took him little time to realise he was chained to a wall in what looked like a basement. His right cheek had a deep wound and blood ran down his face. In front of him stood a dark silhouette of a figure, lurking in the shadowy background. "Finally you wake. You know, for a moment I thought we lost you," said the figure in a strong Spanish accent.

"Who are you?" Nick tried to slip his hands out of the shackles, but of course he ultimately failed.

"Me? That is not important, no, but what is important is what you know."

"What is it that I know?" asked Nick when he realised his attempts to escape were futile.

The figure let out a chuckle. "I believe you are the one who knows that."

"I don't know anything, I swear."

"You see I want to believe you I do, but I can't. Now tell me what you know so we can avoid the violence."

"We can avoid violence if you just don't hit me," Nick said.

"Don't play dumb with me! Now tell me what I want to know!" said the figure, raising its voice.

Again, Nick tried logic, although it hadn't gotten anyone very far in the past. "You haven't told me yet what it is you want me to tell you about. Asking me to give you any old information without so much as a frame of reference is a little insane."

The figure let out another chuckle, which was a recurring trend of villainous people in this war. "Insane? That's a good one, I tell you. You know, I get called that a lot. I do. You may or may not believe that, but I do. Now, before I forget, did I ever tell you the definition of insanity?"

Instead of listening to an aphorism he'd already heard before and the long, rambling monologue of a hackneyed villain, Nick tried to gather his thoughts. *I need to get out of here. I need to find what's left of my squad.* His arms ached, and he could feel the strength of the chains binding him. He looked around for an object, but found nothing. He couldn't see a window, so he assumed he was underground in a basement somewhere, which became apparent when the only door opened and he could see a set of wooden stairs through it. Two guards moved in, dragging Eddie behind them. They said nothing, instead just chaining him to the wall across from Nick, and left with the shadowy figure that had been taunting Nick.

"Eddie! Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie. Eddie, please tell me you're okay. Eddie?" said Nick as he realised it was Eddie.

Eddie slowly lifted his head. "Ni. Nic. Nick."

Nick could clearly see Eddie's face had been badly beaten. His eyes were swollen, his lips busted, and his cheek cut open. "Yeah, it's Nick. What happened to you, man?"

It took some doing for Eddie to speak. "B...beat...me....with.....with guns.....and bats.....then they.....did it.....again."[26]

"Don't worry, man. We are getting out of here." Nick had no reason to say such a thing.

"No. No. No escape." Eddie gasped before he slipped into an unconscious state.

"Eddie! Eddie, stay with me!" said Nick. "Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie, Eddie." But it was too late. Eddie was out cold. That is when the door opened, and a woman named Citra entered with two guards.

[26] The liberal application of ellipses here represent verbal pauses on the speaker's part.

"Collect him!" she ordered as she pointed at Nick. The word “skank” is bandied about quite a bit in the parlance of the odious and overtly hostile, and though little formal definition has been offered in the way of legitimate publications other than “an offensive term for a woman considered to be foul and sexually promiscuous”, certain connotations are carried as to the candidate for such an unflattering moniker in terms of appearance.[27] In any case, Citra Talugmai was a woman who did fit the epitome of being unclean (she was caked in dirt) and flaunting her bare skin with expensive designer wear that consisted of very little fabric for its cost. Nick tried to struggle against the guards, but one of the guards put a stop to it by hitting him over the back of the head with their riffle.

"You will be an example. You will die for your negligence!" said Citra. Nick was in trouble. A blindfold was thrown over his eyes and a gag shoved into his mouth, and even though they unchained him, he’d been hanging there for so long that his wrists were too sore to fight with. He was being dragged from this place to somewhere else. They must have been having trouble, because his knees bumped against the floor every so often. They dragged him up the steps, banging his knees so they hurt more than a Catholic mass. He guessed he must have been taken outside when he was met with a wall of humid, sticky air. He didn’t realize he was brought indoors until they threw him to a decayed wooden floor which they pressed his ear to and held him down. “Listen up,” Citra said.

Nick recognized the voice he heard from below as the man rambling on about being insane. According to Citra, this man was Vaas, her brother. "You know, I feel like a small boy at Christmas. I can't decide what present to open first." According to his footfalls, he was parading back and forth. Nick didn’t know it yet, but he was taunting the other members of Bravo Squad, his knife tightly clenched in his hand. "Do I go with the big one?" Vaas stepped in front of Wallcroft. "Or do I take the one with the pretty wrapping paper?" He moved over to Becky. "Actually, better save you for later. I'm going to be all tired out after I'm done with your friends.”

Vaas resumed his pacing when Citra joined him downstairs. “Oh, just pick one already. You know I hate waiting for a show to start.”

"Okay, baby sis. I'll take this one." Vaas grabbed Philip by the shoulder and dragged him to the cold metal chair. The chair was fitted with straps for a person’s legs, head, arms and torso. Philip struggled, but his hands were quickly bound to the chair, followed by his legs, head, and then his torso. Vaas pulled the bag off of Philip's head and gave a sigh. Philip had a sock crammed into his mouth with duct tape around his head to hold it in. "Where is the fun in this if you can't hear him scream?" Vaas asked before tearing the tape from Philip's mouth.

Philip spat out the sock immediately and begged for mercy. "Please! Please don't hurt me! Please, I—“ Philip was cut short as Vaas sliced open his right cheek.

"Shut up, you stupid fuck! I have not even touched you, and already you beg for mercy? Just shut up!" Vaas was very angry to use such curse words. Philip went silent. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Vaas then took the bags off of the rest of Bravo Squad’s heads. They too were gagged in the same way Philip had been. "That's better. Now your friends can see how much of a useless fuck you are!" Philip let out a whimper but was immediately silenced by Vaas. Vaas bitch-slapped Philip with the back of his hand. "What did I tell you? There’s no crying in torture!”

Once he cracked his knuckles, Vaas continued. "Now, I am going to ask you questions. You answer them truthly,[28] and I will kill you quick. You lie, and you will suffer through hours of agonising pain. Understand?" Vaas finished his explanation with a question, here noted by the question mark.

Philip gave a nod. He was now fully crying but trying to hold back his whimpers.

"The first one is simple: Where is Castro hiding?"

Philip shook his head and sobbed. "I don't know.”

"What the fuck did I just tell you, you stupid fuck?” Vaas was mad.

Philip's cries grew louder. "I swear I don't know!"

Vaas let out a cry of anger before plunging his blade deep into Philip’s left knee. Philip wailed in pain. His wailing continued as Vaas twisted the blade. "Where is he?" Vaas twisted the blade more.

"I, I don't know!" cried Philip.

"Tell me, you stupid fuck!"

"I, I, I!"

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[27] Urban Dictionary is not a legitimate publication for vernacular.
[28] Sic.

"Stop saying I, and fucking tell me!"

Philip tried to make a sentence but the pain was too unbearable. No matter how much Vaas stabbed and hurt him, the knowledge he did not possess did not magically enter into his brain. Perhaps there was a flaw in Vaas's method. Bravo Squad tried to cast their eyes away. Becky looked over to see Citra. She had one of her hands down her pants and was biting down on her own lip. "You sick skank!" Becky tried to shout this, but thanks to the gag it came out as "Oh ik wak!"

Vaas heard Becky trying to Speak. He stopped twisting the blade and approached her. "You got something to say?" Becky stared him down but did not speak. Vaas tore the gag from her. "Well?" Becky still did not speak. Instead, she spat in Vaas's face. Vaas recoiled backwards and turned his head away. "You know, I think it's time I taught you some manners." He turned his head back to her mid-sentence, wiping the spit from his face. He then pushed Becky to the floor and started undoing his belt. Becky waited for a chance to attack, but Vaas threw himself on top of her. "I'm going to enjoy this," he said, indicating he was a terrible person to enjoy such a despicable act or even to use it to instil fear. When Vaas was close enough, Becky made her attack. She bit down on his right ear lobe, tearing it clean off. Vaas let out a roar of pain, and Becky slammed her leg into his face, knocking him backwards.

Citra pulled her hand out from her pants and charged at Becky. She wrapped her hands around Becky's neck and the wrapped her legs around Becky's torso. Citra pulled Becky back and began to choke her. Wallcroft jumped to his feet and kicked Citra in the face. Citra released Becky and clutched her face, letting out whines of pain. Becky looked up to Wallcroft. Before anyone could react, his throat was slit. His blood sprayed out of his neck, covering Becky like the green slime in a Nickelodeon game show from the 1990s. Becky lay there in shock. Wallcroft collapsed to the floor, choking on his own blood.

Vaas was standing over him, holding the blood-covered knife that he had been using to torture Philip, as well as kill Wallcroft with. He brought his foot up before slamming it down into Becky's face. The force knocked her unconscious. He then helped his sister to her feet. "Are you okay sis?"

"No, that animal nearly broke my nose!"

"Here, have some fun with our friend in the chair," said Vaas as he handed Citra the knife.

Citra grinned, kissed her brother, and took the knife. She then excitedly ran the knife over Philip. She examined his body to find where she could inflict the most pain. She gave an *evil* grin. She had found the place! She lifted her knife and plunged it into Philip's crotch area. Philip screamed as loud as he could the pain was so unbearable.

Vaas gave a grin. "That's my girl."

Nick found an opportunity to pry off his blindfold by the time Vaas came upstairs. "You bastard!" was all he said. He couldn't even think up a stronger obscenity; he was that angry.

"Were you not listening?" Vaas asked. "That bitch is learning some manners! Your squad leader is dead. The wimpy kid is, well, whimpering. The Spanish guy is in shock. I'm letting him think things over. You know, make him realise that all he needs to do is tell us where Castro is hiding."

"We don't know where Castro is! You grabbed us before we had a chance to meet him!"

"Bullshit!" Vaas brandished his knife. "You all are nothing but dirty, scheming liars!" he continued. "I cannot even right now deal with filthy, fucking liars! You will tell me the truth, or I will carve out your eyes!"

Becky found herself deposited in one of the soldiers' tents, lying face down in the dirt. In front of her she could see four of Vaas's men crowded around a table, drinking and gambling. She turned her head to the left to see the exit of the tent and wasted no time crawling for it. She was nearly out when she heard one of the men call out, "Look who is awake!" They dragged her back by her ankles and flipped onto her back. She was now staring a bald, toothless individual in the eyes. "First go is mine, lads." The man laughed as he unbuckled his belt and his pants fell down his thighs. Becky let out a shriek before slamming her boot into his crotch. The man groaned in pain. "Get here, you bitch!"

Becky burst out of the tent and started to sprint through the camp with the four men giving chase. Other soldiers watched in amusement as Becky managed to outrun and outsmart the four guards. The bald man's pants had fallen to his knees, revealing his smiley-face-print boxers, and he had to hop after the others. Becky weaved between tents, confusing the four men as she did. She ran into one tent, and they followed, but she had snuck around the back of the tents and came rushing out a separate one. The four men turned the wrong way out the back and emerged from a different tent altogether, but they spotted her running into a tent across the way and were hot on her heels. She pulled this stunt again, but this time they came out early and chased her back into the tent she came out of. She next dashed across the way, and all four men split up, going into separate tents. When she emerged out of yet another tent, the four men ran into each other without paying attention and collided, their hollow heads producing a resounding coconut-like "clonk".

"Where is she?" cried the bald, toothless guard as Becky has escaped out of their line of sight. Her heart was now racing. Sweat began to trickle down her face. She needed to hide, but where? Then she noticed she was no more than five-hundred yards away from the surrounding tree line. If she was quick, she could make her escape, and if she was lucky, maybe she could find some resistance army. Becky took a deep breath and made a break for it. As she started to run, she heard a guard shout, "There's the bitch!"

Becky sprinted deep into the trees. The further she went, the more tired her pursuers got. After five minutes, three of the guards had given up, and only the bald guard was in pursuit. She slowed down due to tiredness, and this is where the bald guard made his move. He dived onto her. Becky let out a shriek as she was sent crashing to the dirty jungle floor, and her head was violently slammed to the earth. "Now I've got you!" The man fiddled with his belt to remove it completely. "Beg. I like the beggars!"

A gunshot went off, Becky let out a screech as the bald man's brains exploded over her. He slumped over her, dead and with his head gushing like a cracked milk jug. She pushed his plump, heavy body off of her and crawled backwards, panting and gasping for air. She only stopped scooting when her back bumped a tree stump behind her. She looked up to see an old man with a face that looked as if it was made of leather and the hair you find in the drains of bathroom tubs. Of all people, it was Fidel Castro!

Fidel holstered his weapon and handed her some Mentos breath mints. "You okay, little girl? Here, have some Mentos freshness," he asked, before pulling out a cigar, slipping it in between his lips and lighting it. Becky's heart banged furiously against her chest as she thanked him. "No problem," said Fidel, inhaling a puff of smoke from the cigar. "Resistance, I take it?"

"Padre!" Raul's delicate voice followed Fidel through the woods, which in turn was followed by Raul himself, sprinting out from amidst the trees with his arms sticking out and two other soldiers.

"Relax, I'm fine. Just helping this girl." Fidel was demonstrating an inability to gauge Becky's age; she was most definitely an adult, being over twenty-one, and should have been referred to as a "woman" instead of a "girl".

"Sir, we need to get out of here before Vaas's men investigate the gunshot," said one of the guards, who had short, featureless black hair and a symmetrical complexion.

Fidel promptly turned to this guard and held his arms open for an embrace. "Of course, Elian, my first-born! Your Papa shall not let you come to harm."

Raul interrupted. "Um, father, you know Signore Gonzalez isn't your firstborn, nor a blood relation."

Fidel ignored his son and looked at Becky. "What is your name girl?"

"Sergeant Becky Williams."

"Ah, well, I am Fidel Castro, and I own these islands. They are my property."

Becky's brow furrowed with disbelief. She had a feeling he was Fidel Castro. The man was notorious, and his cult of personality meant his face was plastered everywhere on the island. Was this fate, that the man she and her squad had been looking for just before they got captured was also the same man that saved her from her captors? Or was this some kind of weird dream, and she would wake up at any moment to find herself back in Vaas's camp? Becky decided, or rather hoped, this wasn't a dream, and she immediately sought more help from Castro. "I am part of Bravo Squad, sir. We were sent here to protect you, but we were captured by this psycho."

"I knew Vaas's had them!" Raul snapped his fingers.

"Where is the rest of your squad?" asked Fidel.

"As far as I know, our leader was killed by that sick fuck and a woman! A couple are alive, at least I think they still are. I hope they still are. Philip Jack Brooks is wounded, but I'm not certain about Nicholas Bronson and Eddie Guerra."

"We need to leave," Elian said in a singsong voice, gazing into the jungle.

Fidel put his hands to his hairy cheeks. "Okay, we will take you back, gather our forces and surround this camp. Do not worry, Elian, Papa will ensure no harm will come to his shining prodigy."

Again Raul interrupted. "Father, that is not a good idea. We should use our forces to hold the city, that way we can at least protect the civilians. Plus we have the advantage in the city."

"We can't leave them! We came here to help you!" Becky said.

"Look, I know they're your friends, and I'm sorry, I really am, but they signed on for this. They knew the risks, and they still went ahead and signed on. The civilians in our city did not sign on for this war. They had it thrust upon them like a disease! Raul's right, we must defend the city!" said Elian.

"We can discuss this at the HQ," said Fidel. He made his way back to their vehicle, followed by Raul, the other soldier, Becky and Elian, in that order.

"We have to at least save my squad," Becky said as they reached the SUV.

"I'm sorry, but we can't risk the men. We don't even know if they are alive," said Raul.

"We can't leave them there! Do you know what it's like in there? We have to do something!" said Becky. "They were sent here to protect you and your people and your father, and you are just going to leave them behind? What kind of coward are you?"

"Exactly!" Raul snapped. "You were sent to protect us! My father! All the good you did! Why did you think we needed the extra support, huh? It's because we are getting our culos kicked, and we can't afford to waste time, lives and ammunition to save your friend who may or may not be alive!"

Fidel and Elian climbed into the back of the SUV, whilst the other soldier got into the driver seat. Raul joined them by climbing into the passenger seat. Becky climbed in after them, but she was not happy. "This is bullshit!" Little did she know that soon she would see her squad. Dead or alive, however, was the question that still remained. Dun, dun, dunnn!

Chapter Thirty-Six.

Time for church. Mortal combat.

If you are a wealthy member of the bourgeoisie, you have probably been on a long car or plane trip to Disneyworld when your parents have turned around in their seat and yelled at you, "You kids better knock it off, or I'm turning this thing around!" If you are not particularly wealthy, then perhaps you've heard this phrase when in your parents' station wagon to McDonald's.

"We have to go back!" Becky said as the SUV pulled up to Cuba's HQ. She had been bugging Castro and the men about this the entire ride up.

"Please can we gag her, Father?" pleaded Raul as he had had enough.

"I second that vote," said Elian.

"You kids better knock it off, or I'm turning this thing around," said Fidel. "Calm down, boys, I can handle this." He then addressed Becky. "English girl."

"I'm not a girl, I am a woman!" Becky said. It's usually rude to interrupt someone, but it's not as rude as calling someone a girl when she is over twenty-one and an adult. "And I'm Welsh-Scots, not English."

"Well, British woman, we have explained over and over again why we can't go get your friends. What part are you struggling with?"

"The part where you missed the saying , 'Leave no man behind.'"

Fidel laughed. "Sometimes it's necessary to make sacrifices in war."

Becky was glad he brought that up, because it gave her some ammunition. "I lost my brother, James. I know what sacrifice means. I am the daughter of Peter Williams, sister of Daniel Williams, and I command you to gather some men and rescue my squad members!"

"Well, sister of Daniel, daughter to Peter, this is my island. We help the resistance, but the resistance does not own us! Your name or status will not help you here." Fidel thought he was replying as respectfully as possible, despite ignoring the death of her brother, James, and throwing her words back in her face like a tennis volley.

Becky frowned and thought of her family. The Williams family had always been expected to lead the human resistance. She had been passed up for leadership, a fact which she questioned, but that didn't mean she couldn't assert herself. "The Human Resistance is meant to join the human race together against the Equestrian invaders. It's not about political or nationalist boundaries. Please, I will lead the men myself! I need two at most! You need these men. One was in Delta Squad! You know my brother's squad: The ones who drove back the ponies twice! They are excellent soldiers. Please, I really need your help, and so do they."

Fidel tipped his head back and scratched his bushy beard to think. For anyone who knew him, when he was stroking his beard, he was thinking especially hard. "Fine!”

Raul nearly shook himself from his seat. "What?"

"She's right; we could use these guys. Specially trained marines are hard to come by, just like munitions. You should get armoured up and go with her.”

"Dad, you can’t be serious!"

"Oh, I am! I may be your father, but I am also your leader, and I command you to do this!"

Raul started to protest, but Fidel quashed this. Instead, he shook his head and scowled at Becky. "Fine! I will do it. Geez."

"Thank you so much!" Becky said.

"Just hold, British woman. If this guy doesn’t turn out as good as you say, then I am throwing you in the Caribbean. Are we clear?"

Becky found this remark questionable, but wrote it off as a joke. "Clear.”

"Good. Then 'clear' on out of here.”

"I hope their lives are worth ours!" growled Raul.

Becky saluted and joined Raul and Elian. She had won. Her allies now had a rescue team in bound, if they could survive long enough to see it.

Vaas was in the middle of pulling his knife down across Nick's face, leaving a deep and bloody trail from the top right side of Nick's forehead, down over the bridge of his nose, and ending halfway down his left cheek. Nick let out a groan, but nothing else as he was too weary even to express his pain. About that time, Citra entered with news that was both good and bad, depending upon your point of view. “Brother, they have arrived!”

Vaas pulled the knife away from Nick. “Really? And me without my skin suit! You’d better not be fucking with me!”

"Come see. There are so many we could take Castro today!”

Vaas holstered his knife and cupped his sister’s cheek. “We have to greet our friends like we planned, and I know the perfect guest to come with us.” He grinned at the three remaining members of Bravo Squad he tied up. Eddie appeared to be completely out of it, and Nick’s disgust bubbled in his throat as a warm, weak exhalation. “Get the muscle head down and clean him up. We need him in tip-top shape.”

Philip looked distraught as two older guards, one with a moustache and mullet, and another a whisper-thin man, proceeded to unchain him from the wall and carry his body between them by his arms and legs. “To me, to you! To me, to you!” the pair of men recited back and forth as they carried him out of the basement with Citra following after. As an afterthought before he too departed, Vaas said, “Sorry to abandon you at a time like this, but duty calls. Feel free to hang out, make yourselves at home!”

When Philip was allowed to stand, things didn’t improve. Vaas sent the two guards back to the shack, and he and Citra marched Philip through the leafy jungle. The canopy above was dark, so it must have been night, but there was still an eerie haze that glowed somewhere off in the trees. The putrid humidity wasn’t any better, but instead the cold lapped at the sweat caused by the dense air, giving Philip goose bumps. The path roved sporadically through the trees like dirty hyphenation, by some wiles that came natural to Vaas and Citra. Leafy fronds Philip didn’t recognize whipped in the face and crotch, and his captors dragged him along the more stubborn bits of terrain like a shopping cart with a busted wheel and a load of heavy groceries stacked upon soft. As they traversed the creaking, chirruping night, the haze got brighter, and yet Philip didn’t feel as if he could see any clearer. A blinding bluish light became apparent through the trees up ahead, as though some eerie manifestation was brimming with a luminous glee at their approach. The noise of the jungle was eerie, a buzzing chorus of lurking things he couldn’t identify, but the sounds alone made Philip feel as if numerous, prickly legs were ascending his arms and standing his hair on end just like the exotic trees that surrounding him like taunting older schoolchildren.

Before long, Philip realized these sights and sounds were not so much a phantasmagorical phenomenon, but the very real presence of a hundred or so members of the Iron Wolves collected in the midst of some towered floodlights. When they breached the last row of trees before the rectangular clearing, Philip felt a sense of marvel at the sight of an open-air arena dug into a square pit in the earth that was almost three quarters the size of a little league softball field. Filling up this pit was the sort of ring one might find in the blood sports of boxing or wrestling, and within the ring, some of the Iron Wolves were already hitting one another like an underground fight club, which is a sort of illegal group for drunken white trash to enact their

childish, violent fantasies upon one another in a bout of ignorance only a step above flinging their faeces at one another like monkeys at the zoo. Onyx was nowhere to be seen.

Philip knew where this was going. A prisoner being brought to a huge arena would come to a logical end in some barbaric fight to the death, and he'd been a professional wrestler before the world had become overrun with equine invaders. Barbarism was how he defined his livelihood. He tainted the story of his life with the way of the fight. He wondered that if prisoners were fighting, Wallcroft was dead, and Becky was likely being used to some unpalatable end, then how many other captives the Iron Wolves held.

"How's that knee, macho man?" Vaas asked. "I got money on a big, burly alpha chunk like you, so don't let me down." As soon as he undid Philip's cuffs, he and Citra pushed him into the pit where he landed upon the hard-packed dirt. "We've got plenty of armed guards to enforce the rules," Vaas said. Philip didn't need to be told that; he had caught glimpses of men wielding riffles before he'd been dumped in like so much trailer trash, although now the floodlights made it impossible to see above the rim of the arena. Two muscular, bald men had been attacking each other in the neck with their wrists, and though they were shiny with sweat, neither looked tired out. Rather, they appeared to run out of ideas for how to hit one another in more creative ways, and they instead vacated the pit by running to the edges and leaping out. Evidently this was where the Iron Wolves went to train, or for recreational purposes. Philip stretched apart the ropes surrounding the mat and entered the ring, knowing full well that he may never walk out alive again, win or lose.

Philip interrupted a guard who'd been about to explain the rules. "Yeah, yeah, I get the picture. A match to the death for your entertainment, and if I break the rules, you shoot me dead before I can climb out of the pit." It was an odd moment of clarity that must have been spot on, because a spotlight fixed on another pair of occupants in the ring. The song, "Fever", by Aerosmith (which was a band its fans particularly like), began blaring out on some loudspeakers, and it was a wonder that the Iron Wolves' camp had not been discovered by Castro's regime with all the hullabaloo. Philip had expected a frightened Cuban, or a resistance member he might recognize from the ship he'd sailed in on. He'd expected perhaps one of his enemies' strongest, most muscular soldiers, a veritable Goliath who stood heads above men and could crush a skull with ham-sized hands.

He did not expect a scrawny, wheelchair-bound man wearing a helmet, a luchador mask, and a plain black t-shirt that mimicked the Hard Rock Café logo but with the words "Let's get REAL!!" in its stead. The emcee introduced this fighter by the enigmatic pseudonym of "The Real One". At first, Philip told himself his challenger had to be the top-heavy man guiding the chair, but the silent, swarthy Scandinavian was permitted to flee from the pit, knees knocking the entire way. "Oh, hell no," Philip said. "No way am I going to fight a differently-abled person. That's despicable!" It wasn't that he had a moral objection to picking on someone he assumed was incapable of fighting him; as a professional fighter, he had a prerogative to do so. Exploitation, not sportsmanship, had been his calling.

The Real One tore off his helmet from a swollen-looking cranium and stood up from his wheelchair. His spindly legs carried him into the ring where he picked up a microphone that had been given to him. The first thing he did was to remove his luchador mask and reveal his face to everyone. The sight made Philip drop his jaw, because the prime directive of a Mexican wrestler is to keep their mask on at all costs as a sort of cheap, shameless gimmick. The Real One didn't look Mexican anyhow, and had a sleepy, goofy expression permanently stuck upon his face, and his teeth were a hideous contraption of jutting brown bone. "Everything you do is despicable," he said in a wavering, yokel dialect from a particular region of the United States. "The only reason that your championship title ampersand slash or status lasted as long as it did is because you shamed the industry so much that nobody wanted to touch you in all that time you spent. I know you, CM Punk, but you're a letter off, because I have had bowel movements that have caused me greater discomfort slash trauma than you ever will. Ampersand, what is 'punk'? Just a bunch of spoilt attention workers hyphen of hyphen the hyphen night jagging their hair up like special snowflakes."

Philip was dumbstruck. Sure, talking trash like foul-mouthed eight-year-olds who couldn't get along was mandatory for the trade, but he still couldn't believe this person with the swollen head was serious about challenging him, and he also couldn't understand his verbalization of punctuation. "Are you kidding me?"

The Real One continued. "The only joke here is you ampersand slash or your lack thereof in intellect. I am a certified genius ampersand three hyphen time hyphen spelling hyphen bee hyphen winner, ampersand soon my book, 'Diabetics', will go out on the press. You couldn't even write a comic book, but the beating I'm about to unleash will give you plenty of research into stars ampersand little birds tweeting around your head."

"Who in the hell are you?" Philip asked. He shook his head. "My Wikipedia article was ten times longer than anything coherent you've probably ever written. You *never* insult a fellow wrestler's career."

"And yet fruitless, because none of your fans can even read."

The emcee hissed into his mic. "Ooh, now that's a burn to rival this summer's heatwave! Let the death match begin!" The audience became like a roar, some fatal wail as if the earth was rending itself by the weight of some great disaster. They

were screaming threats and calling for blood, but all the cruel words became a melange of harrowing sound. Philip had heard this exact same noise countless times, and it boiled his blood with a familiar desire. Still, he did not strike.

That did not mean that the Real One did not take offense to his mere presence, however. “Behold my wrestling moves, ah!” He let out an ugly scream and ran at Philip, then punched him in the neck. The Real One’s arms hardly looked thicker than spider’s legs in terms of proportion, but he had bony knuckles, and there was some discomfort caused to Philip.

“What in the hell?” Philip didn’t want to because he was grossed out, but he placed his palm against the Real One’s enlarged forehead, preventing him from advancing any further. Even so, his adversary kept trying to punch him, whiffing at the air until Philip gave the top-heavy man a light shove, which sent the Real One falling backwards onto the mat.

“You fool! I am a master of the ultimate unpredictability!” The Real One struggled and grunted and after several long seconds of Philip watching, he picked himself off the ground. He then tried punching Philip again.

“Then why do you only keep trying to punch me? This is wrestling, you idiot!”

“The only idiot here is anyone who stands in the mighty presence of my raw intellect!” The Real One ran to the ropes, which weren’t as elastic as in a genuine arena, but he rebounded off of them as intended. He then attempted to tuck himself into a ball and somersault at Philip, but he was clearly having trouble doing so. He propped himself up like a tripod on his feet and head and didn’t budge. He tipped sideways and then collapsed, then rolled himself onto his back, then stood again and once more failed to somersault in this manner. Once close enough, he leapt awkwardly into the air, kicking his feet out, and landed on his feet again. There was a moment of quiet as Philip stared at him in as much disbelief as an atheist for the Christian god.

The Real One then seized Philip’s arm and clamped onto it with the misshapen, sullied bone that was his teeth. Those grievous chompers pinched right through his muscular tissue and blood flowed like honey from a bee’s mouth. The Real One couldn’t pick apart the hunks of skin caught between his teeth, and Philip screamed at the sight of the sinkhole in his limb. “Looks like the punk just got punked,” said the Real One.

“You bit me! You goddamn bit me! I’ll probably get infected!” Philip was right. As blood pooled within the gap torn from Philip’s forearm, the Real One dipped out of the ring, folded up his wheelchair, and returned, wielding it as a weapon. Raising it nearly put him off balance, but he managed to slam Philip in the forehead with a wheel to the aroused screams of the onlookers. The guard over the wheel sliced Philip’s forehead open, and he fell to the floor with a thud. Still conscious but dazed, the roars and cheers of those who had bet against him exploded into a cacophony. The Real One dropped his chair clumsily on Philip, then crouched down and started chewing on his neck, ripping out his trachea. Philip jerked and shuddered as he bled out in a pretty pattern, smearing his own red life fluid with his hands. The pestilence slipped through him like oil into the ocean. As he looked up into the shining lights, the last sight he could make out was of three diminutive, quadrupedal figures laughing at him. The Real One stood up quickly, but he had overexerted himself. He wobbled and fell backwards on his head, but his waist didn’t bend, so he was stuck there in that position.

“What do you think of the dinner and a show?” Vaas asked his guests, who were standing next to him.

Scootaloo, Sweetie Belle, and Apple Bloom watched in amusement. Apple Bloom munched on a tuft of cotton candy. She swallowed and shook Vaas’s hand with a sticky hoof. “So! This is your army, huh? Very impressive, for so many numbers! What do you feed them on, apples?”

"Enough of this mindless chit chat! We need to discuss plans of action! We need to take Castro before he knows we are here!" said Sweetie Belle, her high-pitched voice causing the floodlights to flicker.

"Relax, the Cutie Mark Crusader Human Exterminators have just arrived!" said Apple Bloom.

"She’s right. Better surprise for Castro, the more likely we are to succeeding.[29] We need those nukes!" added Scootaloo.

Apple Bloom shook her head. "It seems my companions are eager to plan. If you wouldn’t mind giving us some space, we also need somewhere to stash our precious cargo we have for another scheme.”

"Oh no, not at all. Right this way.” Vaas gestured with his arm as though he were a perfect gentleman instead of a psychotic sociopath who felt he was a big man by making people feel violated and vulnerable. He led them away from the scene where his men had begun chucking things at the Real One for fun, leaving him in the pit for their sadistic amusement, and mocking him for being trapped in a pit while they weren’t. The ponies had reached Cuba. Not even they knew the destruction of what would come in the next two days.

Two days had passed since Becky had escaped the Iron Wolves' encampment. Nick and Eddie were still prisoners, and were the only ones left of their squad. The others had all died. They had been brutally tortured, maimed, and killed. During the

[29] Sic.

past couple of days, Eddie and Nick and been through hell, and that was no exaggeration. They had been brutally tortured, and in the process, Nick had lost his right pinkie finger, his left ear lobe and two of his molars. Eddie had lost his entire left ear, two front teeth, and had two of his fingers broken. On top of that, the two of them had suffered a few nasty and deep slash wounds to their lower backs and torsos. Unfortunately for the two men, they weren't just physically tortured. They were also mentally tortured, so much so that their very souls had started to fall apart. Vaas had been having them tortured in hopes that they would reveal Castro's HQ location, but of course they didn't know, and no matter how much they told that to Vaas, Vaas just didn't believe them. Vaas instead assumed that Eddie and Nick were specially trained operatives that could withstand torture, so he had started to introduce a new type of torture.

He and his sister would chain Eddie and Nick to two chairs. Then they would tape their eyes open and bring in a little girl. They started with sixteen-year-olds but worked their way down in age as the days went by. Then they would brutally beat that girl, and when Nick and Eddie still did not speak, Vaas would rape that girl. If they still did not tell him what he wanted to hear, then he would tie that girl to a chair, before he would start to cut off each one of her fingers and toes, one by one. When that didn't work, he smeared honey on her face, pushed her to the floor, and brought in a couple of wild, vicious, and hungry dogs to finish her off in a painful way: They would eat her face. Vaas was truly a disgusting individual to have dreamt such punishments up, and he'd gotten the idea from his experience working in airport customs security.

The worst part of it all is that while this went on, he would play Miley Cyrus music in the background.

The actor, David Tennant, prior to the pony holocaust, once played a character which stated, more or less, that he would "make a terrible god. For starters, you'd never get a day off." Nick and Eddie would have longed for a day off from these constant edge-lord shenanigans designed to prove how hard and unscrupulous Vaas was. When he was not committing crimes against humanity on him personally, they were under constant supervision by a pair of novice torturers: The same couple that had escorted Philip away from them on the night of the wrestling match. No one had said a word about their ally's wellbeing. They had to assume the worst.

"Uh, Paul?" asked Barry Chucklito, the thin, older-looking torturer.

"Yeah, Barry?" asked his brother, the one with the moustache.

"I'm thinking, what if they don't actually know where Mr. Castro is? I think it's very likely they would have told us by now if they knew."

"Nonsense. These are well-trained military men! They'll never give up where their leader's hiding."

"Yeah, but Paul, wouldn't it make sense if Mr. Castro wasn't hiding, and was instead presiding over the most heavily-defended location on the island, say a military base, perhaps the Havana Air Base, from where he leads over all operations?"

"Nah, that's silly. The leader of his country would be hiding out in the jungle in a nary-disclosed location, waiting to pick off Dan the Vaas himself at any moment!"

"Oh, dear. Quiet, you. We're paid for one thing only here, and that's to do our job, and we don't need you getting ideas into your head and mucking everything up as usual. Now, what have we got to torture the guests with today?"

Barry held up a bucket. "I was collectin' silverfish and gonna cover them in them, but I only caught the one."

Paul nodded. "They can be tricky little buggers, silverfish, always crawlin' into small spaces."

"Oh, it didn't crawl, it swam."

"Swam? Where were you trying to catch it?"

Barry shoved the bucket at Paul. "Down by the lake, of course! Look at it; it's silver!"

Paul took one look and shook his head, frowning so that his lips disappeared under his moustache. "You idiot! That's a silver fish, not a silverfish!"

"Eh?"

"Never you mind. It's those little bugs all around this place. When the Americans fled from Florida into Cuba during the invasion as illegal immigrants, the Scientologists brought cockroaches and other pests with them from their Clearwater Motel!"

That was as far as that conversation got, and it would have been a mercy if it had been allowed to continue. Vaas had entered and made his presence known, slamming an empty bottle of Everclear to the floor which didn't break, but slid to the far wall like a hockey puck and cracked. "Put those scummy dry-agers into some theatre seats. I'm in the mood to exhibit."

The Chucklito brothers vacated once Nick and Eddie were back in the chairs. They were uncomfortable chairs to begin with, but made even more uncomfortable by the degrading sexual violence they had to witness, that looked like something from a George R. R. Martin wet dream. They remained silent as they knew no matter what they said, Vaas would not listen to them. Vaas paced backward and forwards in front of them, waiting for his sister to return with a fresh girl. "Look, I am getting real sick and tired of this now. Tell me where Castro is!" Nick and Eddie stared, expressionless, at Vaas. They didn't even have the energy to tell him what they had been telling him all along, let alone how his constant, irrational expectation of results constituted a learning disability on his part.

"God damn! You guys are fucking sick! Are you really going to let me hurt, rape and kill another little girl? And for what? An old man who should have died years ago? Huh? Answer me!" The two of them remained silent, so Vaas let out a frustrated cry and unsheathed his knife, which he plunged into Eddie's left thigh. Eddie let out a cry of pain as Vaas began to twist the blade. "Oh, now you make a fucking sound! Now! Well, fucking scream you little cunt twat slut bitch!" Eddie continued to scream. Vaas did not stop twisting the blade until Citra entered the room.

"Brother, you better not be having all the fun without me!" she snapped.

Vaas tore the blade from Eddie's leg and turned to her. "I'm sorry, sister. I got carried away."

"No problem, brother. The fun has only just begun."

"So where is the girl?" asked Vaas.

"I thought we should mix it up a bit. Go with a younger variety." Citra smiled and pulled a sobbing nine-year-old girl into the room.

Vaas chuckled. "Oh, how I do love you, sister," he said before French-kissing her.

Eddie lifted his head to see the nine year old girl. He gasped. She was the same age, height, and had the same ethnic background as his daughter. Even though he knew very well she was not his daughter, he couldn't let them hurt a girl that young. He couldn't bear the thought of it, especially because he would be thinking of his daughter the entire time. Tears began to roll from his eyes. Both he and Nick had tried to stop him before, despite being tied down and beaten, but hour after hour of the same treatment had killed them inside. Part of Eddie was just desperate to feel anything anymore.

"We better get started." Vaas grabbed the young girl by her hair and yanked her to his side. The girl let out a cry and started to beg for her mum. Vaas smiled before slapping the girl. "Shut your mouth, crying about your damn mama, or I will bring her in here and kill her! Do you understand me?" The girl continued to cry. Vaas shook his head and lifted his hand ready to slap her once more. This was too much for Eddie. He snapped.

"No! Please, wait!" Eddie said. Nick had tried to ignore what was going on, even though it hurt him deep down inside, but when Eddie shouted, he turned his head toward him.

Vaas smiled. "Oh, are you ready to talk?"

Eddie moped and had to find his voice again, which came through like a croak. "Yes. Yes, I am! Just promise to let her go."

"Well, I'll be damned." Vaas laughed like Woody Woodpecker, grinning like a scene from a David Lynch production. "Can't do that, though. You see, you tell us, then we let her go."

"No, wait! Please, let me finish! I don't know this island. I can't tell you, but I can show you. I swear I can!"

Nick realised what Eddie was doing, so he decided to play along. "Don't show them anything, Eddie! You hear me? Don't do it!"

"Shut up!" Vaas slapped Nick with the back of his hand, then turned to Eddie. "How about this: I take the little girl with us. If you show us the place then I will release her. Not you, though. As you can probably understand, I will have to kill you so that you do not warn your friends. But be warned: Fuck with me on this one, and this little girl will suffer more than you can even imagine. I will have every single one of my men rape her. Every single one! Then I will skin her alive and feed her to my dogs! Understand me?"

"Yes, I won't. Please just let me show you." Eddie was on the verge of tears. He tried not to look at the little girl so that he wouldn't cry. "Okay. Okay, just don't hurt her."

Vaas untied Eddie and pulled the tape from his eyes. Eddie struggled up onto his one good leg and tried to balance.

Citra stepped forward with some rope and a demand: "Hold out your hands!"

Eddie did as he was told. "You're a traitor! You hear me? A traitor!" said Nick, still playing along with Eddie's plan, even though he still was not fully aware of what it was. He hoped to hell it was a good one.

"Shut up! When we get back, I swear I will remove your balls and shove them down your throat until you choke to death!" said Vaas, who didn't like long goodbyes. Eddie let out a slight whimper as he tried to keep off of his wounded leg. Citra took the little girl and they all left Nick alone in the room. As Eddie stepped out into the blinding sunlight, he realised that what he was doing was foolish. He had no plan, and he couldn't go back on what he had said or the little girl would suffer worse than she already would have. He needed to think of a plan and soon.

As Vaas summoned three men to fetch a jeep, Citra voiced her concerns. "Vaas, I don't like this."

"Don't worry, sis. Everything will be fine. We win either way." He sneered at Eddie. "I hope for your sake you ain't lying, because if you are, I will—" Vaas wasn't even able to finish his sentence. He was cut off by a bullet from out of nowhere. It entered into his right eye before travelling through his skull and exiting out of his cranium. Vaas's body collapsed to the floor and Citra let out a cry.

"Vaas, no!" She wept and shuddered as if someone died who had deserved any angstrom of compassion or empathy. Bullets had started to fly from the trees like birds and took down Vaas's men by surprise. Eddie dove to the floor. What the hell was happening? He looked up to the trees, and there he saw Fidel Castro, and alongside him were Becky, Raul, and Elian with an entire platoon of resistance soldiers. The resistance had arrived!

Nick was startled by the first gunshot, which was shortly followed by a woman's scream. He didn't know what to think. Did Eddie manage to get a hold of Vaas's weapon? Did he manage to get a shot off and kill Vaas? When the wave of gunfire flooded the encampment, Nick gained hope. The resistance! It had to be! This hope alone had a greater nourishing effect than food or water could ever have brought him, even though he'd been famished for two whole days. Even the colour coursed back into his cheeks. His posture righted itself, and thoughts of escape once again returned to his mind, like remembering a word lost on the tip of his tongue. He struggled against the chair to no avail, so instead he struggled the chair against himself. After rocking back and forth three times, the chair fell back and shattered against the hard concrete. He slipped out of the ropes and tore the tape from his eyes, then picked up one of the broken chair legs and made his way to the door.

Just as he reached for the handle, he heard Citra's voice from the opposite side. "Move it you little shit!" At her words, Nick threw himself against the wall as the door burst open. Citra came storming in, dragging the little girl behind her. "You will see this child die!" she said, but her thunder petered away when she realized Nick was gone, and in his place was a broken chair. Citra gasped and turned her head, but she was too late. Nick moved close to her and swung the chair leg into the side of her head, knocking her unconscious.

The little girl let out a startled whimper. Nick dropped to his knees and looked her in the eyes. "No, no, don't worry. I won't hurt you. I am one of the good guys." The girl cowered in response. "My name's Nick. What's yours?" he asked as he took an M9 Beretta out from the back of Citra's skirt.

"Natasha," she told him.

"That's a beautiful name. Okay, Natasha, honey, I'm going to need you to come with me, but I want you to cover your ears and close your eyes real tight. Can you do that for me?" Nick asked. She answered with a little nod. "Okay, that's a good girl." Nick picked her up in his right arm and took hold of the Beretta in his free hand. Natasha did as she had been instructed, and Nick made his way up the stairs out of the basement which he and Eddie had been held in.

"I want to go home," said Natasha with a whimper.

"And I will take you there, honey, I promise. We just need to scare away all the bad men so that you can go back home to your mummy and daddy. Until then, I need you to be a big girl for me. Can you do that?"

"Yeah." Natasha sounded as convincing as any child ever sounds.

"That's a good girl." At the top of the stairs was another door. Nick pressed his ear up against it. He could hear the voices of three men speaking Spanish, so he had no idea what it was they were saying. He could only assume it was some of Vaas's men. Nick lowered Natasha and put her down onto the top step. "Okay, Natasha, honey, I'm going to need you stay here whilst I make sure it's safe."

"Please don't leave me!"

"Don't worry. I will be right back for you. Just close your eyes, cover your ears, and maybe hum a song."

Natasha gave a nod. "Okay. You promise to come back?"

"I promise," said Nick with as convincing of a smile as he possibly could pull off. Natasha tucked herself into the corner and once again did as he instructed. Nick took hold of the doorknob and took a deep breath, then he counted down from three in his head.

One.

Two.

Three!

Nick pushed open the door and peered out. In front of him were three of Vaas's men, facing away from him and firing AK47's out of a window. Nick pulled back the hammer on his Beretta as he raised his gun, then he took another deep breath before squeezing the trigger. His first bullet made its way straight into the back of the skull of one of the guards. The other two turned to face Nick, but they were too slow. He fired four quick shots: Two for each of the men, and both being struck twice in the chest. Two plus two is four. The bodies fell to the floor and Nick smiled. He turned his head back to Natasha. "You can look now, honey. It's safe."

Natasha opened her eyes and smiled. Nick was about to assure her once again that it was safe, but he was interrupted by a big, muscular hand which snapped onto his shirt. He turned his head back to the open door to see a huge man: One of Vaas's guards. He had brought Vaas all the tools he used to torture Nick and Eddie, and his name was Nero. Before Nick could raise his weapon, Nero pulled him close and slammed his forehead into Nick's nose. The force was enough to break it. Nick let out a cry of pain and Natasha screamed. Nero then threw Nick into what appeared to be the living room of this cabin which they were in. The cabin had once belonged to Vaas, but of course he was now dead so no one owned it. Nick flew forward and went crashing through a wooden table. His weapon slipped from his hand and slid far along the wooden floor.

Nero approached Nick. "You killed my friends!" he said before slamming a size fourteen-and-a-half boot into Nick's rib cage. Nick let out a cry of pain as the force of Nero's kick sent him jolting up off the floor. "You will pay for what you have done!" Nero slammed his foot down onto Nick's back. Nick gasped, then rolled onto his back and kicked out with his left foot, but Nero grabbed his ankle. He pulled Nick's leg aside and kicked down hard on his crotch. Nick let out a squeal of pain and Nero released his foot. He grasped his aching crotch with both hands and went into the foetal position, allowing Nero to grab him by the collar of his t-shirt and the waistband of his trousers. He lifted him off the floor and threw him up into the ceiling like a cartoon character where Nick crashed back down again.

Nick had never been a good fighter. He'd always been more of a mechanic, and the fact that he had been tortured for the past few days didn't help either. Nero wrapped his big meaty hands around Nick's throat and lifted him once more, this time choking the life out of him. Nick tried to struggle but Nero was too strong. He was squeezing his neck so tight that Nick could feel his own eyes bulging out of his head, and his own pulse sounding through his ears. He kept gasping for air like a bird flying too high above the atmosphere, and he felt his life slipping from him. As the darkness began to creep into his peripheral vision, the front door to the cabin burst open, followed by the sound of an AK47 being fired. Next thing Nick knew, Nero had released him, and he was once again falling to the floor. He coughed violently, but couldn't comfort the aching sensation in his throat. Once he'd regained his breath, he looked up to see Nero's body resting up against the far wall, riddled with bullet holes. Standing at the door was Becky Williams holding an AK47, its barrel still smoking.

She smiled at him. "I believe the words you are looking for are 'Thank you.'" She didn't mean that. She and Nick shared a kind of rapport, and she wasn't going to hold a torture victim to his gratitude.

Natasha crawled out of the doorway, and Nick gave her a weak smile. "Everything is okay. Don't worry," Nick told her. Natasha saw Becky standing in the doorway holding her weapon, and she let out a slight squeal and crawled straight over to Nick to tuck herself under his arm. "Whoa, don't worry. She's friendly, I promise."

Becky stowed her gun in a hurry. "Oh, great, now I feel bad."

"Yeah, you should be. Fancy showing your ugly mug to a poor, innocent child," Nick joked.

It wasn't much of a joke. Becky gave him a solid glare. "You best be nicer to a woman with a gun," she said, also joking.

"Ain't that the truth."

Natasha looked up from hiding under Nick's arm and stared at Becky. "She won't hurt us?"

"No, I promise. Now come on, let's get out of here." Nick ushered Natasha to follow Becky, who was looking out of the cabin door. The battle had been over within seconds. Vaas had few men as it was, and the ponies had set up their own camp two miles away. Those made this battle an easy win for the resistance. When she gave the all clear, the trio exited the cabin with Nick holding Natasha's hand. Once outside, a soldier offered to take the little girl into town. Nick crouched down to ask her, "Will that be okay with you?"

Natasha shook her head. "You said you wouldn't leave me."

"It's fine. We'll take her," Becky said.

The soldier gave a nod and moved on, then Fidel and Raul approached them. "So this is the man we came to save?" asked Raul.

"One of them," said Becky. She told Nick, "Eddie's already with the medics."

Fidel lit a cigar and took a puff. "Good to see you're still alive."

"Yeah, wouldn't have been for much longer. Thank you for coming to get us." Nick let out a cough.

"No need to thank me. Thank this lovely woman to your right." Fidel pointed to Becky, who shied away from Nick.

"Yeah, she twisted our arm. Now can we get out of here? We need to get you patched up, fed, watered, then we need to start asking you some questions," said Raul.

"Sounds like a plan." Nick sighed with relief, then smiled to Becky. "Thank you."

Two soldiers had entered the cabin whilst Nick and the others had been talking and were now exiting with Citra, who was screaming and kicking. "Get off of me! Get off of me, you animals! Leave me, you pigs!"

"Bring her to me," Fidel said, beckoning with his hands. The guards dragged her over.

Nick said to Natasha, "I need you to go back inside the cabin for a moment. I promise I will come get you in a moment." Natasha gave a nod. She took Becky's hand and was led back inside the cabin.

"This is the infamous Citra? Inbred queen of the psychopaths?" Raul said. Citra spat in his face, and Raul's scowl deepened. He raised a hand at her. "You cheeky little puta!"

"Raul, calm yourself! We wish to kill her, not beat her," said Fidel.

"I want to do it," Nick said, gunning Citra a cold stare. Fidel didn't look too amazed as Nick explained. "The things I've seen this twisted bitch do. The things she was about to do. It would be a pleasure to take her twisted life."

Fidel sucked on his cigar, then handed his Magnum to Nick. Nick took a moment to admire it. Citra started screaming again, but there was nowhere she could go. "You piece of shit! Are you really going to kill a poor, unarmed, innocent woman?"

Nick shook his head. "Of course not. You're not innocent. You are a sick, twisted woman who deserves to be put down like the rabid dog she is." Before Citra could respond, Nick lifted the Magnum and squeezed the trigger. At this close range, the bullet practically destroyed her head with one blast. Citra's blood and brains sprayed all over the two soldiers holding her. Nick handed the gun back to Fidel and thanked him.

"No problem. It's about time we get back to base." Fidel holstered his weapon. "It's good to finally have met your acquaintance." He invited Nick into a firm handshake. For now, all seemed well for the resistance. The twisted brother and sister duo of Citra and Vaas were finally dead, and so were their men. One less enemy to worry about, but what the resistance were not aware of was the three pairs of eyes which were being laid upon them by three pony scouts. It would only be a matter of time before the resistance would unknowingly lead the ponies to their main HQ, and then, it would all be game over. Or would it?

Chapter Thirty-Seven.

Lost reprieve. In a mirror, Hispanically.

Vaas's camp had been hell. Nick splashed ice cold water onto his face, but it probably would have been more refreshing had he drunk it instead. He had just been patched up and had spent the past hour answering questions about what happened there, not that there was too much to tell from being locked up and tortured all the time. All he could really provide was a list of crimes for which Vaas could no longer be punished for. From the snoopy staff to the criminal pricing, hotel service was never that stellar even before the war, but it was a marked improvement in this case. Across the street was a large building with a huge sign labelled "Cuban HQ", and the hotel itself was used to house soldiers, so they could rest and freshen up.

Locking himself in his room, Nick gazed into the bathroom mirror, but he didn't see himself staring back through the mirror. He saw the weary shell of a man twice as old as himself. He was a ghost. The hell he had been through had taken its toll on him, chipping away at his very soul like a talentless sculptor, and all the best pieces lie in shards on the floor. He felt more hollow than a cheap chocolate bunny. He felt robbed of his humanity like a gas station, all because of some psychotic asshole and his twisted sibling. Have you ever been doing something, then along comes a pair of people with blind ideas they rope you

into, and then they keep deforming it, twisting their broken images along the way until you're running out of ways to patch up what's broken beyond repair?

Nick filled the bathroom sink with water, cupped it into his hands, and splashed it all over his face, spilling it down the neck of his shirt and across the counter and floor. The cool splash of the water made him feel like he was washing away all that he had seen whilst being Vaas's captive, until he looked in the mirror and once more saw the same, sorry face staring solemnly at him. He was interrupted from this navel-gazing by a knock on the door. After a pause, he called, "Who is it?" Cuban hotels had notoriously thin, sound-conductive walls.

"Open the door!"

Recognizing her, voice, Nick grabbed a hand towel and dried his face, then slipped on a white t-shirt as he made his way for the door. Becky was holding a six-pack of beer on the other side when he opened it. "Can I come in?"

Nick smiled. "Only if you're planning on sharing."

Becky pushed her way past Nick and took the liberty of making herself comfortable by sitting on his bed. She threw a bottle to Nick who caught it. He started to bite off the bottle cap, then remembered his molars were lost. He tried to twist it open, but the heat had rendered the bottle slippery with condensation, and those bottle companies were in league with the bottle opener manufacturers. Becky had noticed him raising the bottle to his lips first. "That's really bad for your teeth, you know."

The cap came off with a pop, but Nick nearly lost the bottle between his legs in the process. "The wellbeing of my teeth is the least of my worries."

"Got a bottle opener by any chance?" asked Becky.

Nick shook his head. "If you want, I can try to bite the cap off of your bottle."

"No, I would prefer it if you did not wrap your lips around my bottle."

Nick gave a slight chuckle. "Are you really implying that I should go find you a bottle opener?"

"If you were a true gentleman, then I would not need to imply anything. You would just act on initiative." Becky's words were what is known as a misconception. Telepathy is not a requisite of gentlemanly etiquette.

Nick rolled his eyes and placed his bottle down on a nightstand. "Be back in a minute," he said, exiting the room. He made his way down to the lobby, expecting to find a hotel manager or a bellboy or something. Once in the lobby, he realised that there were no staff; the only people here were the soldiers, and the only one he recognized was Eddie.

"I'm going for a smoke. Care to join me?" Eddie was holding up a carton of cigarettes. He'd just escaped death, but wanted another taste.

Nick gave a nod. "Need you ask?" The two exited the hotel lobby, and Eddie lit up two cigarettes, one of which he handed to him. There was a moment of silence between the two men, apart from the sucking of their lips and the exhaling of coarse smoke. Then Eddie spoke. "Feels weird, don't it? I never thought I would live to see my daughter again. Never get to see her smile or hear her laugh, and now I'm safe and sound."

"Hopefully you will get sent back to Moscow with that." Nick pointed with his cigarette to Eddie's patched-up leg. He inhaled another cloud of smoke. "Hell, maybe they will send us both back."

"That would be nice. Don't get me wrong, this island would be beautiful if it was not filled with so much death. I'm just glad I didn't die here." Eddie threw his cigarette to the floor and blew out some smoke. "I need to quit. Would hate to survive this island only to be killed by an unhealthy addiction." He smiled at his own joke. He couldn't quite muster up a full grin.

"Yeah, that would be a piss take."

Eddie let out a chuckle. "Yes it would. I remember once when—" Eddie's head was suddenly split open by a high-powered riffle bullet. His brains sprayed all over the hotel's masonry. Nick jumped like a deer into headlights as Eddie's body collapsed to the pavement. An explosion of sound hurled him from one moment to the next, and he was lost in a chorus of screaming and panic as gunfire filled the streets. Nick looked up, and on the horizon he could see an army of ponies. The invasion of Havana had begun.

Nick crawled behind an old grey, Sudanese sedan and used it as cover as the bullets began to rain down on his location. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't move, or he would be shot down by a few hundred ponies, and he couldn't return fire like the other Cuban resistance soldiers as he had no weapons on him. He was trapped, and at this moment in time, he was useless.

A Cuban soldier was running past the sedan when a grenade went off right under his feet. His body was sent up into the air and came crashing down inches away from Nick. Nick recoiled in terror as the body slammed to the concrete next to him and blood sprayed across him. He looked past this to the man's equipment: A Thompson (which had become a commonly-used weapon among the Cuban soldiers) with four spare ammo clips tucked into a bandolier, a M1911 Colt .45 handgun with three spare ammo clips, and two grenades and a combat knife. What a score! Along with this were other useful resources such as a water canteen, a map of the island, and a compass, which were all fitted into designated compartments into his ACUs. Nick grabbed the body and dragged it closer. He was about to start taking all the supplies when he noticed the man's cold, dead eyes staring at him. The man's eyes looked ready to pop from his face, and his mouth gaped in a grotesque "O". Nick let out a sigh and ran his hand over the man's face, closing his eyelids over his eyes. "Adios, amigo."

Nick unclipped the belt and harness and slipped it onto his own body before clipping it in place. The harness and belt held the grenades, the spare ammunition, and the combat knife, which was in a brown holster on the right breast and the M1911 Colt .45 which was in another brown holster over the left breast. He had to pry the Thompson out of the man's hands. He took a deep breath and peeked his head up over the bonnet of the sedan. All he could see was Cuban soldiers firing up at the surrounding hills and jungle, as well as ponies returning fire. Numbers were taking heavy hits for both sides, and it seemed as if the two were at a stalemate. That was all he had time to see before another burst of bullets flew at him and dug their way into the sedan's bonnet. He ducked back down with a curse. Even if he was armed, he was still pinned down. He needed an exit strategy, and there was no time like the present.

Meanwhile, further down the road at the HQ, Fidel was watching the sudden burst of carnage from his huge office window. His office was located on the thirteenth floor of the HQ, granting him a good field of view over the city below. Fidel shook his head with a sorrowful sigh. "And so it begins."

The door to his office burst open, and Fidel turned to see Raul standing in the doorway. "Father, get away from the window!"

"Don't worry; I'm quite safe up here."

Raul moved over to his father and peered out of the window. "Oh dear, oh dear. I didn't realise it was that bad! Look how many there are." He clucked his tongue.

Fidel gave a nod in agreement and rocked on his heels. "They seem to have us greatly outnumbered."

"Father, we need a plan of action. If we stay here, we will be slaughtered."

Fidel gave yet another nod, letting out a thoughtful hum. "That is true, but look. We have nowhere to run. We have ponies coming at us from the front as well as both sides, and behind us is the ocean. We have nowhere to run."

"Then we must push them back as far as possible. We can't say pinned down here for *too* long. All they need to do is land a few good heavy artillery shots on us, and we will be screwed."

Fidel turned to his son. "Well, get to it. You know what to do. Come get me when we are ready to move out."

Raul gave his father a scowl. "This is not a joke! We are in some deep mierda here!"

"I know, and by the looks of things, we are most likely not going to make it out of this alive, but I have led a long and tiring life filled with war and all the horrors it brings with it. I have never let it get to me too much, and I will be damned if I'm going to let it get to me now. I have every bit of confidence in you, mi hijo. I believe that if anyone can lead us out of this corner we seemed to have backed ourselves into, then it's you, and if not, then it is simply fate: A fate which I accept. Until we are either moving out of here or until those bastards come to take my head, I am just going to sit here, enjoy a nice cigar, and finish off the eight-year-old scotch I got tucked away in my desk. Now go, my son, and do me proud." During his awe-inspiring speech, Fidel sat behind his desk and lit a cigar.

Raul shook his head and gave a slight chuckle. "You really are one stubborn old bastardo, you know that right? See, I said 'bastardo' because we speak Spanish."

Fidel let out a "hm" then extracted a bottle of scotch and a glass from the bottom drawer of his desk. The other drawers had other kinds of liquors or else small arms. "Of course I know that. It's one of my many personal qualities. Now, I believe you have a battle to win." He shooed his son with a little gesture from his hand. Raul turned and left his father in peace, then Fidel turned in his office chair and kicked the floor to send himself hurtling across the room to look out of the window. He took a slow sip of scotch and said, "I fucking hate ponies."

Nick had had enough of being pinned down and decided he was going to make a dash for the hotel doors. It looked easy enough as they were only a few meters away. However, so far during his time being stuck behind the sedan, he had seen four soldiers leave through the main doors, and all four of them had been instantly shot dead. In fact, their corpses had all piled up together in a handicapped parking space. Nick steeled himself with a deep breath. "Okay, Nick, you got this, buddy. You got

this. It's easy. You're just going to drag your sorry ass though those doors as fast as you possibly can, and then everything will be fine. Hopefully. We'll just do it on the count of three."

"Three."

"Two."

"One!"

Nick leapt to his feet and charged for the doors. His heart raced as he could feel the enemy's bullets narrowly missing him. He was inches away from the door when a mortar shell came crashing down on the hotel's entrance where it gave off a soul-sucking blast. He was sent flying back to the sedan by the force of the explosion that the mortar created. It let out a wheeze of a crunch like only a heavy collision with a car can make, and Nick let out a groan. He was okay, besides the ringing in his ears and the high rate in which his heart was beating. He sat up and looked to the hotel, shaken and stirred. The hotel's front entrance had been completely caved in, and it looked as if the whole building was going to topple over. Birdie, I swear to god wherefore means "why" and it's the stupidest thing ever. A soldier came staggering outside, carrying in his right hand his left arm which had come off in the blast. "Ryan! Where are you, Ryan?" the man was screaming. He turned his head in Nick's direction, and Nick let out a gasp. Not only had the man lost his arm in the explosion, but his nose, lips and eyes had all been demolished by its blast too. It was totally nasty and gross, bro. Then man staggered for a few steps before a bullet to the head finished him off. The hell that Nick thought he had escaped had come back, and this time it seemed as if it was planning on taking his life.

Scootaloo had been watching from the high hilltop since the battle began. She had an evil smile and an over-glorified stance. Apple Bloom was not as enthusiastic. "This is the plan? Just attack straight off the bat and hope it works?"

Scootaloo's smile didn't waver at this dissent. "Of course not. This is just to let them know that we know exactly where they are hiding. We'll just send a few waves of infantry at them, sink a few mortar shells into their streets, then clear off and make them think we retreated. We may have been aged prematurely and earned out cutie marks, but we can still become the cutie mark crusader guerrillas!"

"But of course we won't be retreating, right?" asked Sweetie Belle.

"Of course not. We hide and we wait for them to move their nucular devices," said Apple Bloom.

"How do we even know it is here?" asked Sweetie Belle.

"We don't. Not for certain. Vaas told me that he had some intel on the whereabouts of said nucular device, even though he seemed to have a *lot* of trouble finding the whereabouts of Fidel Castro. If this information is not accurate then we simply retreat back to camp and work on finding it. That could take a long time, but if it is here then I assume they will try to move the device, and that is when we shall hit them with everything we got." Scootaloo punched one front hoof against the other, clearly looking forward to the final part of her plan over everything else.

"So our whole plan is based on a piece of intel that may or may not be correct?" asked Sweetie Belle.

"Eeyup. Pretty much," said Scootaloo.

Apple Bloom shook her head. "That plan really does not sound too great. It can easily be countered if the humans work it out."

"I suppose it can." Scootaloo was too busy admiring the carnage that was ensuing on the battlefield too even care what Apple Bloom had to say.

"Scootaloo, when exactly do we start retreating?" asked Sweetie Belle.

"Give it a few more minutes. I'm enjoying this."

"We are too exposed out here! We did not spend this long getting trained just so you can have us killed in our first real battle!" snapped Apple Bloom.

"Relax, would you? You're starting to really bring down the mood!" said Scootaloo, who felt her mood was more important than the wellbeing of those around her. Like many immature people, she wanted to drag others down with her own stupid suicidal tendencies, like someone walking hand-in-hand across a street without looking both ways just so he or she can push his or her friend in the way of an oncoming truck in their stead.

"Look, you are not in charge! All three of us share that responsibility, so don't go acting all high and mighty! We all say what goes, not just you!" Apple Bloom said.

Scootaloo sighed and said, through gritted teeth, "Fine." She turned to two other units of pony infantry containing around one hundred ponies altogether as well as two Rhino tanks. "You, attack! The rest of us fall back!" she ordered. The infantry did as they were told and Scootaloo turned to Apple Bloom. "Happy now?"

"Very."

The rest of the ponies fell back amidst the trees while the selected infantry charged at the Cuban city of Havana, giving fierce battle cries and firing tank shells. The first attack was nearly over. Unfortunately for the resistance, it would only get worse; much worse.

"We need to get out there now, men!" Raul Castro was in the Cuban military headquarters. Soldiers all around him were gearing up with Thompson's, AK47's, Browning's, RPG's and the occasional Springfield riffle. Raul moved through the men quickly to the side exit of the barracks which came out the side of the HQ.
Elian Gonzales, Raul's half-brother, was by the doors waiting with a few dozen men and a shiny gold AK47 that Fidel had engraved with the phrase, "You will always be a son to Cuba."

"Elian, are these men ready?" Raul asked.

Elian gave a nod. "Si." That was Spanish for "Yes."

"Good. Wait on a few more men and possibly an RPG or two before taking them out to join the fight."

"How many ponies are out there?" asked Elian.

"A few hundred. Maybe more."

"It shall be a glorious victory for us then, once we slaughter all these bastardos."

Raul gave a grin before turning away with the sole announcement, "I'm going to get the task force!"
It took him a few minutes to find out where the Task Force was, and now he was on his way to get them. They were in their own little barracks which were located the next floor up from the armoury, which was next door to the main barracks. He entered to find the five members of the task force preparing themselves for battle.

Their leader, Rodrigo Marques, was checking the iron sights of his AK-12 assault riffle when he saw Raul enter. Rodrigo put his weapon over his shoulder by the shoulder strap and moved towards him, giving a nod as he did so. "Sir," said Rodrigo as he stood straight and gave Raul a solid salute. This was English for "Sir". Rodrigo was a tall Latino man with black, short hair and brown eyes. On his left ring finger he wore a wedding ring, and on his middle he wore a ring of the Federation Alliance. The federation was the name of his task force, and all members wore the ring to show it.

"Captain Marques, I need your task force out there as soon as possible. We got what looks like a full scale invasion on our hands."

Rodrigo gave a nod. "I thought there was something up, with all the screaming and gunfire and the building being on alert. Is there any particular objective for my men that you would like to be completed, or is this just a simple defensive play?"

"Defensive play. Truth is, we need every soldier we can get out there. And we need them now" admitted Raul.

Rodrigo gave yet another nod. "Yes, sir. We will be out there in under five."

"Good. I'll see you out there." Raul gave Rodrigo a gentle pat on the shoulder before leaving the private barracks.

Rodrigo turned to his squad. "Federation, fall in!" he ordered, stating the name of his task force to get the attention of his soldiers. They didn't actually operate on a federation because Cuba was a communist nation and a federation typically consists of more than five people. The first was a man named Pedro Gonzales, the second in command of the task force and a loyal and brave soldier. He was also Rodrigo's oldest and best friend. The next a tall and slender woman with a rugged beauty to her by the name of Chrissie Montiero. She was the hidden gem of the squad and Rodrigo's wife. After her were Gonzarlo Santiago and Juan Martinez, two excellent soldiers with a lot of heart that proved it so.

"Okay, men," began Rodrigo. Chrissie cleared her throat to let herself be known. Rodrigo smiled and started over. "Okay, men, and Chrissie." Chrissie mouthed the words "thank you" and Rodrigo continued. "Our mission here is simple: We defend this HQ at all costs."

"Is that it?" asked Juan.

"It is."

"Isn't that job best made for the soldiers who are signed up to do that sort of thing?" asked Gonzarlo.

"He has a point sir. It seems a bit like grunt work," said Chrissie.

"I know it appears that way, but that is our order and so we must follow it. I know we didn't join this war so we would have to run around shooting ponies, and instead only do all the cool, extravagant and celebrity soldier work, but them's the breaks sometimes," Rodrigo said.

"I thought we were here to defend the nuclear weapons," said Pedro.

"That is our overall goal, yes," said Rodrigo.

"So surely we would be better off defending that. I mean, this just seems like a waste of our skills, protecting citizens and taking the fight directly to the enemy," Pedro said. Juan agreed, and Gonzarlo seconded that.

"Okay, that's enough. I agree completely, but this is our order. Now suck it up, and let's get out there and kill some ponies so that we can return to our overall objective," said Rodrigo. The squad all gave a nod and a glum affirmation.

Nick might have appreciated the intercession of a specialized task force to rescue him, as he was still pinned down behind the old and now bullet-ridden sedan. The sound of gunfire and the dying screams of ponies and men alike threatened to not let up. His ears were ringing after the countless explosions that went off around him, and his head felt several sizes too big. He kept his head down low behind the sedan and his gaze on the hotel lobby doors which were engulfed by fire. From inside, he could hear the painful cries of dying men. He needed to get in there. He needed to know if Becky was alive. He took a deep breath. "Come on, Nick, we can do this," he said to himself as he got ready to jump to his feet. He took another few moments to breathe, then closed his eyes and let his body's instincts take over. He jumped to his feet and charged towards the hotel lobby entrance once again. This is when he opened his eyes. Now he knew it was too late to go back. The only way was forward. Forward through the gates of Hell.

Nick leapt through the flames which guarded the lobby entrance. For a split second the intense heat of the flames gave him a strong pain, but luckily none managed to latch onto him. He landed on his feet and rolled forward. The inside of the lobby looked worse than the outside. It was coated with thick black smoke, and part of the ceiling had collapsed down, trapping and killing a group of soldiers. He looked to the fire escape stairs and immediately made his way up them. He had to find Becky before it was too late.

Raul re-joined Elian at the barracks exit. He took hold of an M16, a rare weapon on this island, and he cocked it. "You ready?" he asked.

"Ready, but where are the task force?" asked Elian. "The Americans kidnap them or something?"

"Trust me, they'll be out there. Now let's go show them fuckers who they are messing with."

Joel gave a nod and Raul kicked open the door and let out a battle cry that sounded like "Auweeauweeauk!" He then charged out into the battlefield with Elian and around four dozen soldiers. Raul and his men unleashed a barrage of return fire which cut through the Equestrian soldiers. "Find some cover and get some heavy fire on those tanks!" Raul said as a tank shell flew past him and landed at the feet of four soldiers behind him. The soldiers were sent flying up into the air, their limbs departing from their bodies and their lives shortly following. Raul dropped to his knees and slid a few feet until he ended up behind what was once a house, but now remained only as a single wall. He jumped to his feet and slammed his body against the wall for cover. Elian and a soldier who looked to be in his early thirties joined him behind the wall.

"Raul! We need to get rid of those tanks! They are doing us some real damage!" Elian had to shout over the sound of the battle. "Probably taken from the Americans, as usual."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Raul asked. "We need to get an RPG down here!"

"The RPG guys keep getting their asses blown up! We need a different strategy!" said Elian.

"Unless you can take a tank out with your bare hands, I highly doubt we have another option!" That is when Rodrigo, Chrissie and Pedro came charging over to the wall. "Captain Rodrigo Marques! You're just in time!" Raul said.

"What do you need, sir?" asked Rodrigo.

"We need help in disposing of these tanks!" Raul pointed at a tank that was rolling over a school bus and shooting at an orphanage.

"Where are the rest of your men?" asked Elian. Rodrigo pointed across the road to the other three members of his squad who were helping wounded soldiers get safely to cover.

"How are we going to take the tanks, boss?" asked Chrissie with no small degree of self-confidence.

"You know the drill. Pedro, have you got your smoke grenades ready?" Rodrigo asked.

Pedro smiled and pulled out two smoke canisters. "Do you even have to ask?"

Rodrigo gave a nod. "Good. Federation, move out!"

Becky stumbled out of Nick's hotel room. Her ears rang, her vision was blurred, and she could barely breathe because of all the smoke. Soldiers constantly pushed past her, rushing back and forth looking for a way out. A lot of them made it to the fire exit stairs but for some reason seemed to not help anyone else. The building constantly let out groans and occasionally ceilings would collapse down. The building was coming down, and at this point everyone saw this as an “every man for himself” moment. Becky continued to stumble along the hallway, coughing frantically and occasionally tripping over. She gasped for help as it became even harder to talk due to the fact every time she opened her mouth, the black smoke crept down her throat and burned it. The fumes were becoming too much for her. Her head started to swirl, and her legs gave out on her. She collapsed to her knees and fell back against the hallway wall. She really ought to have kept low, the way children are instructed to do in case of fire. Eventually she could feel herself slowly starting to not breathe. Her heart started to slow in her chest, and her throat started to swell. The darkness of the smoke was now not the only thing that was blocking out her sight. The darkness that came with a person’s life fleeing their body also played a part in it too.[30]

Then when everything seemed hopeless, Becky felt a strong hand on her arm, and a firm and familiar voice came through the darkness. "Oh no, you don't! I've lost too many people. I'm not losing you too!" Becky felt herself being lifted up high, and it felt as if she was placed onto someone's shoulders. "Becky, stay with me! Come on! I'm going to get you out of here. Just hold on!" She felt herself being carried at a great speed out down a few flights of stairs. A quick burst of heat swept across her body before she was taken out of the building and into the blinding sunlight. The sounds of the creaking building and people slowly suffocating were replaced with the sounds of gunfire and explosions, and the thick smoke was replaced with clean, oxygenated air.

Becky gasped as she inhaled the fresh air, and then felt herself being gently lowered onto a cold, hard surface, and her vision slowly started to come back to her. A blurry figure appeared in line of sight and the familiar voice came once again. "Becky, breath[31] slowly, slowly in through the nose, and out through the mouth. Come on, you can do it.” She did as she was told, and with each deep breath she took, she was met with a coughing fit. "Come on! Slowly! Breath, you hear me? Breath!"

Becky slowed her breathing, and her vision finally came back to normal. Her heart raced quicker than usual after the sudden near-death experience, but apart from that she seemed as if she was going to be okay. Becky could now see her rescuer: It was Nick. “Nick," she gasped. “You saved me.”

"Yes. Yes, I'm here, don't worry. Just focus on breathing."

Meanwhile, Pedro pulled the pin on both of his smoke canisters before throwing them out in front of the two Rhino tanks. Each one hissed out an equal measure of obfuscating smoke as Rodrigo barked out orders. "Chrissie, let's move! Raul, give us covering fire!" He darted out from behind the wall, Chrissie followed closely after him, and Raul and Joel poked around the wall to give Rodrigo covering fire. Rodrigo charged directly at the first tank, using the smoke to conceal himself, whilst Chrissie moved, unnoticed, past it and towards the second tank. Rodrigo leapt out from the smoke and landed on the top of the tank. There was a pony on the heavy MG on the front of the tank, and it reacted quickly to Rodrigo's sudden surprise attack. The pony spun the MG towards Rodrigo's direction and started to open fire, but he rolled to the side to avoid the first burst of fire, narrowly missing rolling off of the edge of the tank altogether.

As the pony came around for a second burst of fire, Rodrigo made his attack. He kicked his right leg out, catching the barrel of the MG. This sent the MG jolting to the side so that it was no longer aiming towards him. He then kicked brought his left leg up and slammed it down into the pony’s face. Its head jolted back as it fell unconscious. The tank driver had realised what was going on and decided to make an attack of its own. It swung the cannon of the tank around, slamming it into Rodrigo's side. He was thrown off of the tank's body work and fell backwards, throwing his arms out. He managed to grab onto the tank's cannon with his right hand, and now he was dangling off of the tank's cannon. The driver moved the cannon back and forth rapidly in an attempt to shake Rodrigo off, but he used all of his strength to hold on until the driver gave up and concocted a new plan. He started to reverse the tank backwards towards the lines of Equestrian soldiers in the hopes that one would shoot Rodrigo off of the tank. "Mierda!" cursed Rodrigo.

"What the hell is he doing?" asked Raul as he tried to take down as many ponies as he could see that were lining up shots on Rodrigo.

"Trust me, he has got this under control! Just keep up the cover fire!" said Pedro.

Raul took down another four ponies with his ammo clip before exchanging it with a fresh one.
"He looks like he's in trouble!" said Private Dixon, the soldier in his early thirties who was taking cover behind the wall with Raul and Elian.

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[30] Citation needed.
[31] Sic.

"Like I said! He knows what he is doing!" said Pedro.

Rodrigo clung onto the tank's cannon with his right hand whilst he moved his left hand to his belt where he kept three grenades. He pulled one of the grenades from his belt and moved it up towards his mouth. He then locked his teeth onto the pin of the grenade, and with one quick jolt of his head, he removed the pin from the grenade. "Viva La Federation!" Rodrigo spat the pins of the grenade out of his mouth then slammed them down into the chute of the cannon before letting go and dropping to the floor. The grenade rolled down the barrel of the cannon before landing next to the tank driver inside the tank. The tank driver let out one final curse before the grenade went off and the tank went up in flames. Rodrigo leapt to his feet and charged back towards the wall where Raul and the others were taking cover. He slid behind the wall and gave the men a smile. "Well, that was easy."

Chrissie charged out in front of her tank, lifting her IA-2 riffle, and fired off quick shots at the tank's heavy MG gunner. Before the heavy gunner could react, he received three quick rounds to the chest. Chrissie then threw her weapon over her shoulder and sprinted towards the tank. The tank's cannon aimed towards her, but before it could fire, she dropped to her knees, leant all the way back so that the back of her head touched the ground, and she slid straight underneath the tank. As she went under, Chrissie managed to attach three quick Semtex grenades onto the bell of the tank. The tank moved away from her before the Semtex grenades went off, and went up in flames just like the other one had. Chrissie quickly rolled into a ditch that had been created by a mortar shell and took cover.

Rodrigo laughed at the funny scene. "That's my girl."

"Damn, you guys are good," said Elian.

"I agree, sir! That was some next level shit, sir!" said Private Dixon.

"We are the Federation. Being badass is what we do," said Rodrigo.

Raul turned to face all his men that were on his side of the battlefield. "Come on, men! Let's show them what happens when they mess with Cuban soldiers!" he roared. The men cheered before charging forward to take out the remaining ponies. The battle was surely going to be a victory for the Cuban Resistance. However, this was only the beginning of a very deadly war; one that threatened to see the Cubans defeated. But only time would tell. Dun dun DUNNN!

Chapter Thirty-Eight.

Planning stages. Nick is a team player. You must have your AA sponsor to read this chapter.

Villages burned and families had died, but the battle was over. An hour had passed since the attack and Raul, Rodrigo, Elian and Fidel were all in Fidel's office while those men best suited to the task by government standards worked on cleaning up the destruction and the dead. "You did fine work out there today, men. I am very proud," he was saying to them while opening a bottle of seven-year-old scotch and lining up four empty glasses. This was difficult to do with only two hands, but he'd had plenty of practice.

"The ponies eased up once they realised we were not going down easy." Raul smirked a smirky smirk.

Fidel filled each of the glasses. "Indeed. You put on a great defensive play. I am truly proud to call you my son. Especially you, Elian! We may not be related by blood, but you will always be like a son to me."
Fidel filled each glass halfway before screwing the lid back on the bottle. He handed the first glass to Elian, then took two of the remaining glasses and hand one to Raul and the other to Rodrigo. This meant that everyone in the room had a glass. Rodrigo thanked him. Fidel took the third and final glass for himself before raising it. "To Cuba!"

"To Cuba!" repeated the other men. All four men then drank their scotch before placing the empty glasses on the table with a synchronous clink. Fidel moved behind his desk and sat himself in his comfy wingback office chair. "Now we must look forward and decide what it is we are going to do come sunrise."

"I think we should just get the men prepared and set up in defensive positions," said Raul.

Fidel gave a nod. "That could work."

Rodrigo held up his arm until Fidel called upon him. "The way I see it, the ponies eased up on us to make us think we have the upper hand here. I feel they will try to make another attack once we get men set up in defensive positions."

"So what is it you suggest we do?" asked Raul.

"I'm actually right now in the middle of suggesting we load up all our men, ammunition and the nuke. And we transport it to the harbour on the other side of the island" replied Rodrigo.

"Wait, why the harbour?" asked Raul, interrupting a second time.

"Then we can transport it overseas to somewhere more safe, like Moscow perhaps. Because Cuba is an island, we have to go across the ocean to reach other places like Russia."

"But surely moving it would be too risky," Raul said.

"My son has a point," said Fidel. "The Russians gave me those nukes as a birthday present to threaten the U.S. While the ponies are the only threat today, it is too risky to move the nuclear device, especially when that is what they are after."

Rodrigo gritted his teeth. "That is why I suggested we take all our men—"

"What? To use them as cannon fodder whilst we slip away with the nuke?" asked Raul.

"That's what soldiers exist for! There are casualties in war. There is no avoiding that. I am simply suggesting we make it impossible for the ponies to obtain the nuke. If that means a few hundred soldiers die whilst moving the nuke, then it's sad to say, but it's better than the ponies obtaining the nuke and killing thousands, possibly millions more." Rodrigo looked around at everyone. "Over the past years of the war, the ponies have been more vigilant than ever. They thought Germany would survive, but it fell. Then Hainan fell, then New York. We are isolated out here."

Elian scoffed. "Soldiers exist just to wave guns at little kids. Not *our* army, obviously."

Fidel patted him on the shoulder. "As delicious as it would be to claim the American territories, I fear Moscow may be our best bet."

"You can't be serious! Father, tell him we will not sacrifice our men!" Raul pleaded with Fidel, who remained silent as he thought over the whole idea. It made sense to him, and he could see that the sacrifice of the men's lives would not be in vain. Raul shouted "Father!" again when Fidel took too long to reply.

Fidel sighed. He wasn't the only one for whom Raul was getting on his nerves. "Of course not. We cannot do it."

Raul smiled and cheered, clasping his hands together in gratitude. "Thank you! I can't believe you would even think of that." He shot an accusatory look Rodrigo's way.

"Raul, Elian, could you leave us for a moment please? I just need to discuss some matters with Mr Marques," Fidel said.

Raul gave a reluctant nod. "Okay. If you need me, I'll be among my men." Then he and Elian left.

"I know, son, I know." Fidel gave his son a nod, and Rodrigo gave him a salute. Once the doors had been shut behind Raul and Elian, Fidel held a hand out to offer Rodrigo a seat. He then reached back over and took hold of the scotch bottle once again, filling up two of the glasses a second time to share with Rodrigo. "My son is a fine soldier, but as a leader, he has no sense of what must be done. He is not like you or I. We know what must be done for the greater good of others. Do you follow me?"

Rodrigo shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure what you're getting at here, sir."

"My son believes that battles are won with numbers, but we both know that is not true. Battles are won with tactics. They are won by men who are not afraid to do what they must to win." As Fidel sipped his scotch, Rodrigo continued to stare at him with a blank expression.

After a pregnant pause, Rodrigo said, "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, I'm not sure where you're going with this."

Fidel frowned. "We were having a conversation just a few minutes ago? You said you wanted to escort the nuke to the harbour to bring to the Human Resistance in Moscow? My son complained about the soldiers who would die, then I just said we weren't afraid of sacrifice?"

Rodrigo took a second to catch up. "Are you saying that we should go with my plan?"

Fidel gave a slow nod. "Yes, but my son cannot know what we are doing."

"Sir, with all due respect, I think even your son will notice when we start to leave men behind on the battlefield. It's not something we can just slip past him."

"I know that, but maybe we could trick him into thinking we are trying our best to keep every man alive."

"But like I said, there are always casualties in war. What Raul wants is for nobody to ever die, ever. That's unrealistic and childish. How would we do that?"

Fidel took another sip of the scotch and belched. "We all have to make great sacrifices, especially in times like this. It is of vital importance that people make sacrifices all the time." Fidel stopped again to take an even bigger gulp of the scotch. Tears

built up in his eyes, but he fought them back. "My son won't leave his men behind, but we need them left behind to ensure that this nuke reaches the harbour with ease."

"Sir, are you suggesting we leave your son among the men?" Rodrigo asked. “He’s your own son.”

"I am well aware of that, but he is arrogant. He will refuse to leave the men to die. I know him. He was being stubborn about rescuing men just for the simple fact he thought he would lose more men in doing so, and even that was tearing him up inside. I hate to say it, but he just isn't cut out for this. He doesn't get the overall big picture. All he ever tries to do is save as many men as possible, not even thinking about the consequences.”

Rodrigo drank the entire contents of his glass in one go before handing the glass back to Fidel. "Well, if you are okay with that, then I guess I am too.”

"Good, but he can't know.” Fidel tapped the side of his nose. “We have to make him think he is going to be saving lives. Hell, let him go out a hero.” He finished off his glass of scotch.

Rodrigo gave a firm nod before standing up and saluting Fidel. "Thank you, sir," said Rodrigo before turning and leaving the office.

Fidel sat in silence for a few minutes, his mind filled with images of his son growing up. He smiled to himself before sliding his glass across his desk and embracing the entire bottle of scotch. "To Raul Castro, my son, a hero among villains." Fidel then finished off the rest of the bottle of scotch. Tomorrow would be a loss either way. Tomorrow he would lose his last remaining son by birth.

As Fidel drowned his dread in malt liquor, the main hall of the Cuban HQ was filled with great merriment. Men danced on tables and sang obscene songs whilst downing their alcoholic beverages. To them the day had been a victory earned and not given to them by the ponies. How completely oblivious they were to the ponies’ plans.

Nick sat alone in the corner of the room. In front of him he had three empty beer bottles which he had earlier indulged in, and he was now onto his forth. Whilst everyone was merry about surviving the battle and thanking the gods they were alive, Nick just sat depressed. Since he had arrived in Cuba, so far everyone he had become friends with was dead. All except Becky. She instead was in the medical bay and would be for another three days on the account of nearly suffocating in a burning building. So now Nick was alone. He thought of his friends in Delta squad, or the old Delta squad at least, and he wondered how they were doing. Considering he had received no word on anyone's condition over there, he assumed they were all still okay.
He pictured Tom with his family, a huge smile plastered across his face as he watched his daughter run around and chase butterflies whist his girlfriend dished up a tasty meal. Then he pictured Tyrone on stage “singing” his famous rap songs for a crowd of star-stricken women at his feet, practically throwing themselves at him. Then Irish, sat with Logan, cracking jokes about the old days whilst downing a few good beers and trying to pull whatever married women came across their paths. And finally, he imagined Daniel. Dead, for all he knew. Oblivious to the pain and suffering going on around him. Just him and his thoughts in a quiet and painless abyss.

Nick raised his bottle slightly and lowered his head. He then proceeded to mutter a silent prayer which entailed the safety of his friends, before downing what was left of his fourth beer. He sighed and struggled to his feet before staggering over to the bar for yet another beer. His only plan for the night was to drown his sorrows and possibly pass out so he could maybe get a good night’s sleep for the first time in a long time.

Raul and Elian were in Raul's private quarters. They too were drinking, except they were drinking the good vintage scotch that Raul's father loved to keep stockpiled. In the room with them were three very beautiful young Latino women. Two were sat cuddled up to Raul and one was sat on Elian's lap, and all were laughing. Elian and Raul were sharing funny and courageous stories about each other, and the women were growing ever more entertained.

"Oh, I got one, I got one," said Elian after the laughter had died down from one of Raul's stories.

"Well, go on then, my friend. The floor is, as they say, yours." Raul was very intoxicated.

"Okay. Okay. Okay, well, it was back when me and Raul were around, I don't know, sixteen, maybe,” Elian began.

"Oh, god, no, not this story." Raul chuckled loudly as he had a pretty good idea of what story his friend was about to share.

"No, no, no, trust me, it's good!”

"I know; I was there, wasn't I?"

"Anyway! Anyway, so me and Raul here are, well, we're ‘attending a party' that we were not invited to. See, Raul had this long-time beef with the guy who ran the party, and, well, while we are there, he…" Elian lost himself in drunken laughter before he could finish his sentence. Raul joined his friend in laughter as he knew what was coming.

"Well, go on," said one of the women.

"What's so funny?" asked another one, screwing up her face.

Elian took a while to regain his breath and still his laughter. "Right, okay, well, old Raul here managed to get the guy's girlfriend to go to bed with him. Turns out they ended up shagging in the guy's bed, and he walked in on them!" Elian laughed and laughed. "And the guy was American! Isn't that great?" Raul continued to join him whilst the women looked blankly at each other. The story was not funny at all. In fact, it was found to be more repulsive to the women than funny. However, the men were way too drunk, and to them it was hilarious. They believed it was the very epitome of comedy, although knowing what passed for television before the ponies' infiltration of the planet, it was hard to blame them.

Feeling as if she was missing something, one of the women said, "That's not funny." The men ignored her and continued to laugh.

"Yeah, I'm going to go now," said the woman who was sat on Elian's knee. The men still ignored their women as they were nearly dying of laughter.

"Yeah, I'll join you," said one of Raul's women as she got up and followed Elian's out. The men continued to laugh for a few moments.

When the laughter did finally die down Raul and Elian looked around. "Well, there goes those hoes," said Joel, following through with a belch.

Raul turned to the final girl who remained at his side. "At least I got this beauty," he said with a fairly creepy grin.

"Okay, I'm going to go as well." The "beauty" moved away from Raul and climbed to her feet.

Elian laughed at Raul as Raul pleaded with her. "Oh baby, why? We can have so much fun!"

As she was leaving she passed Fidel who was on his way to see his son. "Oh hell, Sir Castro."

Fidel gave the woman a nod. "Evening. Is my son in there?"

The woman gave a disappointed look and gave a nod. She was in a very giving mood. "Yes, he is, and he is very, very drunk." She gave him a weak smile before leaving.

"That's my son alright. Thanks." Fidel took a deep breath before proceeding into his son's room where he wasn't immediately noticed, and he thought about turning around and leaving. He had come to see his son one last time before the next day's events claimed him, but as soon as he laid eyes on his son and his happy nature, his heart sank and he couldn't bring himself to engage him in conversation. In fact, he turned to leave when Raul spotted him.

"Ah, Father has come to visit us, Elian!" he called out.

Fidel sighed and turned back to face the two drunken nincompoops. "I just wanted to make sure you were alright. That's all."

"Why wouldn't I be? I got my friends, my drink, and my women. Well, I *did* have my women. They weren't so entertained." Raul snickered.

"Can I talk to you for a moment in private?" asked Fidel.

"No. Elian is here. If something needs to be said, it can be said in front of your pampered adoptee."

"Son, please."

"No, Father! After our talk upstairs with Mr Marques, you really think I'm not still mad? Leave the soldiers of the Cuban army alone!"

"I already told you we aren't going to do that," Fidel *lied.*

"Wait, are you still going on about that?" asked Elian.

"Don't worry your pretty head about it, son," Fidel said. "Don't let me trifle you with trivial family matters."

"Actually, it's not a family matter though, is it, Father? In fact, I'm pretty sure it affects quite a few people outside of our family, don't you?"

"Look, son, just stop, okay? You're embarrassing yourself, and I don't want to argue with you."

"Then piss off, and we won't have any arguments."

Fidel lowered his head and sighed. He could control what the population thought, but he couldn't control his own son. This wasn't how he wanted his last conversation with his son to go. "Is that really how you feel?" he asked.

"Yes, it is! Now please leave. We have some drinking to get to," Raul said.

Fidel gave a nod. "Okay." He turned and made his way towards the door to the room. He turned his head back to his son. "I know you're mad, son, but just remember: I do love you." He then made his exit. Raul ignored his father and went back to drinking.

Meanwhile, the three ponies had broken off from their camp a few miles away in order to scout out what the humans were getting up to, and so far all they could hear was the resistance soldiers with their merrymaking. This angered Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle, who took offense to humans celebrating their survival. "Do you hear that?" Sweetie Belle said.

"Yes! It sounds like they are having a fucking party!" said Apple Bloom, even though she'd been raised to refrain from curse language.

"Relax. Relax," said Scootaloo, who enjoyed pretending she was the level-headed member of the group. Like the word "literally" or the word "don't" in the sentence "Television programmes exclusive to digital streaming services don't suck," "relax" is a word which is frequently used incorrectly. Everyone knows that while a dictionary would describe relaxation as a lessening of stress, people use the word relax to invoke stress like a jinx or a spell. It's like asking someone to stop scratching an itch after fanning them in poison ivy.

"Relax? Relax! They think they have beaten us! They act like they have beaten us!" said Apple Bloom.

"So what? Leave them to their own stupidity. It will be their downfall," said Scootaloo, using a similar tactic as some people do to cope with homophobia, pollution, and drug use.

"If they think they have won, then that means they feel like they are unbeatable. They actually feel like they won the battle today," said Sweetie Belle. "As everypony knows, thinking something makes it true!"

"So what? Like I said, it will only lead to their demise in the long run," said Scootaloo, who was showing signs of agitation such as repeating herself a lot.

"Yes, but what if they feel they are safe enough as they are, and that they don't need to move their nuke?" asked Apple Bloom.

"If that happens then we just go in and take it by force."

"So what you're saying is we wasted the lives of two hundred ponies today," said Apple Bloom.

"Oh, well relax. We got plenty more where they came from." Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle both dropped their jaws at Scootaloo's remark. The pegasus decided to act innocent, knowing full well that what she said was stupid and wrong. "What?"

"And where exactly do we get all these ponies from, anyway?" asked Sweetie Belle. "You still think the stork brings 'em?"

"They are not just some pawns in your little game of chess! They are Equestrians, like me and you, and their lives are worth ten of the humans! We cannot treat them like they are expendable!" said Apple Bloom.

Scootaloo smiled. She was revelling in the disbelief of her fellow Cutie Mark Crusaders. "They are kind of expendable. Look at any battle we have won against the humans. If you calculate the death toll, we seem to always have more casualties on our side than they do."

"That will not be what happens here on this island! We will be good leaders, and we will make sure that everypony's life is cherished and considered when in battle!" said Apple Bloom. Sweetie Belle nodded.

Scootaloo let out a wheezy sort of chuckle. "Knowing when to sacrifice soldiers is what makes a good leader. Think about it: The humans never do it, and that's when we take advantage and beat them into the ground."

Apple Bloom shook his head. "In case you haven't noticed, so far we haven't been winning this war at all! Except for decimating the human population, enslaving them, felling whole nations, conquering Berlin, Hainan and New York."

"No, we have not, when under Rainbow Dash's rule," said Scootaloo.

"What do you mean?" asked Belle. “Because she had to rely on our main commanders after Twilight Sparkle’s defeat, and the humans ended up killing them?”

"Think about it,” Scootaloo said again, as though she was thinking about it. “The tactic is good, but it was always issued by Rainbow Dash, who has proven herself a terrible leader as Luna and Celestia say. We now serve under Luna's command, and I lead this battle.”

“We lead this battle! Not *you! We!”* said Apple Bloom. Scootaloo gave another chuckle, which is the incorrect response when someone is raising their voice, because laughter denotes amusement whereas shouting tends to suggest a threatening aspect. "Is something funny, Scootapoop?" Apple Bloom asked, edging closer.

"Yes," replied Scootaloo with a cocky tone. "I find it cute how you think you could lead, Apple Plop."

There was a moment of silence, then Apple Bloom snapped and grabbed Scootaloo by the shoulders. "Listen here, you controlling little fuck!"

"Get you filthy hooves off of me, or I’ll cut your fucking throat out!”

Sweetie Belle realised how loud and out of hand this argument was getting between the two ponies, so she quickly jumped in between them. "Guys, keep it down! You don't want the resistance to hear us!"

"Either stay out of this, Sweetie Barf, or tell this controlling piece of shit to back the fuck down!" said Apple Bloom.

"Please, what do you think she can do? I am in charge here, and if you lay your hooves on me again, make no mistake, I will end you."

"Really? You think you can take me? Go ahead on!" Apple Bloom shoved Sweetie Belle aside and charged Scootaloo, staring him in the eyes with a fiery gaze.

Scootaloo smirked. "I was just joking. Calm yourself.” This time, Scootaloo was misusing the word “joke” which does not mean “antagonize” and instead refers to something like “I’m so poor I can’t pay attention,” or, “Why did the chicken cross the road? To have its motives questioned.”

"No! You weren't...now! Try it?" Apple Bloom’s voice cracked as though the forced growth process hadn’t quite finished with her voice. She punched Scootaloo hard in the cheek with her hoof, then shoved her forehead backwards. “Next time you know to keep your little trap shut!" she growled.

Scootaloo looked shocked, and finally displayed an emotion appropriate to the situation. Her voice quaking with fear, she gave a nod. "Yes, I'm...I'm sorry."

Apple Bloom continued to stare at her for a few moments before turning away from her and facing back to the humans’ base. "Good!" he said, his head facing away from her but his tone still directed to her.

"Oh, one more thing," said Scootaloo, her voice still deep with fear.

"What?" snapped Apple Bloom, turning back towards her. Scootaloo swung her hoof up from her belt and dug one of her knives straight into Apple Bloom's throat. Apple Bloom gasped and Sweetie Belle, who was still on the floor watching the two argue, let out a squeal. Scootaloo smiled. It had all been an act. Then she looked deep into Apple Bloom's eyes. There was no longer a deep fire there. No, instead it had been replaced with the sense of a frightened child mixed with the sense of someone fighting hard to keep their life. Scootaloo chuckled and twisted the blade. Apple Bloom collapsed to her knees and continued to choke on her own blood, whilst trying to breathe.

Scootaloo leaned in close. "I warned you not to lay another hoof on me," she whispered into her ear.
She then tore the blade out of her throat, severing her wind pipe and vocal cords. Apple Bloom collapsed onto the dirt, and within seconds, the life left his body. Scootaloo chuckled, which was a recurring trend these days.

"You...you killed her." Sweetie Belle gaped in disbelief.

Scootaloo didn’t look up at Sweetie Belle. "Yes, yes I did.”

"You psycho! Why would you kill one of our own?”

"I would choose your words carefully before I kill you too," warned Scootaloo.

"What? No, please, I—“

"Be quiet then! Or I’ll kill you, too, and then I’ll kill every single pony who doesn’t respect me! There is nothing to worry about. I did say there would be casualties. Unfortunately for her, Apple Bloom was one of them. Now let's get back to camp. Tomorrow is a new day, and we will bask in the blood of the resistance. Oh, and don't worry about her. I'm sure there are

some wild animals roaming these woods that can take care of his body. As long as you know I'm in charge, everything will be okay!"

Rodrigo let out a sigh of relief and rolled off of Chrissie to lie beside her on the bed. The two of them both lay there panting for a moment. Their naked bodies coated with Rodrigo's sweat and their eyes rolled back from exhaustion. Chrissie grabbed a slip of paper to finish making out her shopping list as Rodrigo stared up at the ceiling of their private bedroom, the faces of the soldiers who fell in the last battle still floating up at him. Their home was located two doors down from the main barracks. He was now thinking about what he and Fidel had discussed, and he felt a weird feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew what he had to do, but he also knew it was wrong, and he had been thinking about it since he left Fidel's office. The only time his mind had been off it was the ten minutes he had just spent with his wife.

Chrissie turned her head to see Rodrigo staring up at the ceiling, sensing something was wrong. Since he would still be reeling from his sexual elation, she decided now would be the best time to talk about his feelings. "So, when are you going to tell me what's bothering you?"

"What?" asked Rodrigo as he snapped out of his thoughts. "Oh, nothing."

Chrissie didn't look up from her coupons. "You know I can tell when you're lying, so why bother? You're staring up into space, and when I asked you what was a matter, your heart rate picked up slightly. That and instead of calling out my name, you said 'We've got to move the nuclear device,'" said Chrissie, who was a lot smarter than she looked.

Rodrigo gave a slight snicker. "Cheeky puta," he joked. "Puta" is Spanish for "whore".

"Hey, I just call it like I see it, or in this case how I feel it, and to be honest, I didn't feel very much for very long tonight."

Rodrigo sighed. "It's just something I got to do. Something that makes a lot of sense to me, but somehow still feels wrong. I can usually trust my own judgement, but this time it really doesn't feel right."

Chrissie listened to her husband and didn't respond until he had finished what he had to say. She thought for a moment and tried to figure out what her husband was talking about. "Is it to do with a mission you have been given?"

"Yes. Well, a mission *we* have been given."

"Our mission is to defend the nuclear weapons. Seems pretty straightforward to me." Chrissie folded up her coupon book and looked at her husband for the first time that evening. "Look, we have been married a very long time, and most of that time we have been fighting with and alongside each other. Nothing you can say will surprise me, so just come out and say it. I am the one person who won't judge you. You should know that by now."

Rodrigo let out another sigh. His wife always had a way of getting to the bottom of his problems. Refusing to speak about them never worked, so he just decided to tell her, just so he could at least pretend to himself that it was his idea and not hers. "Fine. Castro wants us to move the nuclear device across the island to load it in a submarine or a ship. I'm not sure which, but he wants us to get it off the island., since the ponies had been taking a lot of islands before their disappearance. Naturally, he thinks that the ponies will attack us when we try, so he wants us to sneak away whilst his men fight until they are either all killed or taken prisoner. He thinks that will give us plenty of time to move the device."

Chrissie sat up and gave a nod. "I hate to say it, but it wouldn't be the first time we have had to do something like that."

"Yes, but this time is different. His son was there when we were discussing it, and he was outraged. So, he lied to him, told him we would think of another plan. Then when he left, he told me how the plan was still going forward, and that he was willing to sacrifice his own son. Who does that?"

Chrissie squinted her eyes. "Um, Fidel or Raul?" she asked.

"Raul was angry. Fidel wants to use the plan."

His wife looked at him and placed a pitying hand on his cheek. "Look, we are soldiers. We don't get to ask questions. We are paid to do what common men cannot. We take lives when we are told, and we save lives when we are told. Choice is removed from the equation, and as a soldier, we cannot be held accountable for our actions. That privilege goes to those who give us our orders. I'm not saying it will be easy if you think of it that way. It will be hard. It will be a burden knowing that you let those people die, but it won't be your burden to carry. It will be Castro's. So please just don't think about it."

Nick stumbled out of the HQ and onto the war-torn streets. He swayed from side to side, marching around in ugly circles to try and walk off the effects of the alcohol, knocking over trash cans and stacks of boxes and other liquor bottles while muttering an old army chant which he learned back at boot camp. "I'm gonna get some Burma gold. Polish women aren't too cold. I'm gonna swallow all my rage. Bottle it up for the London Cage." In his left hand he held on tightly to another beer, about his eleventh one that night, and in his right hand he held a cigarette lighter. He also had the last cigarette from his twenty

carton of Redwood tucked between his lips. He flicked up the top of his lighter and ignited its flame. He then continued to stagger whilst swaying side to side and muttering his chant as he slowly raised the lighter towards the cigarette in his lips. He tried his hardest to light the cigarette, but his drunken state had blurred his vision to the point where he was seeing three exact copies of it, all swaying around and around. He tried desperately to light one of the dancing images, but he failed miserably, and he refused to give up until he missed and the lighter managed to burn his cheek.

"Oh shit!" cried Nick before tossing the lighter and spitting out the cigarette. He then looked down at the cigarette which lay on the tarmac road. "Oh! You think your all big now, huh? Don't ya? Well, fuck you! I don't need your shit!" He stamped the cigarette into the tarmac. During his mad rage at the inanimate object that was the cigarette, Nick managed to trip over his own boot lace, and he went tumbling to the ground. The bottle which he had tightly clutched in his left hand smacked against the hard surface of the sidewalk. He let out a cry of pain as the bottle shattered in his hand and a piece managed to get stuck in his skin. He raised his hand a stared at the broken glass stuck in it with pus and blood oozing around it.

"Oh. Big...big man, are ya? Well, screw you, you can't hurt me. I'm fucking invincible! I am." Nick stuttered, his highly intoxicated mind tripping over itself. He grabbed hold of the glass and tore it out of his hand. "See? Not so tough now, are ya, wise guy?" He looked across the half-destroyed road and to the hotel building that was not too far away, then he sighed and lowered his head as he thought about Eddie and how his last words were of his daughter. The daughter that would soon be told by her mother that she had just got a call saying her father had been killed. That Daddy wouldn't be going home because he let his guard down for one moment. That he wouldn't be there ever again to tuck her in and read her a bed time story. Or that he would never be able to hold her when she was scared and tell her that everything would be okay.

A tear came to Nick's eye and he shook his head. "It's not right." He knew the pain that came with losing his father. He thought back to just before he had left for Cuba, in the barber shop when his father was mentioned. He was ashamed to admit it, but until then he had almost forgotten his father. It was like he had put him out of his mind so that he wouldn't feel the pain of his loss any more, and now he wondered if Eddie's daughter would forget him. Would she forget that she once had a father who loved her so much that his very last words were of her? "It's not right," Nick muttered again.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Nick slowly raised his head to see a man he had never seen before. That man was Pedro. "Yeah, fine," Nick said, though it was still hard for him to form a proper sentence.

"You sure? You don't look fine." Pedro had been for a run whilst the soldiers had been celebrating. He didn't like to drink any more, but he knew all too well what a man who had been heavily drinking looked like, and he instantly recognised that Nick had gone way over board with that shit.

"I'm perficatalleyme fine," said Nick. To date, "perficatalleyme" does not appear to be any word in the known English language.

Pedro moved closer to Nick. "Come on, man, I'll get you back to the HQ. You need some rest." Pedro wrapped his arm around Nick and helped him to his feet. Nick didn't struggle, though he did sputter some incomprehensible albeit timid protests. "I'm not going to leave you out in the street like this. You need a warm bed and sleep."

Pedro noticed as he helped Nick walk that Nick walked with a slight limp. "Is your leg okay?"

"Oh, yeah, fine. Old war wound." As though self-conscious, Nick tried hopping on his good leg. "Got it in Germany."

"No kidding. You served in Germany? What regiment?"

"Wasn't in a regiment. Wasn't in a platoon."

"So you were one of the task force then?"

"Nope. Just a squad of six. There were a lot of those types of squads out there, but this one was mine. Delta Squad." At the mere mention, Nick felt his pains ease up.

Pedro chuckled and a smile grew on his face. "No shit? You guys are a big deal, man. I'll have to get your autograph when you're back on your feet. So you were at the battle of Berlin then?"

Nick shook his head. "No. Injured just before, sadly."

"Oh well hey. At least you served in Delta Squad. Not many men get to brag about that."

Nick was now drunk and prideful, a wicked combination. "I was in New York! And China though," he blurted in an attempt to further impress his newfound friend. He gave a little hiccup.

"Oh man, that's awesome. I started off my military career in New York, you know. That was some crazy shit lost a lot of good people that day."

"We all did, if you ask me. They were lucky ones. They don't have to deal with what came after," said Nick as he thought back to his time in Vaas's camp.

The two men went silent for a moment as they reached the main HQ's entrance. Pedro pushed open the door and helped Nick in. "So where are you staying?" he asked. “The hotel?” He looked at Nick who was drifting in and out of sleep, but not before giving an exaggerated nod. "Well, I guess we will have to find you somewhere to crash.” Pedro moved along a corridor now as Nick mumbled an affirmative response, and he searched for a place he could let Nick rest. Soldiers came pushing past him chanting and drinking. "Noisy bastardos. They will be the first to complain when they are hungover and in a firefight,” Pedro said.

Nick opened one eye. "It ain’t as bad as you think. You’re too busy trying not to die. You don't notice the head pain."

"Fair point, I suppose." Pedro continued on down the corridor until he came across a maintenance room. He pushed open the door with his boot and entered the tiny room with Nick. "I know it ain't the four seasons, but I'm afraid this is all I can find." Pedro apologized and rested Nick against the wall. The maintenance room was full of cleaning supplies as well as stuff like spare pillows and the occasional ash tray for those soldiers who smoked. Pedro stacked some pillows on the floor before grabbing hold of Nick again and slowly resting him on them. "Rest now. A soldier like you deserves better privileges than this, but it's all we got.”

By then, Nick appeared to have fallen asleep outright the moment his head hit the pillow. Pedro gave Nick a salute before turning to leave, which he couldn't see on the account of his eyes being closed. When Nick stirred, Pedro turned around, expecting him to say something. “Thanks,” Nick more or less mumbled.

"It's okay. You’re a good soldier, and good soldiers need to look out for each other.”

"I'm not good." Nick had his face buried into the pillow, but his words could still be understood.

"You survived Germany, China, and New York. You have to be one hell of a soldier to make it through the three bloodiest battles this war has seen so far. I’d say that’s a blessing.” Pedro smiled.

Nick shook his head. "No. No, I'm just cursed. My friends die around me. My family, too, and yet here I am, alive and well. I'm cursed."

Pedro sighed. "Get some rest, soldier. You'll feel better in the morning."

Nick remained silent as Pedro left, closing the maintenance room door behind him as he left. Now he was all alone in the dark. He clenched his injured hand as tightly as he could and placed his other hand over his face and began to cry silently. "Why me? Why do I get to live?" He’d had never felt so alone. His entire family was dead. His friends were across the world from his and he didn't know if they were alive or dead, or somewhere being tortured like he had been. He just wanted to go back to a time before the war, back to when he was a teenager, before his dad had died in the car accident. He remembered the regular arguments he and his father used to have. They would fight over and over, sometimes resorting to physical violence. That was his deepest regret. He never did get to say to his father that he loved him, and it burned away at his heart. With all that was going on with the war, the hole left in his heart grew wider, and the flesh within charred over with an ever thicker layer of coal. He was on the verge of a nervous break own. He meant what he said. Being alive was like a curse to him, a curse that threatened to never be lifted.

Pedro was stood on the other side of the door. He could hear Nick crying, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. At first Pedro's instincts told him to go in and comfort the soldier, but he decided against it. The way he saw it, whatever was eating away at Nick needed to come out, otherwise it would haunt him for the rest of his life. Instead, he sighed to himself and moved away from the door. He too had been through such dark times that he felt like Nick felt right now, and the sad fact was that there was nothing anyone could say or do that would make Nick feel better. This was something he had to get through on his own. On the other hand, he had a lot of respect for Nick after the brief encounter he had had with him, and he promised that he would keep Nick safe, just so that one day he might be able to appreciate his life, and maybe settle down with a beautiful woman and have tiny, beautiful children. This was a dream that Pedro had. In fact, nearly every soldier now wished that. They wished they had more time to live their lives, rather than risking it day in and day out.

But none of them could get that dream, because ponies existed. The next day would bring death and pain for a lot of those soldiers, and not one of them would be able to ever experience what life really had to offer. It was a crying shame, but it was the truth. No one was safe anymore. No one. Because ponies.

Nick from the bliss of unconsciousness, his dreams forgotten but troubled by the unfamiliar faces of all those who died in the recent battle. He dreaded that these faces should become more familiar, but at present, the nudge to his ribcage was more urgent. He rolled over onto his back to see Pedro standing in the doorway of the maintenance room. Nick had been sleeping there all night, and he was now feeling the stiffness that came with a hangover as well as sleeping on a hard floor. The phrase “sack of bricks” may very well have been coined for just such a situation, because Nick’s head felt not unlike having a sack full

of bricks dropped on top of it. Even Pedro's friendly voice was like the discordant buzz of an alarm clock wresting him from rest.

"Come on, soldier you need to get up and get geared up." Pedro knelt down next to Nick. It took a moment for Nick to remember Pedro, but the events of the night before did come back to him. He sat up with little more than a groan devoid of syllable. His head felt bigger than his entire body at this moment, and his bones only felt more stiff the longer he was awake. Pedro pulled out a couple of pills from his top left breast pocket and handed them to Nick. "Here, take these Midol. They'll take the edge off your head," Pedro said. Nick took the pills and gave Pedro a nod of gratitude before popping them into his mouth with some degree of difficulty. Pedro took his water canteen from his belt and unscrewed the cap to offer the canteen to him. Nick took the canteen and used some of the cool water inside to wash the pills down his throat. He then screwed the cap back on and handed it to Pedro with a word of gratitude. He was helped to his feet next and almost toppled back over as a wave of dizziness struck him like a carousal that's tipped over and rolled down the sidewalk at him.

"Castro wants all the soldiers who are able to get ready. We are going to be moving the nuclear weapons across the island to send them away to a safer location," Pedro explained.

Nick sighed. "Great. Back for one day, and already this will end up being my second time in battle. Since I got back, that is."

Pedro took out a pack of chewing gum and slipped the entire thing into his mouth. "You don't know for sure if they will be attacking us," said Pedro as he offered a piece of chewing gum from a second pack to Nick. "We suppose we should move fast before they have time to fully recuperate."

Nick shook his head and Pedro put the packet away. "I think they will. I'm pretty damn sure they will. No matter how many ponies we gun down, they always have more, somehow. The only thing that breeds that quickly is a virus."

Pedro gave a nod to at least indicate as if he was listening. "Yeah, most probably, but hey, don't worry. I had a word with Rodrigo. Told him what a great soldier you were and your background, and, well, you're on the team."

"The team? What team?" asked Nick as he was now confused.

"I'm second in command to a task force known as the Federation. We are a small but efficient group. Never seen a group of tougher soldiers than us, and now you're one of us."

"Wait, do I get a choice in this?" asked Nick.

Pedro gave Nick a confused look of his own. "Well, yeah, but I just figured that with one hell of a promotion such as this, you would jump right to it. Usually there is this whole try-out thing that you have to do, but considering the conditions on this island and how important our mission is, Rodrigo pretty much excepted you in without me even having to talk you up that much."

Nick gave Pedro a nod. "Okay then. I guess I'm in. What's our mission exactly?"

"Oh, we are in charge of transporting the nuclear weapon."

That didn't help Nick's hangover any. "So what you're saying is we're the enemy's prime targets."

Pedro forced a smile. "Pretty much, but we will have a lot of soldiers to help us out. Castro is going all out with his forces, and I do mean all out. Never seen so many soldiers fighting for our side in one place before. It's crazy. If you ask me, he's counting on us being attacked." Pedro realised he may of said something he should not have. He and the rest of the Federation had just finished a mission brief with Rodrigo, and they'd been informed on what their plans were. "Oh, nothing. Don't worry about it." The phrase "don't worry about it" is one of those weird phrases that invoke the exact opposite effect of what it says. Before Nick could question Pedro any further, Pedro patted him on the back. "Come on, let's go get you geared up."

When the two finally reached the armoury, they were met by a large group of soldiers, all of whom were young and looked as if the highest rank among them was private. "You gear up, then meet me in the main hall. Castro is going to be addressing all of the soldiers there," Pedro told Nick. Nick gave a nod, then took a moment to look around at all the young faces. There were so many, and it looked as if they all shared an age of eighteen or nineteen. Some even looked younger. These guys were clearly the fresh recruits straight out of boot camp. Some looked as if they had only served a week there.

Nick shook his head and moved over to a weapons rack in the far corner. There were a few weapons and ammo clips left as most of the armoury had now been cleared out. When he reached the rack he considered his slim choice of weaponry. He could use a standard M16, a more efficient, more accurate M14 with its only downside being the low fire rate and ammo captivity, or he could go with an old yet trustworthy M1918 Browning automatic riffle, commonly known as a BAR among the troops. He wasn't too sure what to go with. The M16 was always a good choice, but the BAR had enough bullets to take down

an entire platoon, if the ammo was used sparingly. Considering he was part of this new task force, he wondered if he would need a more ranged weapon, in which case the M14 would be more appropriate.

"Can't decide?" came a southern-sounding voice from behind Nick. He turned to see a man who looked to be in his late twenties. He had kind of long, rugged black hair and a sort of goatee-looking beard.

"Er, no, not really," Nick said. "Do I know you?"

The man held out a hand. "Daryl Dixon."

Nick shook it uneasily. "Nick Bronson." Daryl and Nick both gave each other a nod, but Nick wasn't sure how he felt about making acquaintances. If you've ever been a dog being trained for keen observation, and your trainer keeps pretending to throw the ball so you can discern more quickly whether the ball has actually been thrown or not, you may come to loathe the ball being thrown at all, although for a dog, that might take a while. "So what did you go with?" he asked.

Daryl held up a pump-action shotgun known as the "trench gun".

"Damn. Nice choice. Bit short-ranged, though, don't you think?" asked Nick.

"Yeah, that is a down side, but I know my way around it pretty well. Plus I could always switch to the M1911 Colt .45 if I need a little more range. You might want to choose quick before someone else snatches it up. It's slim pickings in here." Daryl hoisted his gun in both hands and over his shoulder as he spoke. Nick gave the weapons another quick look over, then made his decision. He reached out and grabbed a hold of the BAR. It was a weapon which he was used to, and he felt as if he could use all the help he could get. Daryl's smile opened into a grin. "Good choice."

Nick loaded up with a few spare ammo clips and a couple grenades, then turned to Daryl. "You know we got a meeting in the main hall, right?" he asked.

Daryl gave a nod. "Yeah, I know. I'm just finishing up in here."

"Okay, I'll meet you in there," said Nick as he turned to leave the armoury.

He managed to get in to the main hall just in time for Fidel to take a stand upon a podium in front of all his troops. To their leader's right was his son, Raul, and Elian, and to his left was Rodrigo. In front of him was a microphone which he adjusted before addressing his troops. "Sons and daughters of Cuba, I stand here before you with a mission of the utmost importance. What we do here today can and will shape the fate of humanity. Today we will play one of the most important roles in this war, and we will go down in the history books, regardless of if we succeed or if we fail."

The crowd of soldiers gave a naive cheer. Nick watched from the back of the crowd of soldiers and was listening carefully. Daryl just slipped in through the main hall's doors and quickly found Nick. "Did I miss anything?" asked Daryl in a whisper.

"Just some crap about us going down in the history books."

"So, nothing."

"Pretty much."

Fidel looked to Raul who acted as if he did not notice. He sighed and then looked back to the crowd to continue his speech. "The ponies have come to our own little piece of paradise and with them they brought death, and now they plan to make attempt for our weapons! Our nuclear weapons! And with them they plan to destroy us all! To destroy what humanity we have left! I for one will not allow them! I will not give them the opportunity!" The crowd cheered in agreement.

"I like how he speaks as if he is the one fighting," said Daryl.

"Seems to be a common theme among leaders. All talk, yet they leave their 'grunts' to do all the fighting," said Nick.

Fidel raised his fist. "We repelled their attack! This gained us an advantage which we will take no time in taking. We will move our nuclear weapons off of this island! We will send them to Moscow! There, they will be put to good use, and the ponies will once again be defeated! Now, my brother and my sisters! I have but one question. Are you ready? Are you ready to become heroes? To become legends? To go down as the men and women who were responsible for the salvation of humanity itself?"

The crowd cheered again. "I guess he has won the crowd already then," said Daryl.

"A thing which seems all too easy," said Nick.

Fidel then concluded his speech. "I must ask one more thing of you comrades: Be brave out there, and if you shall fall, fall with honour. Now, go do humanity proud. Go win this war." The crowd cheered once more and Fidel stepped away from the microphone. He then turned to Rodrigo and gave him a nod.

Rodrigo then took his place at the microphone and addressed the troops. "Okay, soldiers, this is how it's going to work. Me and my task force will be in charge of transporting the nuclear weapons. You will all provide us protection. If the ponies strike, you will be there to help us keep the weapon from them. You are the key element for our success. We will be loading you into trucks and Humvees outside of the HQ. If you will please make your way out there now, it will be greatly appreciated." The crowds immediately started departing as asked, although Rodrigo hadn't finished speaking yet. "And if you believe in it, then let God be with you. If not, then let your will and your courage be strong." He finished his talk to the soldiers with a salute before stepping away from them.

"You heard him. It is time to embark on your claim to glory. Now go," said Fidel.

The men all turned to shuffle out of the main hall, talking amongst themselves. "I guess it's time for us to go get shot at again," said Daryl.

Nick's laugh became another sigh. "Just one day. One day without being shot at is all I ask."

Daryl let out a slight grunt sound. "We don't get that luxury. Only men of higher rank and worth do."
Nick agreed with Daryl by giving a simple nod. They continued out of the HQ building and onto the streets of Havana. The trucks and the Humvees were already lined up, and men were quickly beginning to load into them. Nick and Daryl moved towards a truck and were about to board it when Nick was stopped by a firm hand on his shoulder.

He turned to see Pedro. "You're with us," Pedro said with a leer.

Nick turned back to Daryl. "I'll see you out there."

Daryl took his hand and shook it. "That's if we don't die first," he said with a slight light-hearted tone as he continued to board the truck.

Pedro led Nick over to a truck that was right next to the HQ. By the truck were Rodrigo and Chrissie;
the couple were flirting with each other, but Chrissie stopped and gave Rodrigo a nudge before nodding in Pedro's and Nick's direction. Rodrigo looked to see the two men. "Is this the new guy?" he asked.

Pedro confirmed this with a nod. Rodrigo held his hand out and Nick took it. The two then shook hands. "Good to have you on board, soldier. I heard about your career so far. It's impressive, I must say."

"Thank you, sir. I'm glad to be on the team."

"This isn't going to be a walk in the park. I hope you're ready for what is to come," Rodrigo said, just as Gonzarlo and Juan came struggling from around the back of the HQ. They were pushing a fairly large object which was covered with a large piece of cloth.

"Is that the nuke?" asked Nick.

"Si. Come on, we all need to help load this into the back of the truck," Rodrigo said. Nick followed him and Pedro as they came to the aid of Juan and Gonzarlo. Chrissie instead turned and climbed into the driver's seat of the truck.

"Jesus, Rodrigo, this thing weighs a tonne, esse," Juan said.

"I'm with you there, Holmes," said Gonzarlo, who was not familiar with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Rodrigo turned his head to Pedro and Nick. "You guys get the sides. We got to be very careful when lifting this thing into the truck. Don't want it going off by accident." Nick and Pedro moved to the sides of the nuclear bomb and placed their hands under it. Nick took a deep breath. "On the count of three," said Rodrigo, "we lift it into the back."

"Damn, you think they would give us a forklift or something for this," Juan said.

"Yeah, or maybe a crane" added Gonzarlo.

"Just quit your whining and get ready," said Rodrigo. The men all readied themselves. Rodrigo took a deep breath.

"One."

"Two."

"Three!"

The men all let out strenuous groans as they lifted the bomb off of the ground and moved it towards the back of the truck. Unbeknownst to them, they were being watched by two pairs of large, shiny eyes. Only one pair could actually see them, though, because Scootaloo was using the binoculars. She had a giddy smile on her face. “They’re loading the bomb!” she said, more to herself than to Sweetie Belle.

“So the plan worked?” Sweetie asked.

Scootaloo gave a quick burst of excited laughter and rubbed her front hooves together. "You bet your flank it worked! Go get the soldiers. We got a nuclear weapon to steal.”

Rodrigo, Gonzarlo, Juan, Pedro and Nick all had finally loaded the nuclear weapon into the back of the truck and were now ready to get going. They even tied it down with some bungee cables so it wouldn’t rattle too much in their rusted red pickup. Rodrigo turned to the men and gave them their orders. "Okay, Juan, Gonzarlo, and new guy," he said, pointing out the men and pointing to Nick when he said “new guy” because Nick was the newest member of their group. "You will be driving in front of our truck in a Humvee. If we get attacked out there, we are going to need to keep pushing forward as much as possible, so you guys will have to clear us as best of a path as you possibly can.”

Juan gave Nick a suspicious look. "Sir, are you sure we can trust this guy?"

Rodrigo looked to Nick and thought for a moment. "His record suggests we can. If he proves otherwise, he won’t exactly be able to get the jump on us.”

Nick felt awash in disbelief at their lack in faith in him after *their* invitation to their group, and was about say something when Pedro over spoke him. "We can trust him!" insisted Pedro.

"Good.” Rodrigo did not look up from the road maps he was quintuple-checking. “Anyway, me, Chrissie and Pedro will be following you in the truck. If for any reason our truck stops, you stop. We need to stick together if we are going to get this weapon across the island.”

"Got it, boss," said Gonzarlo.

Rodrigo looked to Juan. Juan gave a nod. "Okay. Are we going now?"

"Yes, we are," replied Rodrigo.

Gonzarlo and Juan moved towards the Humvee which was parked in front of the truck holding the nuclear weapon. Nick turned to Pedro. "Thanks for the support.”

Pedro smiled. "No problem. Hey, watch those two. They can be a handful sometimes."

"Will do.” Nick then started towards the Humvee when Rodrigo stepped in front of him.

"Look, new guy," Rodrigo started to say.

"It's Nick."

"Right, okay. Nick, I trust you at this point in time as I have no reason not to. However, if you betray that trust, and it turns out you are not as on our side as you like to make out, then we are going to have some problems. Big problems. Do you understand?"

"Sir, with all *due* respect, I hardly work for the ponies," Nick said. “I was in Delta Squad.” He half expected Rodrigo to make fun of his dead father next, but he managed to keep his tone respectful because he was still a bit hungover and couldn’t muster up the energy.

"Good. Now be safe, and let’s get this over and done with" said Rodrigo. The two men gave each other a quick salute before moving on. Nick climbed into the back of the Humvee, with Gonzarlo in the driver seat and Juan in the passenger seat, and Rodrigo climbed into the passenger seat of the truck, with Chrissie in the driver seat and Pedro in the back with the nuclear weapon.

Raul and Elian loaded their equipment into a Humvee which they were to share with three other soldiers. "Is that all of it?" asked Raul. Elian gave a frank nod. "Good, then let's get this show on the road," said Raul as he opened the Humvee door and was about to climb in.

He was stopped by the sound of his father's voice calling out to him. "Son, wait!"

Raul sighed and turned to see his father jogging over to him. "What is it?"

"Look, son, I know we had some disagreements, and the solution to some of our problems that I had came up with did not really agree with you, and even though we agreed not to go through with those plans, maybe just the fact that I even came up with them disappointed you, and for that I am sorry." Fidel spoke very quickly so that he could get a word in edgewise.

Raul half-lidded his eyes in a stern grimace and resumed loading his gear into the Humvee. “That’s great, Father, but you do notice that you appear to be going through with the whole ‘escort the nuke, guarded by our military’ plan even so, don’t you?”

"Look, son, I love you very much, and we don't know what could happen today. Please, if something bad did happen to you today, I couldn't bear to think that we left things off on a bad foot." Fidel knew fine well what would happen and was just trying to make amends with his son before he met his end.

Raul looked at his father and could see the tears building up in his eyes. He could see he was being genuine. Raul sighed and gave his father a comforting nod. "It's okay, Father, I forgive you.”

Fidel smiled and held out his arms, twiddling his fingers. Raul moved in and embraced his father with a manly hug. "I love you, son," said Fidel Castro, the words almost getting caught in his throat.

"I love you too, Father, but don't worry, I'll be fine,” said Raul Castro.

Fidel pulled away and tried to give his son the most convincing smile he could muster, which was a bit different with his thick, scraggly beard. "I'm sure you will son. I'm sure you will."

Raul then heard the familiar voice of Becky coming from his left. "Hey! Is there room for one more?"

"No. No, there is not," he responded.

Becky continued over to him. "Please, look, I mean, well, my squad as you know are all dead but one, and I can't find him. Please can I just catch a ride with you" begged Becky.

"Your friend is with the task force now," said Fidel.

Becky gave a surprised look. "Oh really? That's good for him."

"I thought I saw you in the medical bay?" asked Raul. "If you’re injured, then you should not be going out to fight.”

"I'm not. Not really bad, anyway. A few minor burns on my back and maybe a bit of a cough. Really, I'm fit to fight. Honest." As a trained soldier, Becky did not want to be left behind.

Fidel looked at her. "Are you sure you want to go fight?" he asked. Becky nodded vigorously, and Fidel held in his sigh. This was yet another person he would have to send off to their doom. "Raul, just take her," he said.

Raul rolled his eyes. "Fine, you ride in back. No trying to take command though.”

“She’s not an American, is she?” Elian asked.

Becky gave both of them an odd look, but decided Elian’s question was easier to acknowledge. “I’m Scots-Welsh.” She then forced an awkward smile to both Castro men. She stuffed herself into the back of the Humvee next to the three other soldiers that were there.

Raul turned back to his father, who gave him one last desperate hug. "Goodbye, son," he muttered, squeezing his son so hard Raul couldn’t even move his arms.

"I'll be back when this is done," said Raul, who was totally oblivious to his father’s plans. Fidel stepped away and Raul gave one last nod to his father before climbing into the driver seat of the Humvee and closing the door behind him. He then started up the engine and gave his father a wave before putting the vehicle into drive and pulling off away from Fidel.

Fidel sighed and lowered his head. "God, forgive me," he whispered.

The rest of the convoy made up of trucks, Humvees and tanks lumbered to life like heavily-armed ants attending a picnic. The truck containing the nuke, and the Humvee with Nick, Gonzarlo, and Juan, were located in just about the middle of this beige and green procession. Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle bore witness to this immense queue from the bushes with their army hidden with them. Scootaloo looked back to her army which seemed to cover most of the forest. All her soldiers were extremely well-camouflaged, making it near impossible for the resistance soldiers to see them.

She chuckled with delight, then leaned in next to Sweetie Belle. "Tell the soldiers to follow the resistance. We don't attack until I say. I want them past the point of no return before we take them down. Then you know what you need to do.” Sweetie Belle gave a nod, then turned to inform their soldiers. Scootaloo looked back to the line of travelling resistance and

held one forelimb up on her other hoof like she was holding a bazooka. She then aimed it towards them and gave her limb a jerk. "Boom!" She laughed, symbolising the death which her and her people would bring down upon the resistance.

Two hours passed while Nick had been resting in the back of the Humvee in silence. The hot Cuban sun was beating down onto the Humvee like a sauna. Sweat dripped from his brow, and he tried desperately to think about anything else. That however, proved incredibly difficult as he had Gonzarlo and Juan sat in the front, playing obnoxiously loud Spanish Latin music and singing along with the foreign[32] language. Nick sighed and rubbed the sweat from his brow. Juan heard Nick's quiet exhalation despite his loud, atonal crooning and the deafening percussion of the bass speakers, and it was as if for the first time during this journey that he had noticed the "new guy" was in the back seat of the Humvee.

Juan turned down the radio despite Gonzarlo's protests and turned around in his seat to face Nick. "So what's your problem, esse?" he asked, spitting the sibilance.

It took a moment for Nick to realise that Juan was in fact speaking to him, so there was a noticeable delay in his response. "Nothing," he answered.

"Oh really? Doesn't seem like nothing." Juan picked up on Nick's pause and interpreted it as arrogance, because Juan was that kind of guy.

Nick shook his head slowly. "Nothing is wrong. Just hot is all." It was too late. Juan's hostility put Nick on his guard.

"Well ain't we all, but I wasn't asking how you feel. I was asking what is your problem."

Nick winced in the pain of Juan speaking to him. The heat mixed with the constant questioning and the nagging hangover headache he still had was just all starting to build up and make him very irritated. "I have not got a problem, but I can clearly see that you do."

Juan let out a sarcastic chuckle. "It's that easy to tell, is it?"

"What is your problem?" asked Nick.

"My problem? My problem is you, my friend," said Juan, not knowing the meaning of the word.

"Yes, I guessed as much, but why do you have a problem with me?"

"Because me and my friend here, we worked very, very hard to get to where we are now. Very hard. Then out of nowhere comes your white ass, and suddenly without any training or preparation, you're on the team!" Juan apparently adhered to debunked superstitions regarding skin pigmentation and considered his relatively mild darkness to be all that different or significant.

Nick groaned in the face of this pathetic petty jealousy like a rat that has collided with a dead end in a maze for the umpteenth time. What was especially irksome was the presumption this man was supposed to be on a highly-trained task force. "Look, I don't want to be here. The only reasons I am here is because Rodrigo thought you could use a little extra help, and Pedro put my name forward. I can probably guarantee that as soon as this mission is over and done with, I will be dropped from this 'team', and then you can go back to being happy and high on yourself. Okay?"

"No, not okay. What, you think you're better than us? Huh, is that it? Think you're too high and mighty to be working with us? Huh, is that it?" Juan was shaking the seats something fierce.

"Juan, shut up!" snapped Gonzarlo.

Juan turned to Gonzarlo with a surprised look on his face. "Me? Why me?" His voice squeaked not unlike Sweetie Belle's.

"Because the white guy didn't even open his mouth until you started on him, so clearly this is your fault. Just leave him alone. Don't be so pathetic," Gonzarlo said. Juan gave a tut like a saucy elderly woman and turned back around in his chair. Gonzarlo looked to Nick in the rear view mirror. "Don't mind him. It's just this heat. He don't handle heat well."

Nick gave a nod. "Don't worry. It's fine." At this point, Nick was no longer certain if he was being as polite as he'd been raised to be, or if he'd just lost all urge to fight. He hoped the latter wasn't the case by the time the ponies showed up.

"So, where you from?" asked Gonzarlo as he tried to mend whatever damaged impressions Nick now had of the task force thanks to the loudmouth that was Juan.

"Toronto, Canada," Nick answered.

"Oh, Toronto? There a lot of honeys there?" Gonzarlo had a big grin. "You got a woman back home?"

[32] Read as: Not Russian.

"Not back home, no." Becky instantly popped into Nick's mind.

Juan let out another tut. "I can't believe this shit."

Gonzarlo decided to patronize Juan. "What can't you believe?"

"You! You're acting as if he is one of us!"

"Well for the meantime, he is!"

"No, he is not! He hasn't earned the patch!"

"Well don't worry! He isn't wearing the fucking patch, so quit your whining!"

Nick zoned out of the argument between the two men and continued to think about Becky. There were so many things he wanted to say to her before he left today, but he hadn't had the time, and now he did not know what would happen to him. He just wished he had told her how he felt about her. Maybe she would return his feelings. Maybe they could have had a good life together. Juan and Gonzarlo's argument drifted back to Nick for just a moment, and he turned to them, about to tell them to calm down. "Guys, look, it's no big deal, just—"

He was cut off by the loud screeching sound that came after a mortar had been fired, and then one of the resistance trucks erupted into a fiery explosion. Five more mortars came flying from out of the trees, and this time the mortar shells were accompanied by a hail of gunfire coming from the surrounding tree lines.
Nick ducked down in the back of the Humvee as a quick burst of gun fire slammed into their vehicle. A single bullet made its way through Juan's door, and it dug straight into his right elbow. Juan let out a pain-filled cry. "Ah, shit! Oh fuck, they got me!"

Resistance trucks and Humvees were exploding left, right, and centre. The ponies had taken them by surprise easily and even managed to take out four trucks and two Humvees before the resistance soldiers started to pulled over and exit their vehicles. Most of them got shot as they opened their doors and slid out. The resistance soldiers that survived unbuckling took cover behind their vehicles and blindly fired back into the trees in hopes they would vanquish their enemies.

Gonzarlo kept his foot on the gas pedal and tried his best to weave in and out of the parked up and destroyed resistance vehicles. "Gonzarlo! Juan! Are you guys okay?" asked Rodrigo's voice over the built-in Humvee radio.

Juan grabbed hold of the radio with his left hand and pushed in the button which allowed him to broadcast his voice back to Rodrigo. "Roger that! I got hit, but it's minor, and we all seem to be okay!"

"Good! Just keep moving through! We need to get the weapon out of here!" ordered Rodrigo.

"Understood, sir! We will get right on that!" Juan placed the radio down and turned back around to Nick. "What are you doing? Open the hatch, and get on that heavy MG!"

Nick reached up to the closed hatch above his head and unlocked it before pushing it open. He then stood up so that the top half of his body was poking out of the hatch, but his lower body was still safe inside the Humvee. He grabbed hold of the heavy MG which was fixed on top of the Humvee, and he cocked it. He aimed it towards the surrounding tree lines and began to open fire.

"Move! Move!" Gonzarlo bashed his hand down onto the horn of the Humvee. The vehicle's horn blared out amidst the platoons of warring soldiers who were all hiding outside their vehicles. The resistance seemed trapped now. To the right of the road they were on were the ponies, and to the left was a very steep hill which eventually turned into a sheer drop. They could not move back or they would be shot in the back as they ran. They could not move forward for similar reasons. All they could do now was stand and fight, but given the great amount of numbers the ponies had, mixed with the numbers they gained from the Iron Wolves, hope for the resistance looked very bleak. Soon the great island of Cuba would be brought to its knees if the resistance didn't come up with something fast.

Chapter Thirty-Nine.

Castro captured. Suicide and crocodiles. Back underwater.

Fidel wandered back into his office, distraught over the ramifications of his strategy. He looked out of his favourite lofty window which had a transparent sticker of a cartoon Chihuahua on it at the beautiful island that was Cuba. In his mouth he had a rare type of Cuban cigar, in his right hand he held a glass of his aged scotch, and in his left hand he held a photo of his son, Raul. He put the photo behind the glass and mimicked his son's falsetto. "Help me, Papa, I am drowning!" The photo showed him and his son at their leisure cabin which was located deep in the woods. The memory of their time at the cabin was a fond one for both Fidel and Raul, as it was where Fidel first taught his son how to shoot. Fidel had tears in his eyes as he remembered back to his son's childhood of gunning down birds and small pets, from before the war with the Equestrians, just

after the Cuban Revolution, to be precise. He would take his son fishing, and he would tell him of the stories that had once been defining moments in Fidel's life and half a century under his sole rule, such as the sinking of the 13 de Marzo, or the establishment of the Military Units in Aid of Production. He remembered the looks of amazement and awe that his son would give. Those were the good old days; the days where his son looked up to him and trusted him.

A tear rolled down Fidel's cheek which he rubbed off with the back of his hand before taking a huge gulp of the scotch. He swallowed down the cool liquid and tried his hardest to hide his sadness from the otherwise empty room. "What have I done?" He realised just what it was that he had given up and lowered his head. "What kind of man am I? A miserable pile of secrets?"

Far off in the distance, Fidel could hear the faint sound of explosions followed by gunfire. He looked out of his window again, but saw nothing out of the ordinary save for a thick, black smoke coming from far across the island. His heart dropped, and he felt as if he had a golf ball stuck in his throat again. He could feel the sick rising within him. *That's it,* he thought. *They got him. The bastards got my boy*. He threw his glass of scotch at the wall and let out a frustrated and devastated roar. "Noooooo!" The glass shattered against the wall and Fidel stood up from his desk, shaking both fists at once. He then tore open his drawer and snatched up the silver magnum which resided inside it.

At this moment in time, all he could hear was a little voice in the back of his head. "Do it!" the voice said. "Andele, andele!" Fidel's hands shook as he gripped the weapon. "Do it! Kill yourself! Just like you killed your son!" continued the voice. He began to sob as he pulled back the hammer on the magnum and raised the weapon up to his face. He positioned the picture of him and his son so that it was facing him.

"I'm so, so sorry," said Fidel as he ran his finger down the photograph. "Please, forgive me."

"Do it!" continued the mousey little voice. "Andele, senor!"

Fidel threw his cigar to the floor, and in its place he slipped the barrel of the magnum. His lips quivered at the cold steel of the barrel, and he got a taste of old copper as it rested on his tongue. He took a deep breath. He knew this is what he had to do. He knew he wouldn't ever be able to forgive himself, and he was a fool to think otherwise. "I'm sorry," he said one last time, a task which proved difficult with the magnum lodged in his mouth. He would never taste scotch again. Never taste a grapefruit steak again. He ran his finger over the trigger and bit down on the barrel. A few seconds of complete silence went by. Just silence. Still silence. And then the silence was broken.

The door slammed open, rattling his collection of liquor bottles. "Put that gun down, Mr. Castro, or I'll shoot you!" Sweetie Belle had arrived along with two other armed Equestrian guards, and Fidel remembered that there were still reasons to live.

Back on the battlefield, Raul slammed on the Humvee brakes, skidding to a sudden stop. "Get out now!" He and Elian scampered from the vehicle through the left hand side to take cover as the ponies rained gunfire down upon them. Becky was about to make her move out when the ponies fired off a lot of shots in her direction. The bullets tore through the Humvee and struck all three of the resistance soldiers that were in the back with her. One of the soldiers' dead bodies landed on her and pinned her to the seat of the Humvee.

"Help! Help me!" cried Becky as blood dripped out from the dead man's lips and landed on her face.
She struggled to push the heavy build off of her. A few more bullets made their way into the Humvee. Luckily for her, the dead body acted as a human shield and took every single bullet that came close to her. "Help!" she cried again, becoming extremely panic-stricken.

Raul and Elian heard Becky's screams and reacted to them. Elian tore open the back Humvee door and Raul reached in with both arms. "Take my hands!" he shouted over the sound of the gunfire. Becky reached her hands out and took hold of his. He then used all of his strength to pull her out from under the dead body, and she let out a squeal as she landed on the ground. The two men resumed cover behind the Humvee while Becky wiped the blood from her face and spat on the floor just to make sure none was in her mouth before thanking them.

"Are you hit?" asked Raul. She shook her head in response. "Good! Now keep your head down, and keep quiet!" Elian popped out of cover for a brief second to blindly fire an ammo clip out from his M16. Raul asked him, "You see how many there are?"

"No, I can't see shit! It's as if the trees them fucking selves are firing at us!" responded Elian. "God, I'm having flashbacks!"

"Feces! We need to know if we are at least close to killing these fuckers!"

"I doubt it! They are using a poop tonne of fire power on us! Just look at how many mortars are dropping!" The men had to strain their voices as it was near impossible to hear with all the explosions and the gunfire, and it was unlikely anyone

would keep the noise down while they were trying to have a conversation. Becky took a hold of her M1 Garand and popped out of cover to let off a few shots. She managed to let off two before she herself was shot. A single bullet found its way through the trees and bushes and straight into her right biceps. She screamed in pain and went crashing back to the ground, dropping her weapon and clutching her wound with her free hand.

Raul turned to her to see what she was screaming about. "God fucking damn it! I told you to keep your head down!" He grabbed her by her vest and pulled her close to him, then moved her hand away from her wound. "Let me examine it," he demanded as Becky tried to cover it back up. He looked into her wound and saw the bullet hadn't gone too far in. It hadn't hit a main artery as there would be much more blood. "You're going to be fine, but I need to get the bullet out." He removed his belt and his pants fell down a ways, then he wrapped the belt around her arm, just under her biceps, and tightened it. Next, he pulled out his combat knife. "I ain't going to lie! This is going to hurt," he told her.

Elian picked up a stick and shook it at Becky. "I know it ain't ideal, but bite down on this!" He placed the stick between her lips and Becky bit down on it as Raul moved closer to her arm with the knife.

"Solid waste, keep firing!" roared Gonzarlo as bullets bounced off of the Humvee. Nick squeezed the trigger to the heavy MG and directed its fire into the trees, since it would be more useful to fire upon the enemy. Still he saw no one, and like the lotto, the weather, and fashion, it was all just about guessing.

"We need to get out of here!" said Juan.

"I'm fornicatingly working on it!" roared Gonzarlo.

"Well drive faster!"

"The coital thing won't go any faster!" Their argument, which really had no time nor place in the midst of a battle, was interrupted when a mortar shell came crashing down just next to the Humvee. Its explosion rocked the heavy Humvee right off its wheels, tossing it off the edge of the steep hill. Nick wasn't certain whether someone had pulled him in or he'd just lost his footing, but either way, he slipped back into the Humvee in the (ahem) nick of time. He could have been broken in half as the vehicle flipped over, but instead he joined the other two men in being thrashed side to side. Sparks flew out of the console as they strained to keep hold of their seats. The men continued to roll and roll until they met the end of the steep hill where they just had a sheer drop. They teetered for a moment, and none could say for how long that moment lasted, but a breath later, they plummeted down towards the rocky waters below.

Chrissie witnessed this event. "Bowel extract! We lost Juan and Gonzarlo!" She couldn't stop for this and instead drove on through the mass wreckage and carnage which was ensuing from the battle.

Rodrigo let out a heavy sigh and lowered his head in remembrance of his brave comrades. Just keep moving we can't let their deaths be in vain." They continued down the road, avoiding their fellow resistance soldiers.

"Hey! Where the fuck are you going?" asked Raul as he saw Chrissie, Rodrigo and Pedro come rushing straight past them, and both he and Elian wondered if they were being left behind.

Becky let out a groan and sat up from the dirt floor. Raul had gotten the bullet out of her arm, and they had wrapped a belt around the wound to keep her from bleeding out. "What do we do?" she asked. Raul at first did not hear her question. He was too deep into his own thoughts now. Something didn't feel right here. Was Rodrigo going through with the plan to leave everyone behind as a decoy after all? Had his father been in on it? Is that why he had been so nice to Raul before he left? Find out immediately on HvP3! Raul was then snapped out of his thoughts by Becky taking hold of him and screaming into his face. "What do we do?"

Raul was stunned for a moment, then looked to the trees as if not having heard what she said. "We are sitting ducks out here. We need to charge into the trees so that we can at least see our enemy, and then we need to strike back against them!"

"Are you sure that will work? We could all just be shot dead instantly," said Elian. "These guys must be trained Americans, and even using American weaponry. I'm surprised they aren't jamming the weapons down our faces."

"We will all be shot dead if we just stay here! Check the Humvee for smoke grenades! If we got some then we can just throw them to give us some sort of cover!" said Raul.

Elian gave a nod and crawled back into the Humvee, keeping his head low and moving slowly so that he did not draw the attention of the ponies onto his location. He gave the compartments in the Humvee quick look overs, but there was nothing, save for the three dead soldiers in the back. He sighed with relief as he found two smoke canisters hooked to the belt of one of the deceased men. "Rest in peace, comrades," he said to the dead men before crawling back out of the Humvee.

Elian smiled and held up the two cans. Raul took one and gave a cheer. "Good! Okay, you throw one over towards the middle of our soldiers. I'll throw my one in front of us. Then we will charge out through the smoke and face the enemy head on!"

"How do you know the others will follow us?" asked Becky.

"You mean how do I know the others will follow me and Elian? I don't, but I got to believe that my men are more honourable and trustworthy than my father and that damn task force!" Raul said. He was being a bit resentful.

Becky had picked up on what Raul had said, given that he'd said it right to her, and was now being objective. "What do you mean, 'me and Elian'? I'm coming in as well!"

"No, you're not!"

"Yes I am! What, just because I'm a woman you think I can't fight?"

"No! I think because you got a gaping hole in your arm that you cannot fight! You are staying here!" Raul said. Becky quietened down, so he turned to Elian. "Let's do this!"

Scootaloo was sitting atop a tank deep in the woods with a pair of binoculars, watching the carnage from afar with her wings trembling from excitement, when Sweetie Belle re-emerged from her errand. Scootaloo heard her approach and asked, "Did you acquire the package?"

"Yep! Sure did! You know who's gonna be so proud of us! How's it going on your end, Scoots?"

"Very, very well."

"How many have fallen?" Sweetie Belle asked.

"Lots." Scootaloo was too invested in the carnage to give longer replies.

"Yes, but how many?"

"I am not going to count every single dead body! There are lots! Leave it at that!"

Sweetie Belle lowered her head and stuck out her bottom lip. "Sorry." Scootaloo ignored her apology and continued to watch the battle with a great deal of joy. Sweetie Belle asked, "How many have we lost? C'mon, ballpark estimate!"

Scootaloo sighed, then took a quick look around her ocean of soldiers. From what she could see, only a handful of Equestrians had fallen. Scootaloo gave an *evil* grin. "Few. Very few."

Sweetie Belle gave a cheer. "This is actually working! We are winning!"

"Of course it's working! I'm the one leading the charge!" Scootaloo said.

Raul pulled the pin out of his smoke grenade and gave a nod to Elian. "Now!" he cried. The pair threw their smoke grenades which landed out in front of the wall of vehicles that the resistance soldiers were using for cover. A few seconds passed before the canisters released the smoke. "Charge!" Raul took hold of his M16 and charged towards the rising cloud of thick smoke that obscured their vision. He and Elian leapt out from behind the Humvee and charged towards the woods. The other resistance soldiers watched them and realised what they were doing. They too charged after Raul and Elian to assist them in eliminating the ponies. Raul raised his M16 and fired blindly in the direction of the woods as he charged through the smoke.

The resistance soldiers joined him in doing this, and they all let out a fierce battle cry. Most of them were going "Haaah!" but one guy was going "Hoooh!" until he got strange looks from his fellow soldiers and corrected himself.

"What are they doing?" asked Sweetie Belle. "What do *we* do?"

"For fuck sake!" Scootaloo tossed her pair of binoculars to the ground, opened the top hatch of the tank, and jumped inside. "We kill them all!" Sweetie Belle scurried up the side of the tank and jumped inside as well, closing the hatch behind her.

Once Raul made it through the smoke, he dived to the floor so that he was a harder target to hit. He smiled down the barrel of his M16. At this distance the ponies could now be seen. This was now becoming more of a fair fight. He started to pick ponies off with quick bursts of fire. Elian took to one knee next to Raul, and raised his AK47. "It's working! The plan is working!" He too fired shots at the Equestrian soldiers.

"Just keep up the pressure, and we might just make it out of this alive!" Raul threw a grenade towards the ponies.

Scootaloo took hold of the radio that was inside the tank. "I didn't think we would have to resort to this. I'm sending in the suicide soldiers." She pressed down on the broadcast button on the radio and cleared her throat. “This is General Scootaloo, looking for what’s left of Vaas’s Iron Wolves. Please respond, over.”

“Of course! Yes!” Sweetie Belle said. “I’ve been wondering where the suicide bombers have been this whole time.”

Thus spake the radio: "This is the Iron Wolves, over.”

Scootaloo smiled. "Good! We need you now. Send in the suicide team!"

Meanwhile, the resistance soldiers at the top of the hill were making good progress in combating the ponies. Raul barked at the men to “Keep up the pressure!” as he moved forward and took cover behind a tree. Since they had entered the woods, the resistance soldiers had managed to pushed the ponies back a few feet, as well as lower their death toll percentage by ten percent. They were making great progress.

"Where are they?" Scootaloo was angry that the suicide soldiers had not yet arrived.

Sweetie Belle had been loading the tank’s cannon and firing of shots towards the resistance soldiers, since those were their enemies. Most of her shots had either missed or only taken out a few soldiers at a time. "Maybe they’re held up?" she asked when she stopped to load the cannon again.

"Don't be so stupid! They are not idiots like you! They are an efficient group of soldiers who are so dedicated to our cause that they will risk their lives!"

"That's only because last night you threatened to not only kill them, but that you would find their families and kill them too,” said Sweetie Belle. “That’s bad management strategy. I think you got that from a Walmart employee handbook.”

"Yes, well, that doesn't matter! They are loyal to us. That is what is important!"

Elian finished off his ammo clip in his M16 by taking out a group of five ponies, then moved up to Raul and gave a cheer. “Yippee skip! We are doing marvellous!”

"Let's save the praise for now!” said Raul, not wanting to get too cocky too quickly.

“I was praising the now.”

“No, I mean this is still anyone's battle!"

Becky still waited behind the Humvee, listening to the battle and growing ever more tired of it. Perhaps you know how she felt: The constant toll of death and fearing for your life is very taxing on the human system. "I should be there!" She reloaded her M1 Garand and held it for a moment. She placed it down then picked it back up again and studied the weapon. Her urge to join the battle was growing. "Screw this!" She climbed to her feet, lifting her M1 Garand up high, which wasn't easy given her wound. "I refuse to stay here!" She charged through the fading smoke and joined the resistance soldiers in battle. As she entered the woods, she found herself amazed at how well the resistance was doing. There were more dead ponies in the woods than there were resistance soldiers, and she found that she didn't have to be all that careful whilst catching up to the rest of the resistance soldiers, as the ponies were too busy focusing on them.

Becky charged over to a fallen tree and took cover behind it along with three other soldiers. She rested the barrel of the M1 Garand along the trunk. "Go to Hell," she said before firing a few bullets. The bullets spun through the air and found themselves digging deep into the Equestrian soldiers. Everything seemed to be going well, at least until there came a frightening mob of men charging from both sides of the Resistance’s flanks. These men were dressed in ragged clothing and tattered shoes. Some had bombs strapped to their chests, and others just charged forward with bladed weapons such as machetes, katanas, axes, swords, bayonets, spears, poleaxes, lances, daggers, bat’leths, katars, knives, and pairs of scissors. These were the suicide soldiers, and they were driven by fear of Scootaloo and hatred of the resistance.

"Who the heck are they?" asked Elian, who had not read the tactical report above. He watched one of the Iron Wolf soldiers run into a group of three resistance soldiers before blowing himself, and the soldiers, to pieces.

"I don't fucking know, but don't let them get close!" said Raul as he directed his fire to the advancing suicide soldiers. The resistance now had a new problem. They had stopped firing at the ponies and had started to focus on the suicide soldiers, which left them vulnerable to pony fire. The resistance death toll started to increase once again.

"Yes, finally!" Scootaloo laughed with joy as she watched the suicide soldiers do their work for them.

"I can't believe this is working," said Sweetie Belle.

"Fear. It's the key aspect to having true power!" Scootaloo knew she was so mature to give into that mentality. She then pushed Belle out of the driver seat of the tank and took over. "Come, let's finish this! We’ll make things nice and toasty!”

Raul caught sight of the tanks mobilising. “Excrement! Fall back, everyone!” His throat was starting to taste of blood from trying to yell over all the noise. Elian sprinted towards the rest of the soldiers, relaying Raul’s message for him. The soldiers passed the message down the lines as they all began to fall back, not unlike the “twilight bark” made popular by *101 Dalmatians.* Raul was nearly out of the woods when suddenly™ he was tackled to the floor. He crashed to the dirt and rolled over a few times. His weapon flew from his hands and disappeared into the shrubbery. When he landed upon his back, he saw one of the suicide soldiers standing in front of him, holding a sword which dripped with the blood of a few resistance soldiers.

The soldier let out a chuckle. "What an honour to be able to take out the mighty Raul Castro!" He laughed as he raised his sword, but Raul saw nothing funny about this situation. He was certain he was about to die. At that moment, a loud shot went off close by, and the soldier's torso was blasted open. He let out a final shriek as his body flew back. Raul quickly turned his head to see Daryl Dixon there, his left hand stretched out and his right hand holding a trench gun, the barrel still smoking.

Raul let out a chuckle and took his hand. Daryl pulled him to his feet. "You okay?"

"Thanks to you, yes." Raul nodded towards the tree line. "Come on. we need to get out of here.”

"Lead the way,” Daryl said, and the two men then charged off out through the trees.

Raul and Daryl returned to the Humvee that Raul, Elian and Becky had been trapped behind at the start of this conflict, which was kind of a feat given all the confusion. "Quick, take cover!" Raul said needlessly as he slid across the bonnet of the Humvee. He landed on both feet at the other side and ducked down beside the vehicle.

Daryl did the same thing. "What do we do now?" he asked.

Raul peeked his head back over the bonnet. He could see the resistance soldiers all charging out of the woods and towards the vehicles for cover. Past them, he could see the ponies. This time, they were actually advancing to take out the soldiers. This meant that soon they would be at the disadvantage as they would no longer have the cover of the trees. This made Raul smile. "We use the heavy MG on the Humvee. They are giving up their cover like fools! We have the upper hand here!"

Daryl gave a nod. "Finally something goes our way."

Before long, Becky and Elian came charging out of the woods. Raul saw them and waved them over where they joined the others in taking cover. Despite his invitation, Raul was less than accommodating. "I thought I told you to stay here!" he snapped.

"I did say that I wasn't going to! I refuse to be sat back whilst everyone else is fighting!" Becky said.

"I am your commanding officer, and you will accept my orders, despite the fact if you like them or not!" Raul noticed Becky roll her eyes and was about to continue on at her when he was stopped by Elian.

"Raul, this really isn't the time, my friend! What are we going to do? These ponies are coming to gun us down like Americans invading a suburban homestead!” said Elian.

"He's right! They had tanks!" added Becky.

Raul sighed. "We got the Humvee’s heavy MG to help take out the foot soldiers, but I have nothing here to help take out the tanks."

"Damn! Looks like we are going to have to rely on our comrades for that," said Elian. “Somehow.”

"No, we don't," said Daryl. "The truck I was in was loaded with weapons, including RPGs.[33] If we get over there, we might be able to get a few."

"Yeah, that's if others haven't already taken them," Raul said.

Daryl shook his head. "I doubt it. Everyone I was with on that truck either died when we were attacked, or what few remained died in the woods. Want me to lead you there?”

"No, I think it’s your turn to guard Becky. Me and Elian will go get the weapons.”

"Excuse me?" asked Becky. “Why can’t Daryl go with you? Why can’t I go with him?”

"You stay here with him." Raul then addressed Daryl. "If she tries to leave, just shoot her, please." He had a slight joking tone, but it was still an incredibly cold thing to say. Becky certainly wasn’t amused, and Daryl gave an unsettling smile and nodded.

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[33] Rocket-propelled grenades, not role-playing games. For more information on the Haich Versus P role-playing game, keep checking the wiki at http://hvp.wikia.com/!

Raul and Elian charged through the crowded dirt road towards the overturned truck that Daryl had been traveling in. "Keep you head down!" said Raul, even though he and Elian were already doing that. The explosions and gunfire only seemed constant when people were trying to speak. Elian charged forward to the truck and dove down into prone, as there was no cover. Raul copied his actions. Some of the crates had fallen out of the back of the truck and now lay a few feet away. Elian commando-crawled over to the crates in order to riffle through them. Each was marked with the name of the weapon that was inside written in white along with the ammunition it had, and any attachments. There was even a huge sticker sheet of decals, but there was no time to check them out. Instead, he asked Raul to help him look. He pushed away some crates of assault riffles, and Raul helped to look at the crates with a great and efficient speed.

"Ha, look at them run!" Scootaloo laughed as she advanced forward in the tank. “Cutie Mark Crusaders Tank Patrol!”

“Well, what’s left of us,” said Sweetie Belle, who was just behind her and was also inside the tank. "Still, at least the plan is working!"

"Of course it is! I told you it would!" Scootaloo’s arrogance was palpable.

"What happens if we hit the nuke?" asked Sweetie Belle, realising that hitting the nuke would be a great disaster.

"Big boom. We still would have accomplished our goals.” Scootaloo fired a tank shell into a vehicle with around four resistance soldiers hiding behind it. The soldiers flew back, all of them missing several limbs and one of them losing his head. Scootaloo giggled.

"Wait, what do you mean by 'we would have still accomplished our goals'?" Sweetie Belle asked. Scootaloo ignored her because Scootaloo was being a bitch. "Scootaloo?"

"What?" snapped Scootaloo, as if one wasn’t expected to respond when asked a question.

"I said—“

"I know what you said!"

"Then why didn't you respond?"

"It's not the fucking time! Shut up!"

"I deserve to know!" Sweetie Belle stamped her hoof and puffed out her cheeks in consternation.

"Shut up!" Scootaloo slammed her hoof on the console to fire another tank shell. This one missed. "God dammit, you made me miss!" She let out an angry scream.

"I'm just asking! I want to know!" carried on Belle, who was alone in her determination to know the answer to her question. Scootaloo let out a roar of impatient anger. Because she had anger management issues, she then pulled her Unishot from her belt and fired it straight into Sweetie Belle’s chest. Sweetie Belle let out a cry and then gasped. She felt her body starting to shut down, then she collapsed to the floor as her body filled with the incurable poison. She did not even twitch as all the pleasure receptors in her body shut down. Nothing she could do could alieve the singularity of pain that engulfed her.

"I warned you to shut up.” Scootaloo went back to controlling the tank as if nothing had happened and she had not just wasted years of Equestrian research by killing off another recipient of the hormone experimentation.

Daryl climbed into the Humvee he and Becky hid behind and opened the top hatch. He took a hold of the heavy MG and cocked it, getting an erection from doing so. "Make sure no one flanks me!" he told Becky.

"Got it!" She rested the barrel of her M1 Garand on the bonnet of the Humvee to gaze down its sights.

"Go to Hell, you pony scum!" Daryl opened fire upon the advancing ponies, shredding through a good ten ponies almost instantly, and he continued to keep up that line of fire. Becky could see a small group of three ponies who were out of his line of fire to the left of the Humvee readying their weapons to take him out, so she aimed her fire on them. The riffle jolted with each shot as Becky put four rounds into the three ponies. Her riffle then clicked, and she popped out the empty ammo clip. She ducked behind cover to load a fresh one in. For those of you who skipped Part III, this was known as “reloading”.

Daryl let out a glorious laugh as he mowed down nearly forty pony foot soldiers in the short time he had been on the heavy MG. "You want a fight? I'll give you a fight, you assholes!" His laughter continued with his slaughter. That is when Scootaloo came rolling out of the woods in her tank, and the first thing she saw was Daryl on the heavy MG, attracting a lot of aggro.[34] She aimed her cannon towards the Humvee, and when Daryl saw this, he knew he had no time to escape. "Aw, come on!”

[34] Aggression.

Becky popped her head back over the Humvee just in time to see Scootaloo fire the tank shell. She didn't even have time to pointlessly swear as she dived out of the way. Scootaloo's tank shell crashed into the side of the Humvee, creating a magnificent explosion that completely obliterated Daryl's body. Becky was thrown further away, but managed to survive the blast with a ringing in her ears and no serious wounds.

"Ha! I love this!" For once, Scootaloo had lightened the fuck up, and she savoured the blast as the Humvee flew up into the air in many pieces. In fact, she was having more fun destroying vehicles than she was people. The rest of the tanks had made it out of the woods, and as well as having to deal with all the soldiers, the resistance now had to deal with a line of tanks.

"Coprolite, we need to find those RPGs, quick!" Raul watched the tanks emerging from the woods.

Elian in the meantime found a crate that said RPG on it. "Yes, I got one!" He raised both fists and wiggled in celebration. He grabbed hold of the crate and jumped to his feet, rushing around to the side of the truck that was facing away from the battle.

Raul followed after him. "Quick, get it open!" he ordered, which was what Elian was doing. Elian laid his gun on the ground and pried open the lid with his hunting knife and all his strength. He smiled like he'd just opened a Christmas present. However, the RPG inside the crate only had four rockets with it. "Is that it?" asked Raul.

"It's all we got. Better make them count." Elian loaded a rocket into the RPG. "I bet the Americans get more rockets with *their* RPGs."

Raul quirked a brow. "What is it with you and the Americans? You were only a kid when you went there. That was a long time ago. Also, technically, we're in Central America, so we're Americans too in that respect." Elian didn't answer him, so Raul just held his hands out. "Never mind. Pass that here." Elian gave a nod and handed the RPG to Raul, who lifted the heavy weapon up and rested it over his right shoulder. He placed his right hand around the handle and his left hand on the stock. "Let's hope this can make a difference." He sighed as though he didn't really believe that, then poked out from cover and aimed the RPG towards a tank. He took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger.

The RPG gave a vicious jolt as the rocket flew from the barrel and went hurdling towards a tank. It bent slightly whilst travelling through the air, but it managed to slam straight into the body work of the tank, which exploded on impact. The operators were killed instantly. Raul gave a laugh as if somebody told a fart joke and went back behind cover. "Damn, this thing works like a charm!"

Elian sulked as he handed Raul another rocket. Raul loaded it into the RPG with a huge grin on his face. "These bastardos won't know what hit them." He popped back around the corner and fired off another shot which obliterated yet another tank. "Hell yeah!" When he came back into cover, Elian was there to offer him one of the last two remaining rockets.

Still, he'd fired one rocket too many to stave off aggro. Scootaloo had seen Raul take out the second tank and now knew his location. She aimed the barrel of her tank towards the truck and chuckled. "Come back around that corner. I dare you."

Raul loaded the third rocket into the RPG. "I need to get myself one of these things when this war is all over."

"We will find another when you have used all the rockets," said Elian.

"Hell yeah, we will!" Raul took a deep breath and yet again popped out from under cover.

"Got you." Scootaloo fired a tank shell straight at Raul. Elian had been watching as Raul was about to pull the trigger to his RPG when Scootaloo's tank shell crashed not too far from Raul's feet. The explosion was loud and powerful. So powerful, in fact, that it sent Elian flying backwards and crashing to the ground. He bounced a few more feet and went tumbling down the steep hill, but he managed to grasp onto an outcropping of a tree and pull himself back up before the pain really struck him. The ringing in his ears stopped after a few moments and was replaced by the painful and devastating screams of Raul. Elian sat up and looked to his right. There lay Raul. Both his legs, as well as his right arm, were gone, and the right side of his face was horribly burnt.

Scootaloo gave a loud and joyful cheer after firing the shell at Raul. "Damn, did you see him fly?" she asked, turning to Sweetie Belle. She remembered she'd just recently killed her and just stared at her body. "Oh that's right, I killed you." She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh well. Survival of the fittest, I suppose." With a dumb chuckle, she returned to firing towards various pockets of resistance soldiers, and she cheered each time she saw their limbs fly up in the air.

"Ah! God, help! Someone help me!" screamed Raul as the pain was too unbearable. Elian crawled over to him and rested Raul's head on his knee. He just sat there in shock, not knowing what he could do. He wasn't a doctor, and even if he was, he had no medical supplies. Even if he was, the middle of a goddamn battlefield was no place for reattaching limbs. Raul continued to scream, louder and harder, his face beat red and scrunched up in horror. Elian lowered his head and gave a heavy sigh. There was no chance that Raul was going to survive. None that he could see anyway. Raul was most certainly going to die.

Not right away, of course. Raul continued to cry out as the burns to his face and the bloody stumps of his missing limbs caused a great deal of pain. One says “a great deal”, but one makes understatements from time to time. Calling Raul’s pain a “great deal” would be like calling the absolute zero temperatures of outer space’s vacuum “a might nippy” or like saying it’s a bit late to keep whining about Jar Jar Binks’s character in the 1999 Star Wars film. It’s a bit petty, to put it mildly. To Raul, his pain was like an entire dimension of cruel sensation, one where the afterlife had already seized hold of him, and it was a pittance to invoke the name of the hypothetical, metaphysical anthropomorphization of the creative forces of that universe. “Oh, God!” he choked out. He flailed his missing limbs much in the way one struggles to get out of bed mornings.

Elian had to think of something fast before Raul bled to death. If only those Hallmark guys were here right now. "Hold on, man. You survived the explosion. That's a sign you’re going to be just fine!" He was usually pretty full of himself, but right now he was having trouble believing his own words.

"It hurts!" screamed Raul. Another understatement.

"I know, man., just let me think." Elian raced through the possible options he now had. He could find the arm and legs somewhere and try sticking them back on somehow. He didn’t have any glue or a staple gun or Scotch tape, though. That's when he had an idea. It wasn't perfect, and it wasn't definitely going to work, but it was something. Elian lifted Raul's head off of his knee and rested in on the dirty, rocky ground. Next, he leapt around to the two bleeding stumps that once had Raul's legs attached to the end of them and unbuckled his belt. He pulled it out from his combat trousers and pushed Raul's stumps together before wrapping the belt around them. "This is going to hurt, but bear with me." He pulled the belt tightly around the stumps. Raul screamed as the pain doubled when the belt tightened around his legs. Elian noticed that this had slowed the blood flowing out of the stumps but not completely stopped it. It did provide more time for him, though, and that was some sort of progress, I guess.

Elian then unbuckled Raul's belt and pulled that off, not that much remained of his pants to hold up. "One more, then we can try and get you out of here,” he said, moving towards the stump which once had Raul's right arm attached to it.

"Oh, God, please! Please, no!" Raul begged and begged from some mystical source which couldn’t save him. He couldn’t take much pain, to tell the truth. What a pussy.

Elian raised the stump onto his knees then wrapped the belt around it. "I'm sorry, but I need to do this. Just take a deep breath." Raul gritted his teeth together and inhaled deeply as Elian used as much strength as possible to pull the belt as tight as possible. Raul let out a roar of pain as more tears rushed from his eyes, and Elian tried in vain to comfort him. "I know, man. I know it hurts, but trust me, it will do you some good.”

Raul continued to scream, although the belt around the arm seemed to work better than the one around the legs. It practically had stopped all the bleeding. Elian let out a sigh of relief. "That will hold you for now, but I got to get you out of here,” he said.

"It hurts!" cried Raul, as if we didn’t know by now.

"I know, man. Just trust me, you’re going to be fine."

"Oh God, what have they done to me?" Raul wailed with the realisation that if he did by some miracle live, he would spend the rest of his life as a cripple, and he would no longer be able to lead men into battle and show courage and skill upon the battlefield. He choked on his own spit from fury. “I’m a gimp, Daddy!”

Becky charged through the battlefield, her head ducked low and her riffle held tightly against her chest. She searched for Elian and Raul as she rushed forward, taking quick cover when able to regain her breath, before charging onwards. She arrived at the turned over truck, and as she drew close to it, she could hear the deathly cries of Raul making a scene. She charged around the truck to find him lying on the ground, his legs and one of his arms missing, and Elian trying to keep him calm. Taking to one knee, she asked, “What happened here?”

Elian looked up and stammered like a child found over an empty cookie jar. “He was like this when I found him,” he said. “A tank got him. What are you doing here? Where's Daryl?"

“Uh, another tank. He didn’t make out,” she said, “from the explosion that seared his body.”

Raul continued to sob and cry out in pain. "Those bastards! Rot in hell!"

"Sir, you need to try and keep calm. You’re only doing yourself more damage," said Elian. Raul's heart was racing and therefore pumping more blood. This was bad, as Elian had not managed to fully stop the bleeding. As a result, Raul was bleeding to death at a steady pace.

"What the hell are we going to do with him?" asked Becky.

Elian shrugged unhelpfully. "I don't know, but whatever it is, we need to do it fast. He won't survive much longer." He said this right out loud where Raul could hear every word. What a time for the munitions fire to stall.

"Oh God! I'm going to die!" Raul sobbed some more.

"Just remain calm, and you will pull through this!" Elian said, although he was wrong. He thought that if Raul continued on like this, that would be the straw that broke the camel's back, and he would kill himself.

Then Becky got an idea. "We need to get him some medical help!"

Elian swung his arms out. "Just look around; there isn't[35] any here. Half our medics are dead or missing or off with other soldiers or clowning around, and the nearest hospital is miles back across the island."

Raul started to gasp violently for air and his body started to jolt wildly out of control. "Oh God, what's happening?" squealed Becky. "He's getting gross! What can we do?"

"Shit! His body's going into shock!" Elian placed his hands on Raul's shoulders in an attempt to stop the violent jolt of his body. "There's nothing we can do unless you got morphine!"

"But then he'll get addicted!" Becky managed to calm her breath. "Is he going to die?" she asked. Elian looked to her and the two made eye contact. He gave her a slow nod. She gasped and turned away so that Raul would not see the look on her face. He was too busy anyway, dropping his jaw at Elian's nod. He instead looked aside and tried to beg for help, but he was having trouble getting any breath.

Elian continued to lie. "Calm down; it's just your body reacting to the shock. You're going to be fine. Just let it pass." Raul's gasping started to slow and his body jolted less and less until he became still. His eyes rolled to the back of his head.

"Oh god. Is he..?" Becky couldn't repeat the word "dead".

Elian gave a nod and sighed heavily. "He's dead." Raul looked at him, but Elian closed his eyelids with his fingers. Raul opened his eyes and glared at him as he gasped out his last few breaths, but by then, Elian and Becky had climbed to their feet.

Scootaloo continued to slaughter the resistance soldiers until she saw Becky rushing past her tank and heading towards the big overturned truck that she and Elian were behind. With an evil grin, she turned her cannon on them. She wondered how many men were behind the truck and fired the cannon. She was expecting another glorious explosion but was instantly let down when she realised she needed to load the cannon once again. "Aw, come on! Alright, just bear with me," she said aloud as if she was talking to Becky and Elian. "Stupid Sweetie Belle. Just because you're dead, apparently you can keep a cannon loaded!" She struggled to lift another tank shell into the cannon. Once she had loaded it, she then took her seat back at the controls and cleared her throat. "Take two."

Becky and Elian stood around with their thumbs up their asses, until she asked him what to do next. Elian gave a useless shrug. "Raul was commanding this army. If he's gone, then aren't you in charge now?" she asked.

"I don't know!" Elian snapped. He was getting sick of being asked questions that he had no idea how to answer. "My adoptive father, Fidel, knew I didn't like guns, so I didn't have to do the training required for being a general or whatever."

"We ought to do something before—" Becky's sentence was cut short when Scootaloo's tank shell slammed into the other side of the truck, causing an enormous explosion which sent both her and Elian flying back off of the edge of the hill. The two slammed into nearly every tree they passed on the way down, letting out curses and painful cries as they went. Elian rebounded off one tree and found himself catapulting back into another. He let out a strong cry of pain as he felt a branch from one of the trees pierce his back. When they came to the steep drop, they both let out a cry as they plummeted off of it and into the murky water below.

Scootaloo frowned when she discovered that there were no bodies to desecrate behind the truck. She found it damned disappointing, but there were still lots of other bodies, some of them even still alive and ripe for the blasting. She sought these out to destroy with her new favourite toy, griping about the lack of challenge in her whiny, petulant voice, and obliterated yet another Humvee where soldiers had taken cover. "Stupid campers!" The soldiers let out their cries before their gruesome deaths, and Scootaloo laughed at them. She wanted tank ammunition that could laugh instead of making a big boom. She wanted all the Human Resistance to stand in a group like they were having her snap their photo, so she could see how high her combo could go. She wanted a couple of new Cutie Mark Crusaders to gloat over and shoot whenever they tried to use their petty "reasoning" and "logic" on her. "I have to admit though, I love the way they scream like frightened fillies before they die!"

[35] Sic.

“Flaming diarrhoea, they are onto us! Those are ponies firing at us, or my middle name isn’t Filo!” said Pedro. A wave of nearly two hundred ponies was chasing them down.

“Chrissie, you need to get us moving faster!” Rodrigo ordered. “Use more fast! More of the fast!”

Chrissie saw the merit in her husband’s brilliant strategy, but it wasn’t that simple. “I'm already flooring it! This thing won’t go much faster on these crap roads!”

Pedro raised his Bizon and fired off at the incoming enemy vehicles and foot soldiers. His bullets sprayed out of the barrel of his gun and began to crash into the body work of the closest enemy vehicle, with only one of the bullets managing to pierce through the windscreen and strike the driver in the shoulder. This, however, worked well, as it caused the driver to let go of the wheel to comfort their wound, making them lose control of their vehicle. Pedro then watched as the pony vehicle turned so the right side was facing him before it toppled over. The other pony vehicles were coming in too fast and couldn't stop, so they ended up crashing straight into the vehicle as well, flipping themselves. This slowed the ponies down and gave Pedro, Rodrigo, and Chrissie a ten-minute advantage. Pedro gave a shrug. “That works, I guess.”

Rodrigo looked in the rear-view mirror and smiled. “Buen trabajo, Pedro!” he called to the back of the truck. “Hemos derrotado ésos escoria vil pony esta vez!”

“Maldita derecha era!” responded Pedro with a smile.

After about five more minutes, they passed by a bar, and Rodrigo ordered Chrissie to pull over."Qué? ¿Estás demente? Coger para arriba!" It defied her sense of self-preservation, but she did it.

“¿Qué demonios estamos haciendo?" Pedro asked as Rodrigo leaped out of the back of the truck. Rodrigo ignored his question, instead barking for Pedro to follow him as he ran towards the barn. Pedro complied, but he would have been faster if Rodrigo had taken just a few seconds to explain his plan. “¿Qué demonios estamos haciendo? Estarán con nosotros pronto!”

Still Rodrigo ignored Pedro instead of validating his trusted companion’s concerns regarding their well-being in a life-threatening situation. Instead, he pushed open the heavy barn door. Tucked away inside was a fairly new-looking truck with an open, flat back. When Pedro caught up, he asked, “Está bien. ¿Qué el infierno nos vamos a hacer con eso?"

Rodrigo waved Chrissie over, who was still seated in their truck. She shifted into gear and drove over. After ordering the pull over and walking the way up to the barn and taking a look inside, Rodrigo explained his idea to Pedro beside him. “Vamos a mover el nuke a este camión nuevo. Entonces, cuando los caballos vienen por el camino, enviamos la precipitan una vieja a través de los árboles. Me y siga después de él, todos los ponis de dibujo después de nosotros. Una vez que pasen, Chrissie puede entonces obtener la nuke de aquí y a los muelles antes de que se den cuenta de lo que ha sucedido.”

Chrissie shook her head. “I’m sorry, could you say that again in Russian? It sounds like you want to use the old truck for a decoy and leave me on my own.”

“You can handle it, Chrissie,” Rodrigo said to his wife. “You take the nuke in this truck and head to the docks. This isn't up for debate. This is what we are doing. Let's hurry this up!”

It took the ponies less than five minutes to recover from the crash and begin mobilising towards the barn. During this time, Rodrigo and Pedro had just managed to get the nuke onto the new truck. Chrissie had taken to the driver seat and still wasn’t sold on the plan. “I don't like this,” she reiterated, sticking her head out of the window of the truck.

Rodrigo leaned up and gave her a soft kiss on the lips. “Don't worry. I'll make it back to you.”

Chrissie then said the two most unlucky words in any language, the two words you never want to say if you want to be sure everything will turn out alright, the two words that will make you believe in the superstitious folly of jinxes: “You promise?”

And of course her husband answered, “I promise.” It was like digging a pit and covering it up with dirt and leaves, walking over it yourself only to find it will hold your weight, then jumping up and down on it until it collapses beneath your feet. Making a promise, like gambling, is making a prediction about the future, but predictions and guarantees are two different words. It’s a fool’s hope to depend upon things which have not come to pass, and even knowing a foregone conclusion will bring to further happiness simply by promising it. Even knowing certain outcomes of this war, in the process of recording it, I cannot promise that Rodrigo and Chrissie will remain together. I cannot promise that the nuclear device will be put to good ends. I cannot promise that all who have died will stay dead. What I can promise is that there is still more tragedy to come, and

if any promise I make will bring any semblance of happiness, it is that there is only one more book left in this series of atrocities, and the history of the human race and its war with the Equestrians will finally come to its close.

Pedro had been keeping watch from behind the cover of the barn door, and now he could see the enemy vehicles coming around the dirt road. He cocked his Bizon. “Rodrigo, they are inbound.”

“Understood!” Rodrigo picked up a piece of wood lying on the barn floor and opened the bullet-ridden front door. He turned the key in the ignition, and the engine roared to life. “You ready, Pedro?” When Pedro gave a nod, Rodrigo winked to Chrissie. He then jammed the piece of wood onto the accelerator. The truck sped forward and out of the barn, off into the surrounding tree line.

The ponies pulled over immediately upon seeing the truck speeding off into the tree. “After them on hoof! The truck won’t get far through the trees!” said the highest-ranking pony, an earth pony by the name of Brute Force. His minions demobilised.

Pedro aimed down the barrel of his gun at their forces, and Rodrigo took a knee next to him. “We fire off a few rounds, take a few of the close ones, then we’re going to make a run for the tree line. The idea’s to make it look like we’re protecting the truck.” He gave Pedro a pat on the shoulder. “Be safe out there.”

“Aren't I always?” Pedro grinned. Rodrigo raised his AK12, and the two men watched the ponies as they rushed towards the tree line across from them. After a few seconds, they pulled their triggers. The bullets let out a crackle as they spurted from the end of their weapons and spun towards the ponies. Pedro took three down, and Rodrigo took two. The ponies dropped to the dirt whilst the others spun to face towards the barn. Rodrigo gave the signal and leapt to his feet. Pedro joined him in darting out of the barn as the ponies opened fire upon it. Pedro fired two quick, three-round bursts at the ponies as he charged past. His bullets sprayed off of their vehicles and injured one, but apart from that he held their aggro.

Rodrigo was the first to burst through into the trees, seeking the path the truck had taken. The trail of tracks and broken branches was easy to find. He ordered Pedro to follow him as he rushed forth. Bullets hissed past the duo, missing them both by mere centimetres. Even as a bullet cut through his short and grazed his flesh, he pushed for the charge. They ran through the woods with the ponies in hot pursuit, continuing to fire upon them. This went on for a good five minutes before they came to a rocky formation which looked as if it would provide good cover. Both men pressed their backs against it for cover.

“What's step two of our genius little plan?” asked Pedro, activating his sarcasm mode.

Rodrigo peered over the top of the rock. “We take a few out, hold here as long as we can, and press on. Sound easy enough?” Pedro shrugged. They rested the barrels of their weapons on the rock and aimed down their sights, which was the best place for it. They set their gunfire to single burst. Rodrigo aimed his weapon to one of the first wave of ponies. He squeezed the trigger, and his bullet made a pony’s head pop. He then aimed slightly to the left and tapped his trigger twice. The gun jolted as two bullets spun from his barrel and entered another pony’s chest. Pedro kept a steady and quick fire rate of putting one bullet into pony heads. He took four down with one quick rapid tap tactic. The ponies continued to funnel themselves down into the line of Rodrigo and Pedro's fire, and their bodies predictably collapsed to be replaced with more enemy soldiers.

“How many are there?” Pedro asked once he’d put down a total of twelve ponies.

“Just keep up the fire! Don’t keep score!” Rodrigo had only taken down seven ponies himself. The two continued to take down the advancing enemies for approximately another square five minutes before too many were getting too close. Rodrigo ducked down behind the rock whilst Pedro continued to take down the enemy. “Pedro, we need to move out!”

Pedro gave a nod, but refused to take his eyes away from the enemy. He was “in the zone”, a phrase which is metaphorical in nature and is unrelated to when someone is in the no parking zone of a fire lane outside of a department store, or following a truck too closely in its “no zone”. Instead, being “in the zone” refers to when one is experiencing a long streak of good performance, such as racking up combos in a video game, or getting through many chapters of compiling these military reports in a single night. After a second, he remembered to respond. “Just go! I'll provide cover fire before catching up.” He squeezed his trigger two more times, each bullet finding its way into an enemy's skull.

“I'm going to move up a few meters, then I'm going to turn and provide cover fire for you whilst you run to me. Then we try and get away from these fuckers. This should have been more than enough time for Chrissie to get a good head start for the docks,” Rodrigo said. Pedro did not reply, instead focusing on taking down the enemies. “Pedro! Did you hear me?”

Pedro leant down behind the rock to reload. Whilst doing so, he looked to Rodrigo. “I heard! Just go!” He slipped the new ammo clip into his weapon and popped back out of cover to continue his fire. Rodrigo took a deep breath before leaping to his feet and sprinting down further into the woods. Pedro continued his fire, though a few ponies were getting rather close now, so he had to keep ducking down behind the rock to avoid being shot. Bits of rock shot up at his face as enemy bullets chipped away at it. He swore and switched his Bizon to “fully auto”, so that when he squeezed the trigger, his blind fire sent a wave of bullet out across the enemy lines. His rounds failed to deal any fatal damage, although they did manage to wound three ponies and send two diving behind cover. This gave him a decent enough clearing to come back up out of cover and deal some real damage once again.

Rodrigo continued on through the trees for a short way before spinning on his heels and dropping to one knee. “Pedro, move! I got you covered!” Rodrigo shouted as he opened fire on the ponies. Pedro climbed to his feet to race towards Rodrigo, but things didn't go as smoothly for him. A bullet came flying from the barrel of a pony’s gun and dug straight into the back of his left thigh. He let out a cry of pain and collapsed to his knees. Rodrigo cursed and took out the culprit with a clean head shot. “Pedro! You got to fight through the pain! Get up!”

Pedro bit down on his bottom lip and tried to concentrate. One can’t actually fight pain, as pain isn’t a physical object one can hit with fists or a lead pipe or a garbage can. He groaned and struggled to his feet, then limped towards Rodrigo with a quick pace. He had made it towards him before he was struck by yet another bullet. This one entered in through the back of his left shoulder blade and travelled through his body, narrowly missing his left atrium, before shooting out of his right breast. He gasped and fell to his knees once again. With every breath he took, he felt a strong stabbing pain running through his upper torso. He coughed up his own blood before collapsing to the forest floor.

“Pedro!” Rodrigo took his fallen friend in his arms and stared down at him. Pedro looked back up with lifeless eyes. “Pedro! Pedro, stay with me!” Rodrigo begged, but it was too late. Pedro was dead, and there was no time to mourn him. This was made more than apparent by a bullet that hissed past Rodrigo’s ear.

He jolted slightly with a quick scare before looking up to see his enemies. Ponies swarmed the woods like vast droves of locusts. Behind every tree there were at least two neighbouring ponies, both firing their weapons towards him. He grabbed his AK12 and looked down at Pedro's staring eyes. Ignoring the stench of Pedro’s vacated bowels, he ran his fingers down across Pedro's face to push his eyelids back over his eyes. It didn’t work, because rigor mortis had already set in. “I'm sorry. Your death won’t be in vain.” Rodrigo shed a single tear. Another bulled hissed past him, signalling it was time to go. He climbed to his feet and flicked his AK12 to automatic fire. As he ran backwards, he held down the trigger of his riffle, releasing a wave of deadly and unpredictable bullets which found themselves tearing through trees and bushes and, on one or two occasions, even a pony's torso. He wasn't trying to get kills; he was trying to suppress the ponies so he could make his escape, but this was not working as there were too many of them. He found himself having to leap side to side as he ran to avoid being tagged by the return fire that the ponies graced him with. He stopped at a tree twenty metres from the ponies so that he could reload his weapon. Once doing that, he flicked it back to single fire and turned to face them. *Okay, just take a couple of the close ones out and fall back. You’re going to be fine*, he thought to himself, not that he would think to anyone else.

He then raised his weapon and stared down its barrel. “Viva La Federation.” He lined up his unlucky targets and pulled the trigger. Pony heads popped like soda cans that had been shook up. Their brains and blood sprayed up into the air with a certain grace which not many people got to see first-hand. Their bodies went stiff and drooped, but some fell back and twitched. Rodrigo got carried away. His heart burned with rage and grief, and he continued to line up shots and pull his trigger. He noticed the bullets shooting past him anymore; he just stood his ground and kept on taking out pony soldiers. Before he knew it, he had burned through an entire ammo clip, and when he lined up another shot and pulled the trigger, the gun let out a click. “Mierda!” he cursed, fumbling around in his harness for another. When he found one in the top left breast pocket of his harness, he smiled and pulled it out before slipping it into the weapon and cocking it. He then raised his gun and was about to continue his slaughter when he was taken off guard by a bullet that came tearing through the tree he was using as cover. He let out a cry of pain as the bullet continued on into his left shoulder, bringing a few splinters from the tree with it.

Rodrigo crumpled to the ground. He’d been shot many times before in his career, yet the pain never seemed to ease. He recalled it was time to fall back, and so rolled onto his belly, as now the ponies were close enough to get a shot off at a standing target. He commando-crawled as fast as he could through the dirt and further down the hill, dragging himself over the sharp sticks and stones which coated the terrain. Due to the fact he was going downhill, he was gaining a good speed from his crawl, and he’d made it halfway down when a grenade came rolling past him. He sighed and hung his head, and the grenade went off. It had rolled too far away from him to cause any serious damage, but the blast was strong enough to lift him off of his belly and send him up a few feet into the air before tumbling viciously down the wooded hill. He slammed into a tree, right shoulder first, and there was a loud crack sound as he heard his shoulder blade pop out of its socket. His weapon flew from his hand and was never seen again.

His body twisted around the tree and resumed its course downhill, crying out in pain and fear. His vision was blurred from his errant rolling and bouncing, going around and around and around, until he slammed into another tree, this time with the left side of his rib cage. Another loud series of cracks were heard as three of his ribs snapped in half, and the sudden crash made him bite down, which ended up with his teeth biting through the corner of his own tongue, severing it. Now his cries were more muffled due to the fact part of his tongue had been bitten off. He continued to roll uncontrollably down the hill, swallowing the part of his own severed tongue by accident. He came to a stop when his back slammed into a big rock and the wind was knocked straight out of him. The pain was too strong for him to even scream. Je didn't even try to move. For the moment he just looked up the hill, trying hard to see through his blurred vision. The ponies were quite a big distance from him. *This is your chance. Get moving. No!* he thought, trying hard to motivate himself to get away and hide.

But he remained still. He thought about moving, but his body was unresponsive. The pain had him paralysed. *Come on, damn you! Move!* The voice in his head screamed the command, yet it wasn't enough for his body to decide to get moving. The ponies were drawing closer. *Come on! You don't have much time!*
Rodrigo shut the voice in his head off and just closed his eyes. The pain he was in was just too great, and he thought that at least a bullet to the head would end it. He just waited, and waited, and waited for death to come.

Chapter Forty.

The mud and the water. The water bites back.

Nick let out one final cry as the Humvee slammed into the rocky waters. The sudden jolt made him hit his head and nearly knocked him out. He was lucky it only made him slightly dizzy. It took him a minute or two to realise what was now happening, but once he did, he began to panic. The driver's side panel of the windscreen had been obliterated when the vehicle had hit the water, and now water was pouring inside there as well as the open hatch at the top. The water poured in slower and slower as the Humvee sank deeper and deeper into the water thanks to the principles of water pressure.

"Anal seepage!" cursed Nick as the water started to rise up his torso. He couldn't believe this was happening to him a second time. First the tank in New York over a year ago, and now this. "This is exactly why I didn't join the navy." He needed to get out of the Humvee, and the quicker the better, because he couldn't breathe underwater. He looked up to the hatch at the top and first considered that maybe the hatch wouldn't be his best bet as that was where most of the water was coming in from, and the pressure would probably trap him. He then looked to the broken front windscreen. Maybe he would have better luck going through there instead.

The water had now made it up to his neck, making it difficult to tread to the driver's seat. He then checked both Gonzarlo's and Juan's pulses, as they both looked to be unconscious. He checked Gonzarlo's first, but there was no pulse. He gave an inconvenienced sigh and moved onto to Juan's neck. For a moment, it appeared that Juan too had no pulse, but just before Nick moved his hand away, he felt a weak pulse. He got a tight hold on Juan's shirt and used all of his strength to lift him out of his chair. He managed to do it with the help of all the adrenalin that was rushing through his body. He took a deep breath and pushed his way out through the broken windscreen of the Humvee, pushing Juan's narrower frame out first, before wriggling his own body through the narrow space afterward.

Nick let out a gasp as he burst out from under the water, but this time, there was no rescue boat of convenience waiting for him. He had his arms wrapped tightly around Juan's torso, and he was holding him above the water while trying to regain his own breath. He pushed himself back towards a little mud mound in the middle of the lake, struggling to pull Juan with him. A few times the weight overcame him and he slipped back under the water, but somehow he found the strength to resurface, spitting out the disgusting water he hadn't swallowed. Even if he did survive this, he wasn't going to feel good about it. He used all of his strength to lift Juan out of the water and onto the sorry patch of land, then lay on his back in the mud beside him and gazed up at the blue sky. "I'll never let go of you, buddy," he coughed, spewing up the last of the icky water. He became transfixed with the idyllic skies, revealed by the lake winds that pushed towards the land and tossed the smog of battle into the city. Seeing such a placid sight was downright surreal, knowing that not far away, the rough sounds of staccato shooting and screams meant people were dying.

People were dying, and it was easy for him to lose himself in the moment. He attained a kind of strange clarity in those minutes of watching the fickle white clouds play keep away with the glimmering sun, but he couldn't be sure of what he was seeing. He felt it was something important. When one sits in a dark room for a long time, and someone turns on a light, one is momentarily blinded as their vision takes time to adjust. Nick had spent so much time existing in a debilitating haze of fire that solidified his body like so many shards of glass that he'd lost sight of the days he'd spent wondering how a cloud gazes down on the earth.

The sounds of war once again returned to Nick's ears, creeping up on him like tinnitus. The sound came tumbling down the steep hill and the abrupt drop into the water where it swam after him. He rolled onto his belly before clambering to his feet.

Looking at that natural barrier to the lake, he saw there was no easy way up. At that moment, Juan let out a frightfully loud cough as he spat out water and sat up.

Nick knelt down next to him as he began to pant and look around frantically. "Don't worry, you're fine! We just got blown off of that damn hill!"

Juan looked around to the steep drop and gave a confused look. "We did?" he asked. He took a moment to catch his breath. "Where is Gonzarlo?"

Nick lowered his head and sighed. "He didn't make it."

"What do you mean, he didn't make it? Are you sure?" asked Juan as grief and anger gripped him.

"I'm sure. I checked for a pulse. He was gone."

"Wait, you don't know for sure that he was gone! You just maybe didn't feel a pulse."

"Trust me, he was gone. I checked for your pulse as well. If he was alive, then he would be here too. By the time I got to you, the water was up to our chins. I'm sorry. He's gone."

Juan shook his head and jumped to his feet. "What the hell do you know? You're just some rookie! Where is he?"

Nick pointed to the lake. "The Humvee went under. Like I said, we were totally submerged."

"You just left him there! How long has he been under?" Juan was yelling, even though his voice was hoarse, and Nick knew that he wasn't going to let this go. Not unless he knew for sure that Gonzarlo was dead.

Instead of telling him that Gonzarlo had only just gone under and watching Juan waste time as he went to 'save' his friend's life, Nick decided it would be better to lie. "An hour. He's been gone for about an hour."

"An hour! You left him to drown, you fucker!" Juan swung his right fist around and smacked Nick in the cheek. Nick went crashing down into the mud. Juan knelt down over him and grabbed him by the shirt with his left hand. "You fucker! You let him die!" Juan succumbed to the grief of losing a friend and was refusing to believe that his friend had already been killed by the time he hit the water, in case you hadn't gotten that. He raised his right fist again and planted down two more shots to Nick's face. Nick's head jerked with each strike and his left cheek split open. With every strike, he let out a groan of pain. When Juan pulled back his fist again like the chute of a pinball machine, Nick grabbed it with his left hand and dug the fingers of his right hand into the bullet wound in Juan's elbow. Juan cried in pain as Nick twisted his finger inside the wound. When he thought Juan was weak enough, Nick tore his finger out of the wound, formed a fist with his right hand, and then slammed it into Juan's temple. Juan flew off of Nick and Nick quickly climbed to his feet.

"You crazy son of a bitch!" Nick yelled.

"You left him to die!" cried Juan as he clutched his wound in an attempt to comfort the pain.

"He was already dead! I checked for a fucking pulse! When I say I'm sorry, I'm sorry, and it's your responsibility from then on to accept that!"

Juan lowered his head and shook it. "No. No, he can't have been. Gonzarlo was a tough son of a bitch. A drop like that wouldn't have killed him." The moment had passed and anger no longer suited him. Grief took over.

Nick watched this depletion work its way through Juan's body. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said for the umpteenth time, "but blaming me and trying to kill me won't bring him back. We've got bigger things to deal with here. We need to get back up that damn hill, and we need to do it fast."

Nick looked up at the steep drop. He had been examining it for a few minutes now and was trying to work out a way in which he could climb up it. So far he had already mapped out half the climb in his head, highlighting points he was confident he could climb up to or use to aim him in his climb. When the Equestrians had come to Canada, they used the ethical health care system to keep strong and their great expanse of beautiful, natural wilderness to hide, oftentimes climbing atop high, mighty trees from which to strike their foes or watch as they fell into traps. Those days were long gone now, and this cliff didn't have as many roots jutting from the earth as Nick would have preferred.

Juan had just been sitting in pensive silence, thinking about his fallen comrade, who had also been his best friend. He had noticed Nick's silence as well and was curious. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked, trying to get the lumps out of his throat to muster an angry tone.

"I'm figuring out what our best chance of climbing back up the hill is," said Nick.

"Are you fucking retarded? There ain't no way we are getting up that damn hill!" said Juan, whose grief had kept him in an angry and spiteful mood. Either that or he was just a jerk.

"Trust me, we can make it."

"In case you hadn't noticed, I have got a fucking hole in my god damn arm! There is no way in hell I'm going to be able to scale that fucking steep ass drop!"

Nick hung his head with a deep sigh and turned to look at Juan. He was right. There was no way he would be able to climb with his arm in that condition , and there was no way Nick would be able to carry him, so now he looked across the lake to the trees that stood beyond it. "I guess we take our chance over there then," he said, pointing in this direction.

"No, fuck that!" said Juan.

Nick was getting a little tired of the pissy attitude. "What do you mean? It's either we climb the steep drop and the hill after it, or we go through the trees."

"We don't know what kind of wildlife is beyond the trees. We could be killed by any number of animals. It's just not safe!" said Juan.

Nick tried to look for any other options. That is when he saw a log floating towards the mud mound. "Look, I got a knife. We can just make some sort of weapons out of this log." He made his move out towards the water.

Juan was not yet looking towards the log and became confused. "What are you talking about?"

Nick was now in the water and was moving towards the log when Juan finally caught sight of it. He gasped. He knew that was no log. Instead it was an endangered and very dangerous species of crocodile called the Cuban crocodile. He knew it was such because it was smoking a cigar. "Rookie, wait!" He leapt to his feet. You see, the crocodile was only camouflaging itself, and "camouflage" is a word that is as annoying to spell as it is to fall for. Just about anything in the world camouflages itself, from nature itself where crocodiles use the distortion of light as it passes through water to make themselves appear like unrecognizable albeit benign objects, to human beings learning from nature to adapt camouflage paint that helps soldiers blend in with walls that have been painted in camouflage paint. Researchers can camouflage themselves as citizens of another country to find out how other people live, or spies can camouflage themselves as scientists or generals to infiltrate top secret areas. Secret compartments can disguise themselves as books, which is why it is important to read every book you find on a shelf, or books can disguise themselves on the New York Times' bestseller list to lure gullible, kitsch-driven people to read them and lose sight of reality by thinking that means they're any good to read. Secret messages camouflage themselves in the pages of a novel or war report. Donald Trump camouflages himself as a flamboyant, unapologetic bigot in order to disguise the fact he's a flamboyant, unapologetic bigot. His hairpiece in particular is very bad camouflage. Actually, those last few examples are more like disguises, which try to mask something as something else, rather than camouflage, in which one thing tries to blend in with many other things, such as a reprehensible pervert hiding among a benign albeit strange deviant subculture.

Nick tread water and turned about. "What?" The crocodile kept up its disguise and drifted listlessly towards Nick.

"Get out the water! They are crocodiles, you dumb shit!" Juan did not have much respect for people in life-endangering peril.

"What are you talking about?" asked Nick. It was a silly question. Surely he'd heard of crocodiles before, even living up north in Canada. Juan was about to reply when the crocodile broke its act and lunged for Nick. He turned to see its jaw wide open and its teeth looking sharp and deadly. He held up his right arm to cover his face. The crocodile bit down on his arm and began to tear its head side to side, just like in one of those "Faces of Death" videos that perverse teenagers get a kick out of watching to trick themselves into a sense of maturity. Nick let out a cry of pain as his arm popped out of its socket and his flesh was torn. The crocodile then dived under the water, dragging him down with it.

"Rookie!" Juan could only watch in horror as Nick disappear beneath the startled waters. From his own knowledge, he knew that the crocodile would be trying to drown Nick. That meant he had time to save him, and despite the fact he did not like Nick all that much, Juan didn't fancy being left all alone in the Cuban wilderness. Plus, if he was going to fault Nick on leaving Gonzarlo behind, it would behove him not to commit the same crime he suspected. He therefore pulled out his combat knife and took a deep breath after saying (though Nick couldn't hear him), "Hold on, rookie! I'm-a comin'!" He charged towards the water and dove straight into it, which was dangerous because it was hard to tell where it was shallow. He popped his head back out of the water, took a deep breath, and then pushed himself back under. He had to find Nick but quick. The race against time was on, and the outcome seemed bleak.

Once underwater, Juan opened his eyes and scanned for any sign of Nick and the Cuban crocodile.
At first, he had no luck, and the murky colour of the water was about as easy to look at as a midget stripper. He popped his head back above the surface and took another deep breath. He swam a few meters forward before plunging back under. This time, he caught a slight glimpse of Nick being dragged further into the depths of the lake. He wasted no time, using all his arm strength to pull himself deeper in pursuit. His lungs burned as his oxygen depleted like the quality of television after the turn of the century, but now he was close. He could see Nick floating under the water, the crocodile latched onto his arm like a grade

schooler with her Hello Kitty backpack. The creature then began to perform the Death Spin™. This was where it spun around and around in an attempt to drown his victim, just like on YouTube!

Juan pushed himself closer to the beast, his knife drawn and held tight in his left hand. Using all of his strength, he plunged his knife into its hide as it spun. This was no easy task as the water slowed his attack and the croc's momentum rendered it elusive, but at last he managed it. The knife pierced the thick, scaly skin, and the crocodile let out a hiss and released its quarry. It next swung its tail around, smacking it into Juan. Juan was shoved aside in the water and his groan escaped his mouth in a tower of bubbles. The crocodile shot off through the water, Juan's knife still in its side.

Nick was sinking. His eyes were closed, and he appeared unmoving. Juan grabbed him by his arms and swam upwards as fast as he could. He let out a strenuous gasp as he burst out through the surface of the water. "Come. Come, I got you!" Juan pushed himself towards the small mud mound whilst struggling to hold Nick above the surface. When he made it to the mud mound, he rolled Nick up onto it. "You heavy turd." Juan pulled himself onto the mud next. Nick lay still. His eyes remained closed, and his body didn't stir. Even his chest lay still. Juan noticed this, and let out an exhausted sigh. "You better not be dead." He dropped to his knees and placed his ear against Nick's chest, waiting to see if he could hear a heartbeat.

There was none. Juan let out another exasperated sigh and clasped his hands together upon Nick's chest. "If I do this, you better wake the fuck up." He pressed down on Nick's chest three times, then inhaled and leaned down to Nick's face. He tilted Nick's head back with his left hand and opened Nick's mouth with his right. He placed his mouth over Nick's and blew all his air into Nick's mouth.

Juan pulled away and shook his head. "God dammit, your breath tastes like poutine." He returned to pushing down on Nick's chest, but there was still no response. "You better fucking wake up! I did not just give you mouth to mouth for nothing!" He was deeply hurt and offended that his lips touched the lips of another man. He pressed down on Nick's chest three more times, then moved over his mouth again. "This is the last time that I am doing this, so you better fucking wake up." He then once again blew his air into Nick's mouth. Juan pulled away, took another deep breath, and once more pushed down on Nick's chest. After three more compressions, still nothing happened.

"Come on, damn you! I can't get out of here on my own!" Juan pressed his right fist into his left palm and slammed his cupped fist down into Nick's chest as hard as he could. Nick shot up and let out a gasp whilst spitting out a large chunk of water. He panted, gasping for breath like it was going out of style. Juan hung his head, wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve, and said, "Thank fuck for that."

"You saved me," Nick said, though he was still coughing water out of his lungs, so what he said sounded more like: "You, huaugh, saved, huerkughj, me." Nick let out a groan of pain. His arm, as well as being torn open from the crocodile's bite, had also come out of his socket.

"Don't get too worked up about it. I only did it because I refuse to try to find a way back up there all on my own," said Juan, who might have been telling the truth. He looked to Nick's wounds and said, "That looks painful. I warned you not to go near that thing."

"You should've warned me before it was right on top of me." Nick would have been bitter about it if it was not for the fact that Juan had saved his life. "I saw a man once survive being mauled by a bear. I'm guessing this is how he felt."

"What am I, your babysitter? How could you not tell it was a fucking crocodile?"

"That's part of their damn camouflage!"

"Yeah, for other animals. Dumb animals, I would like to point out." Juan had a funny belief that human beings were the epitome of evolution.

"It's not my fault they look pretty damn convincing." Nick sulked because Juan was being unreasonable again. He'd been hoping that after nearly losing an arm, not to mention his life, his ally would behave a bit more amicably. Nope. See the grim reaper, get trashed on for it.

Juan sighed. "How the hell did you ever get into the Federation?"

"Did you honestly just save my life so that you could insult me some more?" asked Nick. He was beginning to miss the company of the Equestrians.

"I saved your life, and that makes me entitled to insult you all I want." Juan sneered. He genuinely believed it was now his right to insult Nick. This is known as "sociopathy", which is a more complex term but is characterized by a brutal lack of empathy. People who suffer from it desperately require professional mental help. The two were too busy with their back and forth banter to realise that the Cuban crocodile was slithering back up the mud mound, coming for revenge.

Juan was about to subject Nick to another line of banter when the two heard a loud splash not far away; By that time, Becky and Elian had just landed in the lake. As Nick and Juan looked in the direction of the noise, the Cuban crocodile made its attack. It let out a hiss and launched forward, snapping its jaws down onto the lower part of Juan's right leg. Juan let out a cry of pain that could've lifted a loaf of bread. "Oh fuck! It's got me!" he wailed as the croc started to drag him backwards to the water.

Nick rushed into action. "Hold on!" he said "It was eating me, and now it's going to eat you! Oh my god!" With his one good arm, he reached out to Juan. Juan brought up his other hand to support the hold, then Nick began to kick the crocodile in the face. The crocodile hissed again, rank steam issuing of its hot breath like smoke from a cigar, while Nick smashed his boot as fast and as hard as he could on its ugly head.

"It's tearing my fucking foot off!" screamed Juan, as the crocodile tore his fucking foot off. He could feel the force of the crocodile's jaws as it tore away at his flesh like tissues at a screening of "La Vita è Bella".
Nick continued to slam his boot into the crocodiles head as fast and with as much power as he could. His reasoning was that both frequency and power would further his ends. After four more strong kicks to the head, the crocodile released Juan's leg. This release of pressure sent Nick and Juan tumbling to the soft mud together, and Juan raised his leg to take stock of the damage.

All the flesh had been torn away by the croc's teeth. His leg muscles and skin were gone, and the two segments of his leg held on by nothing by tendons and loose nerve endings. This was bad. Juan was dismayed to the point where his mind couldn't cope with his own level of shock. His leg looked like a foreign object to him. He couldn't piece together that this was actually him. Nick wanted to be sick, and his body teetered on the edge of fainting, but somehow he managed to hold on.

The crocodile returned with surprising speed, throwing its body up over Juan's legs and pressing its weight down upon his torso. Juan groaned as the wind was knocked out of him, and he managed a hoarse scream at the second attack. Its twisted, jagged jaws parted with another hiss of foul breath, and Juan stared at the bloody pit of its throat and those mangled, dirty teeth, which still had bits of his own flesh hanging from them. The croc snapped towards his face, and Juan squealed as he threw up his arms. Both were seized by the reptile's angry jaws, and Juan could feel himself ready to faint from fear alone, even before the excruciating pain.

By this time, Nick had gotten to his feet on the slippery mud and was wondering how in the hell he was going to fight this monster with only one good arm. He spotted Juan's knife still sticking out from the beast's scaly skin. He would've preferred a much larger weapon, but it would have to do. As Nick twisted the knife backwards and forwards, digging it deeper and deeper into the croc's back, he attempted to provoke the animal with harsh words: "Get off of him, you fucking reptilian bastard!" The crocodile released Juan once again and let out a much louder hiss.

Juan looked at his mangled arms, which seemed to be in a worse state than his leg. The sight made him dizzy with sickness, or sick with dizziness. Then he passed out. The crocodile shook its body side to side to throw Nick from its back. He let out another groan as he crashed to the floor. The croc had enough of that dagger in its back and surrendered its meal, slithering off into the lake where it disappeared, apathetic, under the murky water. There was no indication it wouldn't be back.

Nick took a few moments to catch his breath, before turning to Juan. "Shit, man, are you okay?" he asked. Juan didn't reply, so Nick poked him again. "Hey, I asked if you were alright." He felt a steady enough pulse in Juan's neck, but when he looked to his mangled limbs, he only shook his head. "So much for cricket."

Chapter Forty-One.

Reunion. The eye of the storm. Star-crossed.

Eking out choked, raspy breaths, Becky clutched her rib cage to steady the pain and struggled to keep afloat by paddling with her other arm. In her panic, she found difficulty in gasping only for air, and as she fought to keep from sinking, she spotted the two figures on the small mound of dirt. She called for help, but the murky water filled her mouth, choking her. She spat it back out, but every time she went under, she felt herself descending deeper into that filthy abyss. Her legs felt so sore, and her ribs felt like they might fall apart if she let go of them, but she forced herself to surface so she could scream as loud as she could for help. The ordeal of tumbling down the cliff had actually muddled her mind, and she'd forgotten part of the reason she wanted help. She remembered that Elian had fallen with her.

Becky took what she thought was her final breath, and sank under the water. Her legs and torso throbbed like a raging sea. Pain paid no heed to how much she wanted to kick and swim. It cared not for her determination any more than the ponies did. She wasn't sure she was hoping it or actually felt something, but she raised her arm in expectation and felt a hand grab her. Sooner than she could believe it, she was heaving for air above the water, her nose and lungs burning, and she was slung atop something hard. She thought it was land, but then felt herself being deposited on something less solid but certainly it was ground this time.

“Are you okay?” Nick asked. He had been the one to help her. “What happened?”

Becky was elated to hear him, but all she could do was nod. The foul taste of the unclean water remained in her mouth, so she spat. She managed to sit up with a pained groan, clutching her arm over her lower ribs. “We got overrun up there. An explosion went off, and we ended up tumbling down here. Elian and me. I thought he fell with me. Is he stuck on the hill?” Her eyes were too foggy to see that far, though she held a hand to her brow and tried.

Nick looked. “I don’t see him.” He strained his eyes, but realized he wasn’t paying attention. He turned to look at Becky with a timid expression. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

She smiled back at him, amused by this turn of focus. “Don’t expect me to need you saving me all the time.”

Their moment was cut short when Juan let out a gasp and opened his eyes. His fresh wounds had just struck him harder than a thousand bolts of electricity, and his cry of pain rang out like a show off opera tenor. Nick leapt towards Juan and once again cradled the man’s head on his knee with hopeful reassurances. Becky now noticed the gruesome state their ally was in and was even more skeeved by Nick’s explanation. “We got attacked by a crocodile. I’m surprised I didn’t end up in worse shape than him.” “Skeeved” is a word which here means “disgusted, grossed out, or horrified”. Take your pick.

Juan continued to cuss and cry, as though his excruciating pain was more of a priority than watching his potty mouth. Nick continued to use words to try and make the bad pain go away. “Wait, can crocodiles do that?” asked Becky.

“Do what?” asked Nick. “Bite people with their dagger-like teeth and super jaws? I saw the damn thing myself.” It still frightened him to think of. He tried to push down on Juan’s wounds which had blood pulsing out of them at a frightening pace. “Help me and hand me your belt,” he said. This was no time for politesse.

Becky reached for her waist before remembering that in all that had happened, she didn’t have it. “I gave it to Raul.” Nick looked at her in alarm. “He was wounded. Now he and Dixon are dead.”

Nick looked up at the sky, infuriated with all their horrific luck. When was karma going to balance out for him? “Times like this, I wish Delta Squad had a medic in the group. Grab handfuls of mud and pack his wounds with them, for all I know.” He’d already begun doing this himself.

“What? Won't that cause infection?” asked Becky.

“I don’t doubt it, but it at least slows down his bleeding, gives him more time.” Nick didn’t have a damn idea that would be the case, but he was getting pretty tired of being stuck up a creek with no canoe. He wanted something to work in his favour for once. If Juan had been a motorboat they needed to get working to sail back to land, none of them would still be here, but Juan was a living, organic human being in tremendous pain. He didn’t know how to fix him any more than he knew how to fix his own broken being. Becky grabbed handfuls of soggy dirt with one hand. Her other arm returned to the ache of her ribs. She grimaced as she packed the mud over the wounds of his leg, which right now resembled something out of a Tom Green wet dream. Juan screamed even louder, and Nick just shouted over him. “Cut that shit out; you’re fine! You’re still with us, which means you’re going to be okay.” Becky continued to stuff the wounds with mud, but they were too deep, and the blood kept finding a way of pushing through the dirt and escaping Juan's body.

Juan sobbed and fumed and swore up a storm. “It hurts! That croc killed me, man! He fucking killed me!” His plaintive stuttering was cut off, and his body jolted violently. Pinkish foam dribbled from his mouth.

“He's going into epileptic shock!” said Nick. “I don’t know what to do!” For a moment, Nick wanted to hit himself, as though he was the enemy he was fighting here. He felt stupid and helpless as he watched Juan spasm and sputter while staring up into his eyes. Like the lights of a departing passenger jet, especially back when commercial flights were a common practice, Juan’s life was departing into darkness with a solemn silence, and yet with all the tumult of a hurtling carriage of metal falling hundreds of feet above through the sky. His heart gave three more weakened pumps before coming to a halt. He never even went limp. He just stopped moving like a cockroach you’ve killed and are waiting to see twitch again.

Nick and Becky spent the next ten minutes being thrust through their own emotions. Nick found it hard to keep being angry at himself. Even after being tortured and not having had a moment’s peace since then, his mind had longed to return to normalcy, and anger just wasn’t in his nature. He had the strong impression he was being railroaded by mysterious forces into giving up. If that’s what these influences wanted, perhaps it’d be easier just to give them what they wanted. Becky was angry with herself. She didn’t feel like leadership material like her family was purported to be. She’d just jounced from Daryl to Raul to Juan and probably Elian in between, watching each of them die in turn. She’d rather have Nick’s cursing and curt orders be because he was mad at her for something, so that she could accept some kind of failing on her part and take away the blow these recent deaths had entailed.

But Nick couldn't be mad at her. He was putting his hand on her shoulder and telling her they needed to get moving. Becky moved irritably as her side still ached. For a moment, she forgot there was even a place to go, but then Nick said, "We have to get to the docks. That's where they were heading with the nuke."

"Where who were heading to?" Becky asked. Nick gave a sigh and stared at her. Becky noticed his disappointed stare and shrugged. "What? What did I say?"

"You know the Federation were the ones escorting the nuke, so who do you think I'm on about?"

Becky's face lit up red with embarrassment. "Leave me alone, I took a pretty bad fall."

Nick forced a soft laugh. "You're lucky you got a pretty face."

"Oh, so you think I'm pretty then?" asked Becky, catching what Nick had said and attempting to use it to embarrass him. It had worked and now Nick's face went red. "Anyway," Becky continued, "what docks? There has to be hundred around the island."

Nick shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea. They never actually disclosed that information to me. Probably didn't think I'd need to know. At any rate, we can't stay here. I say we cut across the lake and try and make our way up the hill side." He nodded in this direction. He didn't want to cross the water, and he sure has hell didn't want to drag Becky back into it after having dragged her out, but they were in dire straits. Actually, they were in the middle of a lake, and after a few further moments of hesitation, they were back in the water. As much a relief as it was to them and the task of this war chronicler, the swim to the cliff was without encounter, and they shimmied further around the bend until the ground beneath them rose up to where they could stand. Nick spent some time searching for a suitable place to climb, but noticed Becky's doubtful stare.

"I don't know how far I'm going to be able to get up that hill with my side aching like this. I smashed up on those trees pretty good there."

"You'll be fine, trust me, even if I have to carry you up there."

Becky smiled. "So I'll be like Frodo, and you will be my Sam?" she made a reference to one of her preferred movies.

Nick's smile turned a one-eighty. "What? Who the hell is Frodo?"

Becky gave a look of shock and even greater concern. "Frodo, the hobbit tasked with destroying the one ring." Nick gave her a blank look. *"Lord of the Rings!"* she snapped impatiently. *The Lord of the Rings*, as you probably don't know, was the overstated novel of a language fetishist that lazy people invariably compare every fantasy story to. In this case, Becky was referring to a film adaptation, but in either case, people find it easier to supplant one work for another under the guise of a comparison.

"Oh, right. Never seen it," Nick said. Becky's eyes widened with disbelief, so Nick repeated himself. "Never seen it." He beckoned for her to climb onto his back and she did. How Nick found the strength to begin to climb with an entire human clinging to him, he wasn't sure, but he might've chalked it up to all the prior events on Cuba. He just couldn't feel things anymore. It was a pity, then, when his wounded arm was struck with a pang of hurt, and both he and Becky fell back into the water with a splash.

Becky shoved him off of her and was up first. "Are you alright?"

"It's my arm," he said with a whimper. "That damn crocodile nearly tore it off. Juan set it again before he got attacked, but it still goddamn hurts!"

Becky felt very foolish. "We're going about this all wrong," she said. "Here, you hold onto me." Nick looked incredulous, but was too polite to voice why. She could tell what the matter was and was understandably indignant. "I'm a trained soldier, Nick. I can carry you around. Sure, I'm in pain too, but my arms are more or less fine. Now are you gonna stow your chivalry or not?"

Now it was Nick's turn to feel foolish. He didn't really think Becky was weak. Rather, he wanted to protect her, and that had set up an entire mind-set between them. He still felt kind of heavy, and Becky admitted this would be an easier task were they not both soaking wet, but with his advice of where to grab, the two of them started to climb up the sheer cliff. At least Nick's other arm still worked, and so long as they strapped themselves to one another's ACUs, they weren't that encumbered. As they climbed, Becky struck the conversation they'd been having back up. "How have you not seen *Lord of the Rings?"* she asked, her voice more indignant than before. She sounded just like an alcoholic incredulous that someone would find a football match boring, no matter how many decades the human race has been playing that same game by the same basic rules.

Nick shook his head. "Just haven't."

"Oh my god, what is wrong with you?"

Nick sighed. This happened often, or at least it used to before the war. “Look, are we going to focus on our survival and how to get out of here, or would you prefer to geek out about some dorky movie?”

Becky gave him a look of great disappointment. “I mean it's so good! How have you not seen it?”

“Because I was doing better things with my free time than watching dorky movies,” said Nick.

“Call *Lord of the Rings* dorky one more time, and I swear I'll break your other arm.” This was one of those quaint little threats of violence meant as a joke.

“Next you will be moaning at me for never watching Star Wars.”

Becky almost lost her grip just as she’d reached the ledge of the slope. “Seriously? Every human being on the face of this earth has seen Star Wars. It’s one of the few films that survived the cultural purge.”

“Not me. I haven’t.”

“How? How have you not?” Becky shouted.

“I told you I don't like dorky movies.”

“Oh my god, I hate you right now. When we get onto this hill, I ought to shove you back off.” She was so perturbed that she hurried herself along until Nick could finally climb off of her back, which now started to ache. They almost toppled over though and, apart from nudging each other forward again, started grasping for one of the many trees springing out of the ground. “How can you say you don’t like them if you haven't even watched them?”

Nick was finding it adorable how Becky was geeking out, and he couldn't help but smile. Perhaps there was a bit of a sadistic streak in him after all. Becky was about to start a rant about the perceived brilliance of the two franchises, but before this chronicler can omit things which are neither here nor there and the inevitable complaints, particularly about the latter, which have grown stunningly boring since 1999, they both heard a muffled moan coming from somewhere behind the bushes to their left. Perhaps someone had been anticipating this very same phenomenon.

“Did you hear that?” asked Becky. Nick gave a slow nod and raised his finger to his lips in a signal to tell her to be quiet. They needed to listen.

“Help,” the groan repeated.

Becky promoted herself to the rank of captain: Captain Obvious. “Sounds like ‘help’,” she said. Nick gave a nod of agreement and they both climbed further up the slope toward the bushes. The voice continued to beg, even as Nick pushed the bushes aside with his one good arm. Becky let out a gasp.

After what seemed like an eternity, Rodrigo had opened his eyes to see where his reaper was. He realised the sky had gone from blue to black. The sun had descended, and the moon had risen. He looked around and saw the hill had been emptied of ponies. He must have passed out, and the ponies must have assumed him dead. He gave a sigh of relief and rested his head back against the rock. He was alive for now, at least. By the time Nick and Becky had found him, he had started dragging himself up the mountain, and he looked like a zombie. His blood had been mixed in with dirt and chunks of rock and tree, and his face was a deathly pale.

Recognizing the man took Nick a moment. He also desired a captaincy. “Sir, what happened to you? Was it the ponies?”

“Damn ponies.” Rodrigo’s words were a slur due to half his tongue being missing.

“Oh god, you poor man,” said Becky with great sympathy. “We need to take him with us.”

The pair were about to pick him up off the ground when Rodrigo shook his head. “No, no. I'm not going to make it.”

“You don't know that,” said Nick, but Rodrigo was on the verge of a similar promotion himself, given the state he was in.

“No, I do, but it's okay,” Rodrigo said. “You need to get to the docks. Make sure these bastards don't get the nuke.”

“We don't know where the docks are” pointed out Becky.

Rodrigo pointed to his pocket on his combat trousers. “Map. In there. Tell you where you need to go.” he stopped and reached into his breast pocket, before slowly pulling out a bloodstained envelope. “Please give this to Chrissie, my wife. She will be there. Please give this to her.”

Nick took the letter and folded it neatly away into one of his pockets. “I will,” he said, and because Rodrigo was repeating himself, Nick did as well. “I will.”

“Gracias,” Rodrigo gasped. Becky reached into his pocket, retrieved the map, and showed it to Nick.

Nick looked down at Rodrigo. “Are you sure you won't come with us?”

“No. Just go. Leave me here to die in peace.” Rodrigo waved them off.

Nick let out a sigh and climbed to his feet. He then nodded to Becky. “We better get going.”

Becky looked down to Rodrigo. “I'm sorry this happened to you.”

Rodrigo smiled through his battered face. “No need. A warrior’s death is a fine one.” Nick and Becky both shrugged and let out a sigh as if to say “Isn’t that a shame?” and continued up the hill. Rodrigo just gave a blood-soaked grin and looked out through the bullet-chewed, burnt trees at the surrounding scenery. The stench of death and burning oil was heavy in the air. “What a beautiful place to die.”

After an hour, the smoke had joined the clouds, an amber glow joined the Cuban sky to taint its natural blue, and Nick and Becky had joined the street on their melancholy march through the battle’s aftermath. The silence was only broken by the occasional pained grunt as their wounds ached too much. Neither of them requested so much as a five-minute break, knowing that time was of the essence. The Equestrians and suicidal Iron Wolves had been thorough in decimating every mode of transportation, and every so often they sped their travel when a far-off explosion could be heard coming from Havana’s direction. Becky tried to focus on her own inner thoughts, such as how they’d just left Rodrigo there to die. It didn’t feel right, even if that was what he’d wanted, and though she wondered if Nick felt the same way, she didn’t want to broach the subject and ask him.

As that hour passed, the road showed fewer signs of travel beyond the extent where the ponies had ambushed the Cuban forces. The road was surrounded by trees that looked far less festive and for more foreboding in the darkness. The eeriness was compounded by their lack of familiarity with what lie ahead. Nick was dreading what might happen if the suicide soldiers Becky had warned him about appeared. Neither of them had any weapons on them, not even a knife. Given their wounds, they likely couldn’t even have held their own in a fistfight. Hunger and thirst betrayed them, as neither had had so much as a speck of nourishment in the past four hours. Though the night time was cooler, dehydration was still setting in, which was especially threatening given their blood loss.

Becky’s stomach broke the silence with a growl loud enough for Nick to hear. She let out an apologetic sigh, but Nick reassured her. “Just keep moving. We’ll find somewhere to stay, hopefully something to eat and drink. We’re in Cuba; we’re bound to find a Taco Bell sooner or later.”

Becky looked at their surroundings and shook her head. “Look around, Nick. We’re in the middle of nowhere. There’s no sign of the resistance.” When she could no longer feel her feet, she dropped to her knees with a thud.

Nick stopped. He knew how she felt. He gestured for her to get up. “Come on, stand up.” He grabbed her by the arm, but she pulled away from him.

“What’s the point? We’re dead. There’s no way out of this.”

Nick ran his hand through his hair. Without thinking whether he had it in him after all the gratuitous torture and a battle so arduous it was like trying to figure out how to walk again, he lapsed into a motivational dialogue. “So you just want to give up, then? Not even try? We just lay down and die after all we’ve been through? All we’ve survived?” He tried his best to sound like he was losing his temper, but he was just too damn tired. “Wading through croc-infested waters, carrying me up a cliff, escaping those adolescent sociopaths? You took on an Equestrian general in a fight and lost two brothers, so you’re ready to join them? Well screw that! I'm not leaving you!”

“You have to. Please, you left Rodrigo, you can leave me.”

Nick screwed up his eyes like he was ready to cry. “And you think that was easy? I barely knew the guy and I’m aching. I can’t, and I won’t leave the woman I love to die, too!”

There was a moment of silence as both of them tried to figure out whether they’d really been trying to force those words out all along, or they’d taken some sort of gamble they might not like. On one hand, there was the cliché of love persevering over all odds. On the other, things could become so awkward they’d just keep going without daring to complain again lest they find themselves back down this same conversation.

Becky did her best to smile in spite of her condition. “You love me?” she asked with confidence.

Nick’s neck ached, so his head hung towards the ground. “Okay, so I do. I’m still not leaving you.”

“I love—“ Becky felt something like a warm air pass through her head, and she fell unconscious.

Calling out her name, Nick dove to her side and checked for a pulse. Hers was still strong, but he knew they had to find sustenance. They had to find it soon. Dragging her to her feet, he placed one arm under her waist and hoisted her to his shoulders like a piggyback ride. He might've loved her, but it was still a yoke to bear. Once up there, her weight drove him forward along the dirt road. He imagined her weight becoming one with his own, even as his knees trembled and his dry lips cracked. He spent the time urging himself forward, telling him he could continue, that failure was ridiculous, that this was merely a light day at the Iron Wolves' camp. He made it only a few more feet before he, too, collapsed to the ground. His face slammed on the dirt and Becky's head slid past his own.

He didn't move. His muscles were too relaxed. The idea of lying in the dirt for the rest of the night was very appealing. For the first time since the morning of that day, he felt no pain. His body was completely at ease, and his mind was as numb as his body. He understood a deeper layer of why Becky wanted to give up. It was so easy. He could just lie there and all his struggles would be soon over. He could die peacefully. The reward for rest, even eternal rest, far outweighed continuing with another day, besieged by enemies who wanted him hurt and broken if not outright dead, superiors too infatuated with themselves and their luxury of simplicity to make any personal sacrifices, and no end in sight that anything could ever change. The war had proven too much for so many, and even the researchers and investigators chronicling it must have asked why, and those that came after them have asked if their sacrifices were worth it, and if they, too, would have made a significant contribution should their untimely demise come about. Even with the end so very near, and only one chronicle remaining in this series of Earth's last war, one has to ask if it has all been worth it, and the only solace must be that one does not have to answer.

Nick closed his eyes and embraced the darkness surrounding him. He was about to let himself go when he heard the sound of a truck pulling up next to him. He feared it would run him and Becky over, but he just couldn't move. He kept his eyes shut, assuming it would be the ponies, and he waited for them to finish him off. The sound of a truck door opening was clear. Then came the chatter of what sounded to be a man and a woman, both speaking Spanish. They might have been cursing and arguing amongst themselves. Nick slipped into a deep sleep, and the last thing he felt was a pair of strong hands lifting him up out of the dirt and sliding him onto the back of a truck. He opened his eyes briefly to see Becky and Rodrigo lying next to him in the back of a flatbed, both unconscious. He smiled before joining them in their unconscious state.

He was still smiling when he awoke, and after as well, finding himself in a rather comfortable one-person bed in the far left corner of a very small room that made the whole world feel small and simple. He even noticed that his arm had been wrapped in a clean bandage and placed in a sling around the back of his neck. The room was made entirely of wood: The walls, the floors, the only door, and the only window flame. Well, it did have a smooth glass pane, but that was about it. The skin of a fox was stretched out across the floor, and the wall beheld the stuffed head of a bear, and Nick had a feeling they probably disliked tigers as well.

He swung both legs off the bed and planted them on the floor, hoisting himself to his feet. He half expected himself to be trapped inside the room, but when he tried the brass knob, the door swung open into a much larger room. His nostrils were attacked by the smoky odour of bacon, and he imbibed himself on the smell to the point of seeking it out. This room, too, was comprised of wood, but it also held a dining table and two dusty couches in front of a television sed. The rug in here was bearskin, and the wall had more animal heads plastered over it than a serial killer could ever hope to collect from humans. Every woodland creature Cuba had to offer was represented here in a death mask of posed hostility.

Nick's observations of the interior decorator's fascination with death were interrupted by a peal of laughter from behind a door on the other end of this room. He looked around for a weapon and chose a small silver hunting trophy. It felt heavy enough to do some damage. He crept towards the door, holding it like a child with a teddy bear (though probably not in this house), and sweat revealed itself from beneath the pores of his skin to trickle down his face. The laughter continued, and he was within reach of the door. He gripped the knob with his sling arm, counted to three, and tore the portal open with a short battle cry.

Four startled faces gaped back at him: A man and woman he'd never seen before, and Becky and Rodrigo. "Nick, what are you doing?" Becky looked around at the others in embarrassment. Nick didn't look back at her. He was looking at their plates of bacon and scrambled eggs, most particularly the empty chair and full plate beside Becky.

Rodrigo gestured towards the old couple across the table from him with a fork. "Antonio and Roseate here found us all out on the road. They brought us in and helped us."

Antonio gave a slow nod. "We, er, save seat for you," he said, his English just comprehensible.

Nick remembered the trophy he held and set it down on a kitchen counter. "Uh, gracias," he said, though he wasn't too humiliated to take his time sitting down and grabbing his fork. He was famished. Becky gave him a smile and a wink as he sat down, and found his hand beneath the table. Nick smiled back.

Two miles up the road from the old cabin, Scootaloo and her forces had regrouped. She'd been given a run down by the ponies that had chased after Rodrigo and Pedro as they supposedly escaped with the nuclear weapon, and now they were following the tracks which had been left behind by Antonio and Roseate's truck. "Ugh, how much father?" Scootaloo asked.

The pony leading the tracking was called Gumshoe. "Not sure. Not until we reached the end of the tracks, though the tracks are much deeper here."

"Meaning what?" asked Scootaloo.

"Meaning that whoever was driving the truck slowed down, giving the truck more time to sink into the dirt." Gumshoe peered close at the road through a magnifying monocle.

"And that means what?" asked Scootaloo, bored.

Gumshoe stroked his chin with a hoof. "That means that they either stopped to pick someone up, or they were slowing down as their home is somewhere nearby."

Scootaloo rolled her eyes. "Finally! The sooner we find this stupid nucular device, the better." She followed Gumshoe who led the way, taking in a deep breath of fresh air. "It's a good day to kill."

Almost an hour passed, and the kitchen table had been cleared away. Roseate was washing up the dishes, Antonio was preparing a truck that the group could use to get to the docks, and Rodrigo was taking a leak in the upstairs toilet. Becky and Nick were alone together at the table. She'd been staring at him since they'd been left alone five minutes ago, and there was a silence that was growing ever more awkward. Nick cracked first as he turned to face her. "What?" he asked, not the most astounding ice breaker.

"Well," said Becky, cutting off her own sentence to leave it ambiguous.

"Well what?"

"Are we going to talk about how you said you loved me?"

Nick blushed slightly. "Right. Yeah." He couldn't find the right words to explain himself.

"Did you mean it?" asked Becky, cutting to the chase. Nick gave a nod and Becky's smile grew, and her smile washed away the last wound he was feeling that moment. He smiled back. "Good, because when we get back home, we are so locking ourselves away in the comforts of your bedroom." She leant over and embraced him in a kiss. Nick couldn't help but keep grinning as he shut his eyes.

"You are love birds, yes?" Antonio had appeared in the doorway, a smile plastered across his face.

Nick and Becky pulled away from each other, both blushing slightly, and Becky gave a giggle. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

Antonio's grin looked like it might extend beyond his face. "Very cute."

Before another word could be said, the loud sound of a single gunshot went off, followed by the sound of shattered glass as the kitchen window fell to pieces. Everyone screamed and dived to the floor. Antonio shouted to his wife in Spanish, and she returned with the same foreign language, at least it was to Becky and Nick. The Spanish couple stopped speaking when a voice came from outside. "Will the owner of this here fine establishment please exit the house? Now!"

Antonio started his way to the door as his wife begged him to stop in Spanish. He assured her it would be okay and started out. "Wait! What are you doing?" Nick asked in a quiet tone, as he did not want whoever was outside to know he was in the log house. He was having horrible flashbacks right about then. Antonio opened the door slowly and stuck both his hands out first so whoever was out there could see he was not armed. As he stepped outside, he could see a whole army of ponies standing a few metres away from his home. Scootaloo was at the front of this army, and in a mutated hoof-hand, she held a German Luger, the barrel still smoking from the single shot she had fired. An evil smile plagued her face.

"I not armed," Antonio stammered as he timidly made his way towards her.

"Good! Now get over here. We have some questions for you."

Nick climbed to his knees and peered through the window. "Ponies." The word sent chills through his companions.

Roseate looked at her husband through the window. Tears of fear rolled down her face. "Antonio, no!"

As Antonio approached the ponies, his heart rate picked up, and he perspired. Scootaloo grabbed him by the throat with her left hand and held him close to her whilst aiming a luger at him with the right. "Where are they?"

“Who?” He responded with a question of his own, knowing fine well who she was on about.

Scootaloo sighed and aimed the barrel of the Luger at Antonio's right shin. She cocked it. Why were people she threatened so difficult? “I'll ask again. Where. Are. They?” She punctuated her words for emphasis.

Antonio gulped. “Who?” Scootaloo squeezed the trigger and Antonio let out a scream of pain as his shin shattered from the bullet. His body went slack, but Scootaloo held him up on his feet, increasing the pain.

Roseate screamed and rushed into the living room. “Where are you going?” Becky hissed. Nick continued to watch from the window, and he couldn't help think about poor old Frank and Deirdre from outside Monsoon. He remembered how bad that had ended.

“I said, where are they?” Scootaloo said, even though anyone could remember what she said.

Antonio shook his head as tears streamed down his face. “Who?”

Scootaloo frowned and aimed the barrel of the Luger at Antonio's other shin. “Where! Are! They!” Her voice became louder and louder with every word.

Antonio's bottom lip quivered until he bit down on it. He could already feel the pain coming as the words escaped his lips, “Why?”

Scootaloo fired, and Antonio screamed as he fell to the dirt. Both his shins were shattered. He rolled there on his lawn like a lumpy baby. Scootaloo cocked the weapon and aimed it at Antonio's head. “You all come out right now, or I swear I will kill him, and then I will come and kill you all!”

Roseate came back out of the living room holding a double-barrelled shotgun. Nick and Becky found her aiming it at them, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Go! Outside!” she told them.

Becky and Nick raised their hands, Nick only being able to raise his one good hand, and they both shook their heads. “You don't have to do this,” said Becky.

“Now! They not kill Antonio if you leave!”

“Yes, they will!” Nick said. “They will kill us all! We all human. We are nothing but animals to them, just like they were once to us.”

Roseate shook her head. “Go! Outside!”

Becky and Nick made their way towards the door. “Please don't do this,” Becky said as she passed.

Roseate rammed the barrels of her shotgun into Becky's back to keep her moving. “Move!”

Scootaloo waited for a moment to scratch her itchy temple with the barrel of her gun. “Come out in the count of five, or I blow his head clean off! Well, messily off.” Before Scootaloo could start counting, the door to the house opened, and Nick and Becky stepped out with Roseate close behind them, holding them at gunpoint. Scootaloo was pleasantly surprised. “Oh, good! I can’t count that high anyway.”

“Let him go!” Roseate said.

Scootaloo frowned at her. “You humans really need to stop hiding out in the middle of nowhere, cut off from society. Otherwise you’d have heard that ponies never let humans walk away from situations like these.” She twisted the hand around Antonio's neck and Roseate let out a horrified cry as a loud crack rang in her ears.

“No!” Roseate screamed, dropping to her knees with the shotgun in her hands. Everyone let out a tremulous scream as another gunshot rang out. Scootaloo barked for an explanation, and soon a pair of ponies emerged from behind the house, dragging the body of Rodrigo between them. They dumped him unceremoniously on the ground between Antonio and Roseate. He had a smoking crater in his head from where his brains were leaking. Scootaloo let out an insulted snort, then shouted, “Kill them!”

Before Becky and Nick could dive back through the doorway and into the house, they were inundated by a wave of bullets. Both let out painful grunts as they felt rounds fly into them and occasionally come flying out the other side of their bodies. They both collapsed to the dirt. There was a ringing in Nick’s ears like a train whistle. A strange thing occurred where he tried to count repeatedly in his head the number of bullets that had struck him. He thought he’d been hit a total of seven times. Two had hit him in his top right shoulder, three had found their way into his lower gut, and another two found their way into his left leg, one digging into the metal plate that held his knee cap together. Blood began to seep out of not only Nick's wounds, but his mouth as he coughed up his own blood.

This pacified Scootaloo, who laughed. “Search the house. If any of these guys survive, then we take them. Prisoners of war are useful.”

Nick didn’t think they’d survive this one, and he certainly wasn’t thinking that wasn’t how ponies usually operated. Instead, he turned his head to Becky. Tears began to fill his eyes. Becky's body lay still, and it almost seemed to be at rest. She had been more unlucky than Nick. All the bullets she had taken had struck in more fatal areas. Four had hit her in her left breast, three of which struck her heart. Two other bullets had torn their way through her chest and pierced her right lung, and one bullet had found its way in and through her forehead. Nick laid still, choking on his own blood and sobbing to himself.

Scootaloo approached him with a huge grin on her face. “Well, well. Looks like we’ve got ourselves a fighter.” Three pony guards came bursting out of the house, announcing that it was clear. “Good,” she said before kicking Nick with her hoof. “Bring this one. If he lives, then we might just have ourselves a nice little chew toy. Let's find out where this nuke is.”

At the docks, Chrissie had waited for Rodrigo at the submarine with high hopes, but he hadn't yet shown. He was never going to show. Only a handful of wounded soldiers, Elian Gonzales among them, had come staggering over. They had all been loaded into the submarine with the nuke, and now they were waiting on her. “We have to go, ” said one of the submarine's navigators.

Chrissie's eyes filled with tears and she gave a slow nod. “Okay, I'll be right there.” The navigator boarded the submarine as Chrissie looked out to the surrounding, thirsty trees. Tears bloomed down her cheeks like ephemeral stalks that rooted themselves somewhere deep inside her soul. “Goodbye, Rodrigo.” She turned and boarded the sub. Within minutes, they were diving deep underwater and heading for Moscow. More or less, they had managed to keep the ponies from getting the nuke, yet like every mission, there were always casualties, and this mission had been rife with them. In the end, over six hundred resistance soldiers lay dead on this almost-peaceful-looking island. With only three hundred casualties on the ponies’ side and over forty resistance soldiers taken captive, the battle may have been won, but the island had been lost. Mission accomplished.

Part V: All the King’s Horses

Chapter Forty-Two.

Accounts untold. A bushel of turnips. A snake pit.

Even after all this tragedy, the account of this hazy summer of the war had not yet ended. This has all been the story of the war, with infrequent allusions as to the methods of its telling, but this is not the story of a ragtag team of scholars poring away in dimly-lit cells and abandoned outposts to desperately reveal the truth lest it should be covered up by the Equestrians, factions who disagree about Earth’s unification, and even those same forces who conceived this project, lest they learn more than they bargained for from these insights. This is the record of those heroes who fought to save humanity, accounts into the mysteries pervading its sagas, and shocking intelligence reports into the actions of the enemies as pieced together after the fact through great sacrifice, extensive deciphering, and surprising sources. Much luck has been had with extricating fact from falsity, so when an unsourced report appeared in the laundry chute of an abandoned pet shop, a controversy arose as to its veracity which has yet to be disproven. This chapter reveals its contents.

From a clear vantage in Ponyville, one can gaze off high into the distant mountains to look upon the visage of the mighty city of Canterlot, home to Equestria’s royal lineage, from where it is said that her esteemed highness, raiser and setter of the sun, the honourable Princess Celestia,[36] watches over all the land. Beloved by her citizens, history remembers her kindly to this very day, along with her sister, the Princess Luna, whose recent return to the kingdom was met with joyous celebration. Somewhat-favourable history remembers her other relations, such as Prince Blueblood, a mawkish oaf of aristocratic impotence.

Even less kindly, history briefly mentions his butler, a disagreeable, spineless little arrogant twit known as Edmund Blackadder. With mercy, history utterly passes over the mindless, odiferous little troll known as Baldrick, the pony who cleans out the insides of the latrines. Perhaps it is this untold history, cast aside from the depths of the servants’ quarters in the Royal palace, that we shall find a deeper insight into the workings of global significance. Or, perhaps, even a tale of a different colour, which paints the truer motivations lying beneath a façade of etiquette and upbringing as pretence for the sake of peace and order.

[36] Although intel indicates Equestrian titles were swapped for the purposes of wartime propaganda, this correspondence referred to the involved parties by some sort of classical structure.

Then again, perhaps not. At any rate, here is the largely undocumented history of a despicable dynasty locked forever in misfortune and misdeeds: The untold history of the Black Adder.

The sound of hoof beats cross the mount.
Good folk, do put the cart before him!
Look this gift horse in the mouth
Lest he drop the ball like a gelding.
Blackadder, Blackadder,
A dark horse riding up,
Blackadder, Blackadder.
The mares all pass the buck.
Blackadder, Blackadder,
With many a cunning plan,
Blackadder, Blackadder,
A flash inside the pan.

Our story began at an undisclosed point in near-contemporary history behind the glistening exterior of Canterlot's royal palace, off the red carpet path and into the castle's kitchens. Despite the lofty, sizable stature of the outer edifice, the room was cramped, though only because it was crowded with amenities. Multiple baking stoves lined one wall with ladles, spatulas and tongs hanging at rakish angles above them. Along the adjacent wall, pots and pans cluttered a counter near a massive sink which had been neglected to be cleaned. Water stained the top of one stove where the pot had bubbled over on many occasions, and a container of flour had not been properly shut. A rather tall island counter of solid wood stood in the middle of the room, a few odd cutting and carving implements safely put away, but scraps of vegetable and pastry crumbs remained scattered about its surface. The tiled maroon floors could've been kept a bit cleaner, and if they remained so it was only because there was little space to walk through.

In an extended corner of the room stood a small work table, only a slight bit wobbly. It was almost devoid of crumbs and instead was littered with an uneven pile of letters and a mug of coffee. Sitting at the table was the unremarkable figure of an earth pony with a smooth but hardy coat of dark-gray fur. His jet black mane was kept short but groomed almost flat with accidental curls tapering the ends. His tail was basically the same. Even as bored as he looked, his sullen face retained a despicable air about it, as though his small jowls were always set into a dismal frown. His flank bore an insignia upon either side—a design known as a "cutie mark". Each pony received one automatically when coming of age, and each mark depicted some innate, special talent she or he exceled at. His depicted a slithering ebony serpent that coiled this way and that against itself, its tail sharply rattling and its mouth displaying an eternal hiss. A black adder. His one hoof slid towards the mug of coffee, but rather than take a drink he was preoccupied with the letter positioned on his other hoof. He was unable to concentrate on either.

The reason for this was the fault of the room's other occupant. Crouched down to busily re-grout some flooring tiles was an earth pony of dirty tan coloring and a messy coat. His mane was unkempt in a reddish-brown mullet, and his tail was a pathetic tangle of matted hair. His eyes were sunken by discolored bags indicative of poor sleeping habits, and the way he carried his face hinted at being put upon by his superiors more times than he could remember. His cutie mark bore the image of a scraggly turnip with mottled green leaves and a decaying, white and pink coloration. Not quite the freshest turnip in the garden. He looked tired by his work, yet blissfully oblivious to being discouraged. Clutched between his teeth was a sharp spade he used to work, but it did nothing to muffle the wavering, atonal singing he bellowed through his task, much to the other pony's chagrin.

"You've got to share, you've got to care." Grout grout grout. Slather, tap-tap tink.

"Yes, Baldrick, if you would be quiet." The impertinent attempt at good cheer did not faze the butler. In his favor, the crooning was rather garrulous. Even his muttered utterance was layered with a voice of acerbic wit, basted like a Christmas turkey and inflected upon each crisp consonant.

Baldrick continued singing discordantly as he worked. "And there'll always be a way through."

"My hoof's going to find a way through your backside if you don't shut up." The butler set the letter down on the table with an annoyed huff. Every word was a battle between subtlety and the urge to let fly with a violent exclamation.

Saddened by this interruption, Baldrick pleaded to his employer. "But Mr. Blackadder, it's only good cheer. The Earth Festival is this week. Earth ponies all over Equestria will be celebrating, all so they can share the crops they've grown and the animals they've raised." His voice was like a high-pitched croak, whining and awkwardly emphasized as if his even knowing each word was some manner of cheating at their language, an affront to the standards of learning. Blackadder was no longer sure whether it was the sound of Baldrick's voice or simply the pony himself which bothered him more.

“Well I'm not bound to win any awards for showing you off as an animal,” Blackadder retorted. “And as for reaping anything from the earth, this swill you call coffee tastes like you took the recipe from a mountaineer who’s forgotten his canteens and been forced to make his own water to drink.”

“It's funny you mention that, Mr. Blackadder—” Baldrick began to say something, but a withering glance from Edmund silenced any confession on his part. He blinked hard for a minute as his brain coped to changing tack. “I was thinking of entering my talent into the festivities.”

“Sorry, Baldrick, but I don't believe halitosis is one of the categories to be judged, though a blue ribbon you may very well earn in the subject. In fact, your very presence may pose a health hazard. The only skills to be showcased if you did attend would be the medical treatment of asphyxiation. But it's just as well, because you're not getting any time off as long as I have anything to say about it. I have enough duties as it is without cleaning up after your horse apples.”

Dejected, Baldrick hung his head and returned to his tedious work of replacing the floor tiling. “Actually, my lord, I had a very cunning plan that would amaze and astound everypony.”

“For the love of Celestia, not this again. Baldrick, if I've told you once, I've told you too many times. Your plans are renowned for being about as clever and surprising as a birthday party to an octogenarian. And as for astounding anypony, let's just say that the only mare who would give you the time of day would have a cutie mark depicting a tennis ball and a welder's screw, and even then she wouldn't know which end of you to beat with the riding crop.” Here he paused to accentuate his culmination with further disapproval. “The only carriage you would be trusted to stand in front of is a horseless one.”

“All the other earth ponies are going to be there, showing off their talents,” said Baldrick.

“A mere facade on the part of snooty pegasi and unicorns to patronize their non-magical, earthbound servants.”

“There's even going to be prize money for the best performance.”

“On the other hoof, just the sort of thing to promote the general well-being and show them what we've got. Alright, Balders, tell me your plan.” Blackadder set the letter down to place rapt attention upon his subservient, albeit without too much undue hope. The promise of money succeeded in tempting his undying greed.

Baldrick set down his trowel and eagerly engaged his master, though he kept his distance as he related his plan in a breaking voice. “Well sir, I have been training a herd of weevils to do my bidding, sir.” An undeserving grin from his yellowed teeth worried his master.

“Is that so?” Blackadder really did not have the slightest interest in hearing about Baldrick's poor hygiene; he already endured it on a daily basis. “And here I thought they were just exploiting you for room and board.”

The grin on Baldrick’s face was far too big for his own good. “I was going to show everypony how many I can fit in my mouth at once.”

“Come here, Baldrick.” A “come hither” look was enough for Blackadder to beckon the eponymous servant to the table at which he sat. Once Baldrick was in range, Edmund doused him with the scalding contents of his coffee mug. Baldrick did not sputter but spat out the few ounces of bitter he accidentally took in as though he was used to this sort of abuse. Blackadder then launched himself into another curt tirade. “Congratulations, Baldrick. That has to be the worst plan in history since Aeschylus took a pelican's advice about fashionable reptile-based headwear. Face facts, Balders. The pony who irrigates the royal septic system and the pony whose job it is to muck out the royal family's junk mail are hardly going to take home any prizes.”

Baldrick returned to his demeaning duties while Blackadder once again picked up a letter from the table, this time to unseal it. He scoffed after scanning the first couple of lines. “Oh honestly, madness isn't running in the royal family, it's in these idiots who send their unwarranted solicitations to the likes of celebrity. As if Princess Celestia is going to fall for this one.” He read the following aloud:

Dear Princess Celestia,

You may already be a winner! Want to extend the length of your wings? The fantabulous new pill from Mssrs. Flim and Flam can not only proffer new growth but also restore sheen and luster to your feathers. This is not a pump or temporary unicorn magic. This herbal secret belongs to the deposed monarch of Neighgeria who will be willing to share all. All he needs is a down payment of five-hundred bits or more to conscript an army to reclaim his throne in order to gain access to his rightful funds. Please send your credit card, pin numbers and banking account information to the return address. This will enable your eligibility in this FREE trial for this amazing new wonder-drug! You can *receive a return payment of up to ten million bits for your participation in this program. Furthermore, for your aid in putting to rest the civil wars that plague his land, the Prince of Neighgeria will grant you a percentage sum of his inheritance as soon as possible, as well as a chance to win the Neighgerian lottery with a grand jackpot of five billion bits! This is so totally not a scam. Beware of scammers! This is absolutely, most assuredly a true story, cross my heart and hope to be spanked until my bottom turns purple.*

Signed, the deposed Prince of Neighgeria.

Baldrick ceased scrubbing the underside of a floor tile with a rough-bristled brush. “Oh dear! It sounds like they need help straight away, sir!”

“Once again, Baldrick, you demonstrate your boundless capacity for cerebral incapability. This correspondence is, in fact, the least convincing promise since Princess Celestia offered her sister the role of pilot in the maiden voyage of the Equestrian Space Program, then neglected to tell her that it wasn't a round-trip ticket.” Blackadder crumpled the note under his hoof.

Much to his chagrin, this was the moment when one of the bells on the wall rang to announce the urgent request of one of the servants. Edmund did not need to roll his eyes to the label under the bell to know which monarch was begging his immediate attention. In fact, he ignored the bell outright for the next several rings, each clanging the alarm with increasing clamorous need. Baldrick stopped working to stare at his superior with a stupid expression on his face. His lips were locked into a confused “O” as if parted by a compulsion to speak yet unable to follow through. In the end, his mind was too addled from the unexpected result of Blackadder sitting put that he had to ask, “Are you not going to get that, my lord?”

“When I'm good and ready, Baldrick. That will be Prince Blueblood for only the fifth time today asking me for help on how to put on trousers. Though the peasants know him for being so persnickety as to cringe from anything plebeian like he's caught himself in his fly zipper, he is surpassed only by you in sheer idiocy.” Eventually the klaxon drove Blackadder from his seat, and he stood after throwing down another letter with a huff. He loaded a few stale biscuits from the counter onto a tray and snatched away Baldrick's cup of tea before exiting the room with a final quip. “Unfortunately without me, the fat Prince of Bad Air will doubtlessly suffocate himself trying to put his pants on, and I'm getting bloody sick of sharing oxygen with you.”

Upstairs, the prince's bedchamber was decorated in officious, priceless, hoof-made furniture, bearing such intricate gold and blue detail that was lost in irony on unappreciative nobility such as the prince. Everything in the bedroom was selected with care so as to keep the light just right as it passed through the window and the silvery curtains to reflect upon all the delicate carved surfaces of objects within. Much of the furniture seemed to serve no purpose other than decoration. Though it had function, it was unlikely to imagine the practicality of a couple of lounge chairs facing the bed was served with any frequency. The aforementioned Prince Blueblood was fumbling about with a pair of flashy dress trousers over his front legs. He caught his head inside the seat of the gaudy garment and was busy prat-falling about the room, messing up the bedsheets and upturning the fancy chairs. When Blackadder entered, he held the tray up on his right hoof because the prince had upset the end table between the two seats. Sardonic because this delayed his earnest retreat from the room, Blackadder said, “I trust everything is up to order, your highness.”

Shuffling the pantaloons down from over his muzzle, Blueblood flung a cavalier grin Blackadder's way. The prince was a unicorn with delicate sky-blue eyes, a straight and flowing blonde mane to match his tail, and a shaggy coat of snowy-gray fur. His cutie mark was a gold-and-blue compass rose, as if to symbolize the lands the royal family ruled over. Either that or his purported idea that he was at the center of that compass and the rest of the world revolved around him. Once he had spotted his butler, he greeted him with a one-sided cheerfulness. “Morning, Blackadder! How did you know it was me? I was having a bit of trouble getting these trousers on!” His voice was chipper and dashing, if not charming. It rolled and flowed with practiced elocution to the point where it ended up sappy as a forgotten tree in Vermont’s tapping season. He returned to trying to get the pants meant for his hind legs up over the front of his body.

“I knew it was you *because* you were having trouble getting trousers on.” Blackadder managed to upright the felled table with dexterous usage of his other front hoof and nose, and he placed the tray down upon it. “It is well-known throughout the kingdom that you are a pony with two rear ends. I simply assumed you had forgotten which was which and decided to do the citizenry a favor by rendering your face unseen.”

“Oh tosh and piffle, Bladders.” Blueblood laughed off his servant's intolerable rudeness. He managed to flail his forelegs long enough to free himself of the trousers which were now rendered a crumpled heap on the floor. He stuttered a bit not because he had any speech impediment, but because his mouth worked so much faster than his brain could operate that it realized it hasn't come up with anything to say, which is not to mean he was particularly quick-spoken. “I'm a prince of the realm! Everypony loves me. Why, after my appearance at this year's Grand Galloping Gala, everypony said it was even better than the year before!”

“I fear that to be a matter of stiff competition, your highness,” Blackadder said. “The year before, the Gala was besieged by a group of mad ponies who accosted the hired band, attempted to sell comestibles outside of the catered dining hall, released a stampede of wild animals indoors, and then knocked over a priceless statue of Queen Turvy the Heavy-Tipper. I'm afraid you simply showing up is no longer going to uphold the Gala's reputation for being the absolute worst celebration in creation since Sugarcube Corner of Ponyville played host to three moderately-sized rocks, a bucket of turnips and a sack of flour. Or worse still, the time that Princess Luna decided the ammunition for last Nightmare Night's spider-toss festivities lacked authenticity.”

Perhaps the polysyllabic vocabulary of Blackadder's terse if not concise monologue bored him, because Prince Blueblood continued sharing his private reverie. “It was brilliant, Bladders, to hear them shouting for me, 'Let's hail Prince Blueblood, let's hail Prince Blueblood!”

“Let's *cake* Prince Blueblood. Let's *cake* Prince Blueblood.”

“Do ponies not like me then, Bladders?” Blueblood looked beside himself with disbelief.

“Well you don't eat their food, you don't hold the doors open for them, and you keep calling me 'Bladders' after I have distinctly asked you not to.” Though he maintained his dignity, Blackadder was clearly perturbed given his tone of voice, a fact which went straight over Blueblood's head.

The prince thought this over a bit before letting out a gasp of unwarranted glee. “I've just come up with a splendid plan! What if we hired some very funny entertainment for the Earth Day festivities? The Joviehl brothers! Gelb the Git and Flatulent Fleck in 'Udder Chaos'!”

Blackadder's eyes shut as he gave his head a shake. “Alas, sire, your aesthetics remain as stuck-up as a pencil in a plenum ceiling, while your taste in humor is as pedestrian as a gaggle of mall-walkers at six in the morning.”

“Cheese and crackers!” Blueblood cursed dismissively. He stuttered a bit as he rambled out his next order. “L-listen here, Blackadder, what would you know sitting around in your butler's quarters and, and—and buttling around all day? If you think you know so much about entertainment then you can help me hire amusements for the Earth Festival.”

Blackadder closed his eyes again, this time to shield Blueblood from the sight of their rolling. “And what entertainers have you hired thus far? Apart from those who specialize in weak, prepubescent cow puns.”

“Um.” And then the prince grinned at Blackadder without saying anything for up to half a minute.

“’Um.’ So, so far your entire royal performance revue consists of two cows with more jokes about manure than the audience can throw at them, or can fill an ursa major that's been unlucky in love and has since let itself go.”

“Well Princess Luna showed me a list of last year's entertainment and recommended I go with some of them. She told me even somepony with a brain the size of an ant's wedding tackle ought to get it right.” Blueblood gave Blackadder a scroll of parchment with a list of entries from his nightstand. His butler read it over with a contemptible look on his face.

“Did she now? Phew, what a sorry line up. I remember these acts; they were terrible. ‘Trixie Says You All Suck and She is Better Than You Magic Act.’ ‘Brumby the Bear Baiter, Minus his Brother’. Who organized this? All they're missing are Morris dancers and the bearded mares.” Blackadder shook the parchment in his hoof with disgust.

Blackadder's disapproval was totally lost on the prince who said, “I was thinking of trying my own hoof in the talent contest with a little lounge singing. Isn't that just a brilliant plan?” Blueblood cleared his throat like a cat clearing a hairball, then proceeded to ring out a dull, atonal “Me me me me me”. He grinned at his butler as if genuinely expecting approval, or anything other than the dead stare he was instead met with.

“No, sir. It is a plan as feeble as the time Granny Smith of Sweet Apple Acres misplaced her walker for her sponge bag.”

“I say, Bladders, that’s quite enough of your neigh-saying!” Blueblood tried to demonstrate his consternation at Blackadder’s impertinence by shaking his hoof. He demonstrated it, but it was not compelling. His confounded head-nodding was better indicative of his mental state. “You can bally-well ask Miss Moony Shouts-a-lot what *she* wants for festival entertainment.”

“Very well, sir,” said Blackadder, who could not feel insulted when he was relieved to be dismissed from such flighty company. “And did you still wish to appear as the only unicorn performing in the Earth Festival festivities?”

Blueblood stroked his chin, pretending he could give the matter some vigorous thought. “Um, yes! Do that.” With that, Blackadder withdrew from the prince’s room with the parchment in hoof and set out to return to his kitchen, and it was difficult to say whether the ringing of the bell that greeted him was a blessing or not. Inside, Baldrick was busily dicing up some turnips and assorted other root vegetables while scratching the dandruff from his mane with the same implement.

This bell’s summoner was Princess Luna. While every bit as precocious and whimsical as Prince Blueblood, her daftness was more obfuscating, and Blackadder knew his jibes would require a more erudite finesse in their delivery. He slipped into the kitchens long enough to retrieve a pair of teacups and another kettle of Baldrick’s tea, then took his sweet time through the halls to Luna’s chambers, letting his hapless servant deal with the headache of tintinnabulation. Even before he entered the room, he could hear two voices arguing within, and he paused to eavesdrop for any juicy gossip.

Her chamber was vast and located in one of the tallest towers. It featured eight large, concrete columns holding up the roof. The far left wall had two giant bookshelves filled with thousands of books on war, the humans and the ponies, with a few rare ones on the dragons. The eastern wall had many large curtained windows and various telescopes, charts, and other academic equipment suited to studying the night sky. Amongst the clutter were a few oblong boxes. Luna sat behind a huge wooden desk located at the far end of the room in the middle, next to the giant window which looked out over Equestria. The desk was made from trees of the Everfree forest, a sign of her power and wealth. She was opening letters from ponies which remained in Equestria and treated her as if she was a rock star.[37] The letters themselves were fan mail Blackadder had screened for her, and were teaming with praises of her victories, although in actuality she had none. Kony had been defeated, and as of yet, Moscow and Cuba had not yet fallen. In some weird cases, the letters praised her beauty, which was highly debatable.[38] She was opening the letters with a silver letter opener, which was odd since pony correspondence typically used scrolls.

Judging by Rainbow Dash's voice, she was not happy about the two guards who once worked for her but now shoved her into the room. Luna dismissed them, and Blackadder inside to deliver the tea. He said nothing as he spent his trip setting down the tea and pouring the first piping hot cups, taking his time to listen in. "PLEASE TELL ME YOU ARE NOT STILL UPSET ABOUT MY INHERITING THE THRONE," Luna said. Her voice was chipper and self-satisfied.

"Now you just wait a bloody minute there, Moon-Unit! You mean *stealing* the throne," Rainbow said.

Luna ignored Rainbow Dash to interrupt their conversation with a greeting for Blackadder. "OH, EDMUND! YOU BROUGHT US OUR TEA LIKE A GOOD COLT." He responded with a perfunctory smile, but a smile that Rainbow Dash detested. Luna continued. "YOU SEE, RAINBOW DASH, EDDY HERE KNOWS NOT TO CROSS ME WITH WILD ACCUSATIONS, BECAUSE HE KNOWS HE'D LOOK EVER SO SILLY WITHOUT A NOSEY ON HIS FACE. OR MAYBE WITHOUT A FACE AT ALL IF I TOOK OFF HIS HEAD! CAN YOU JUST IMAGINE WHERE HE'D HAVE TO WEAR A HAT? DON'T YOU AGREE, MY LITTLE DASHY?" She sported a profoundly manic grin as if the sight of removing somepony's nose was a crowning moment of hilarity to her. "I BELIEVE YOU WILL FIND THE THRONE WAS GRANTED TO ME BY MOTHER, MEANING I INHERITED IT. IT'S NOT MY FAULT YOU FAILED IN YOUR DUTIES." Luna then addressed Blackadder as though Rainbow Dash wasn't even there. "SHE LED TWO GIANT ARMIES TO EARTH AND LOST THEM BOTH, THEN GOT HERSELF IN THE FAMILY WAY BY A HUMAN. ISN'T THAT DISGUSTING?" She laughed very much as if it was delightful to be disgusted, because it empowered her over the object of her derision.

Rainbow Dash looked down at her stomach which had become big as she was, now close to being ready to give birth. "You do realize that you haven't done jack shit on Earth, right? Meanwhile, Dash by name, Dash by nature, I've been getting it up out there, taking ponies to heaven and back. My armies *won*, if you'll remember correctly. We conquered Hainan. We conquered New York. All you did was empty out Equestria in ten seconds flat. You do realize ponies don't just spontaneously generate out of thin air, right? Those soldiers are somepony's loved ones. You just let that alien edge lord, Onyx, do all your work for you. You're too busy casting your nose up at those around you to take a good look at yourself. I think your brain lacks oxygen from all that time on the moon."

Blackadder helped himself to the corner of the room in a hurry by utilizing the two mares' argument as a distraction. He hid himself behind one of the window curtains as Luna shouted, "SPEAKING OF ALIENS, HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN SINCE YOU BECAME PREGNANT? WELL OVER A YEAR NOW. HOW IN TARTARUS HAVE YOU NOT GIVEN BIRTH YET TO YOUR FOAL? OH, EXCUSE ME, TO YOUR MONGREL HALF-BREED."

"There's no excuse for you! The doctors said its human blood will make it a hybrid, and that means it takes twice as long to come out, but twice as powerful as man or pony." Rainbow Dash rubbed a hoof against her prominence.

Luna gave a succinct nod and feigned sympathy. "THAT'S GOING TO HURT WHEN IT POPS OUT. MIGHT EVEN KILL YOU. NO MATTER; HAVE A SEAT." She offered the chair across the desk.

Rainbow Dash grimaced and approached. She telegraphed her rage when she noticed the silver opener letter opener she was fond of sitting on Luna's desk. Oft was the time Rainbow Dash could be seen with very same that letter opener, opening many an envelope of the numerous letters she famously received. That letter opener had been on many a wild adventure with her, ready at a moment's notice to loose and unfurl a scroll that she'd received anytime, anywhere. The two were practically inseparable from birth, so much so that it was difficult not to envision Rainbow Dash with it, or even to mention them outside of one another's sentences. Most pegasi just cut open letters using the stem of a feather, or a unicorn would use their horn, even without magic. The item had been her muse in every significant life-changing hurdle she had passed during her formative years, and it is with grievous heart that we have neglected to mention it up until now. Why, to emphasize the significance of this

[37] Interestingly, this is the way many United States video game developers actually expected to be treated, which speaks volumes of the decaying trends of that industry.
[38] Not that this correspondent would *know*.

personal prop would require at least another forty chapters and perhaps several more books in their own right to validate. LOBFF, her Letter Opener Best Friend Forever, and they had gone places and seen things that could never be gone to or seen again.

"OH, DEARY ME, WHAT'S THE MATTER NOW?" asked Luna. "AH, I SEEM TO BE USING THE LETTER OPENER MOTHER GAVE TO YOU WHEN *YOU* FIRST TOOK THE THRONE. THANKS FOR KEEPING IT WARM FOR ME, BY THE WAY." She waved the shiny implement in front of her face, pretending to admire it when really she was taunting her ally. "I RECALL HOW HAPPY YOU WERE THAT DAY, BUT NOW YOU ARE NO LONGER ON THE THRONE. THEREFORE I SEE NO REASON WHY YOU SHOULD HAVE IT." At that, Luna gave a wily laugh and bopped Rainbow on the nose with it. "HA HA HA HA HA." Bop. "HA HA HA HA HA. I AM TAUNTING YOU WITH IT NOW. DID YOU CATCH THAT? HA HA HA HA HA."

Rainbow Dash crossed her front limbs and scowled. "Is this seriously why you called me in here?"

"I THOUGHT YOU WOULD BE PROUD OF YOUR LITTLE BABY SIS, CONSIDERING I SUCCEEDED WHERE YOU FAILED. ANYWAYS, I WANTED TO ANNOUNCE THE FESTIVAL WE'LL BE THROWING OF CONQUERING MOSCOW. WE'RE TO HAVE A PLEASANT DISPLAY OF ALL THE SURVIVORS RIGHT IN THE GRAND SQUARE. IT'LL BE SO FAB!"

Rainbow Dash seethed with rage, not listening to Luna's anticipation. The words cut deep into her, erupting her anger like magma from a wound. "Stop saying that, you spoilt little whore! You don't know loyalty! You don't care about Equestria! Twilight and my other friends gave their all for this pointless, insipid war, and I gave my all for their memory! I'd still give my all for Celestia! All you've done for our solidarity is broken it like a glass piñata!"

Luna let out a well-practiced gasp. It was hard to say whether she was reviled or excited she could really act appalled. "HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO YOUR QUEEN IN SUCH A WAY? YOU WILL RESPECT ME, OR I SHALL HAVE YOU SLAIN!" She stormed around the desk and seized Rainbow Dash's chair.

"Go on! Do it, you pathetic nag!" said Rainbow Dash. "By now, I'm *bored* of you and Celestia putting me down. I'm bored of you going on about gods nopony has ever heard about before this war. If they're so smart, they'd start worshiping me!"

Luna snapped and threw a painful right hook which struck Rainbow Dash straight in the stomach. Rainbow Dash grunted as her chair rolled backwards a bit. She looked at Luna, who looked just as shocked as she did. Shaking, Luna shook a hoof at her. "I HAVE SHOWN YOU WHO IS BOSS AROUND HERE! NEXT TIME, I WILL HAVE YOUR HEAD CUT OFF AND HUNG FROM A ROPE ATTACHED TO A CEILING FAN!"

"You could've killed my child, you psycho!"

Luna chuckled. "GOOD. I HOPE IT ENDS UP BRAINDEAD."

Dash by name, and dash by nature. Rainbow Dash snatched the letter opener and dug it into Luna's throat, dragging it across and cutting it open like a samurai warrior with a poor definition of honour. Luna tried to scream, but instead blood gargled out from her gaping wound. She tried to hold onto the desk for support, but only knocked papers and doodads over before falling to the ground. Rainbow Dash stood frozen, looking down upon her sister's corpse as she wriggled around for a few minutes. Horror filled Luna's unblinking eyes as the life drained from her body and seeped around Rainbow's hooves. The stained letter opener dropped to the floor with a clang. "What have I done?"

If it came to light that Rainbow Dash had murdered her own sister then her child would be cut from her belly and burned to death before she herself would be hung. "What do I do?" She could sneak out of the window and act as if she was never here. No, that would be no use! She'd been spotted coming into the room by the guards. She'd have to risk killing them both. But there would be other guards down the hall. She'd have to kill them next. And then other guards would start to get suspicious, so she'd have to kill those guards as well. Better just kill every guard in Canterlot Castle, and then everypony in the entire world. No, that would be too risky, especially in her pregnant condition. She started to panic, which wasn't helpful. "You stupid nag! Why did you have to push me to this? Why, damn you? Why?"

In her outburst, Rainbow Dash neglected Blackadder, who was creeping silently for the door. He would have made it outside had his bumbling dogsbody, Baldrick, not burst in at the moment with a tray full of chopped turnips. "Oh, Mister Blackadder, there you are. You forgot the platter I made!" Blackadder jutted out his lower jaw and tried to silence him with a hoof gesture, but no such luck. Rainbow Dash reeled around on them. In ten micro-seconds flat, she flew over their heads and slammed the door shut with a heavy bang. As if to put a bell on the trouble they were in, Baldrick looked to the terrifying, fresh corpse of Luna and spoke her name aloud. Even he could discern something was amiss, and Blackadder's reaction was to put his hoof to his face. The lock clicked behind them. "Is she dead?" Baldrick asked, clearly not that quick.

“Of course she is, you blithering, brainless bastard!” Blackadder said. “She’s as dead as Lucrezia Borgia’s food taster.” He recoiled behind Baldrick when he noticed Rainbow Dash, and added, “Which is exactly what we’re about to be.” It took Baldrick a long while of mouth-breathing to follow the butler’s gaze to the letter opener Rainbow Dash was pointing at them.

“Here’s how this is going down,” said Rainbow Dash. “You limp-wristed premature squirts help me dissolve this evidence, or kill you both and pin it all on the butler there.”

“Please, that cliché is as old as Baldrick’s unwashed bedsheets.” Blackadder scoffed, but stifled his dismay when the pegasus flashed her weapon again. “Might I suggest a slight altercation? Since Baldrick is so scintillatingly stupid he won’t even remember this happened come tomorrow. What say we pin the blame on him and call it a day?”

“Sir,” Baldrick interrupted. “I have a clever plan.”

“No you don’t, Balders. Shut up.” He whacked Baldrick in the back of his head with a hoof.

“Don’t try anything funny, towel colt,” Rainbow Dash said. “Even if Celestia thought I killed her sister—I mean, my sister—whatever. Even if that, do you two botched condoms really think she’d let that information slander her great family name? Of course not! She’ll find a patsy anyway and give us both a dirt nap.”

“Sir?” Baldrick started up again. This time, Rainbow Dash smacked him with a hoof.

Blackadder sighed. “Forget it, Baldrick. No matter what we do, we always end up dead.”

“Actually, let’s hear what the limp-noodled embodiment of halitosis has to say,” Rainbow suggested.

“That’s you, Baldrick. But this plan had better be more cunning than a fox which has dropped out of Cunning University for finding the professors in Cunning-ology to be simple-minded and their lesson plans too formulaic, then gone on to start his own rival institution to much success.”

Baldrick blinked and tried hard to recollect. “Oh! Well, I was thinking, we could smuggle the body through all the corridors and bury it in the hedge maze, milady, and we could conceal it in something so nobody would see us carrying a cold, bleeding corpse of the monarch out with us.”

“Well, never mind that,” said Blackadder.

“It’ll have to do, and you two will have to do the carrying, if your sissy backs can handle it,” Rainbow said. “But what can we stick her in? Wrap her up in a curtain?”

“The blood will soak right through,” Blackadder said.

“There’s a box right back there.” Baldrick pointed to one of the oblong boxes at the back of the room.

The trio trotted over and found a large coffin, which they slid out from the clutter. “Why was she keeping a coffin in here?” Rainbow Dash asked. The group worked to pry it open, getting a bit caught up in the task partly by curiosity and partly by their rational fear of the pegasus mare. When the lid snapped open, they were shocked to find a human body face-down inside. “Midnight snack, I guess,” Rainbow said. “What a waste, bringing the humans’ dead to our dimension.” The coffin was pretty roomy, and they managed to cram the alicorn’s body inside after Blackadder suggested wrapping her up anyway to help soak some of the blood so it wouldn’t drip through the bottom, just in case. Baldrick sat on the lid to hold it shut as Blackadder rummaged around for some nails or similar amongst Luna’s tools, then Rainbow Dash banged the coffin sealed with a paperweight. As she did that, she had the butler and his cohort scrub the floor clean of blood. She pitied that there was only one coffin, that it wouldn’t fit these two fools inside as well, and that she still needed them alive to carry it out of the castle.

“Well, now that you’ve aided and abetted me, that makes you just as guilty as me, because carrying a dead body around is just as immoral as actually making somepony a dead body,” Rainbow said.

“Except you’ve got a knife, ma’am,” Baldrick pointed out.

“Have you been paying any attention at all this past year?” Rainbow asked. “I’ve become a broken record telling the powers that be that I’m a loose cannon that gets results, while Luna’s done nothing but contracted others and sat on her ever-widening flank at home here. You really think the powers that be are gonna care about a middling detail like duress? Even the humans aren’t that smart. Now get moving, and don’t say a word, or I’ll bring you down with me, eh.” She felt giddy and fearful all at once. She knew with trepidation what the death of her sister meant, and like a foal on Hearth’s Warming Eve, she was eager to be gone with the evidence of her crimes and reap the rewards in store. She realized what Baldrick had said, and corrected him. “Any by the way, death breath, that’s ‘Queen’! My title! The one she stole! She died because she pushed me too far, so the pair of you would do well not to make the same mistake, eh.”

It took them a good while to accomplish all of this, violently tugging down the curtain from the window on the end and rolling up Luna’s body and doing the aforementioned nailing. She was very glad that it was two lowly servants who had

discovered her after all instead of a couple of guards, because nobody would miss the staff and the soldiers would notice a crack in their routine. By the time it had all been set up, with Luna wrapped up like a burrito and locked away like a board game, Baldrick and Blackadder hoisted the coffin onto their backs (although Blackadder let Baldrick carry the heavier end). Rainbow Dash found a sheet to throw over the coffin like a tablecloth and concocted a story of them removing broken astronomy equipment, as well as reminded them that they brought this fate upon themselves by intruding upon her. In fact, she made them both apologize to her, and even stopped them from continuing in aiding her until they did.

"Like you should feel so sorry for Queen Luna anyway," Rainbow Dash said. "Before she returned to Equestria, she was known as Nightmare Moon, an evil alicorn who tried to curse the land with eternal night. My friends and I freed her, and this is how she chose to thank me. Just goes to show all ponies have their limits when it comes to honour. When it comes to life or death, honour goes right out of the window!"

"Yes, well, I find honour's nothing more than an excuse for your enemies to die," Blackadder said.

"It's what she gets for threatening the life of my child."

"Ah, yes. A monarch dead, the blame on our heads, the kingdom riddled with controversy for generations to come, and all for the product of the most disgusting relations known to Equestria."

Rainbow Dash only smiled in response. The butler had crossed a line, but she permitted it because she still needed his help. They all went silent because they had to trek through the royal palace, locking the door behind them and taking the long route out to the hedge maze. In the night, the yard was empty, but the statues of ponies glared down at the three with contemptible accusations. The maze fared no better, and they deliberately paced themselves to get lost, even as the coffin of Luna and the human grew heavier with each step. Rainbow Dash chided them to be quiet, carrying a dim lantern so they could see where they were going, with the hedgerows high enough to mask their location. Soon, they were sure they were very, very deep, because Rainbow Dash would fly overhead and scout out overhead. She settled back down and waited as they dug the grave for her.

"I don't suppose you're planning on doing any of the work, your highness?" Blackadder asked.

"Quit you're whining; you're worse than a human. Does the title 'Your Highness' mean anything to you? I'll fill in the graves after you put the bodies in."

"It's not every day I cover up a regicide." Blackadder let out an inconvenienced groan as he leapt out of the hole, not wishing to share the pit with the malodorous Baldrick any longer. The two earth ponies callously shoved the coffin down into the pit with a clatter. "If it's any consolation," Blackadder said, "I am a complete and utter coward and prepared to keep silent."

"I can assure you'll keep these secrets to the grave." Rainbow Dash smiled with a satanic grin.

"Oh, damn."

Chapter Forty-Three.

The foreshadow's worth. Elders and their stories.

How Harbinger escaped from St. Germaine Hospital without a trace may have had something to do with fractional guard postings and something known as a vertical foliage drop which is less about tossing bowls of flowers out of high levels and more about landing in particularly thorny rosebushes. It is important for everything to have a tragic flaw, because this gives our lives such deep meaning, and giving an escape route the demerit of prickly barbs offers the assurance that nobody would ever want to use rosebushes to "give us the slip", a phrase which here means "sneak away". It is a similar but unrelated phrase to giving someone a pink slip, which indicates the termination of someone's employment even if pink slips have not been a common practice even for a long time before the pony holocaust. Kony had a different notion in mind for "termination", but it's a moot difference, really, to pick out a random guard and execute him, because cutting someone off from their income prevents them from being able to pay for the staples of biological life: Food for starvation, medical goods for health, clothing and shelter from exposure, and societal goods to prevent social isolation and deviancy. You don't want people becoming sexual outcasts because of vagrancy.

It was either the rosebushes, or else Harbinger transformed into dragon form and flew away from the hospital, which does not explain why he was not sighted by Onyx who only took a few moments to look out of the window on that side of the building. True, there was a flying buttress blocking an ideal view of the corner, but Harbinger's escape was a chancy one. At any rate, he did fly off in his true draconic body for parts unknown before reverting to human shape in order to work the crank on the black box. He was annoyed by the twinkling melody it played that was too unfamiliar for him to recognize. "I hope this works," he thought to himself before the device popped open with a wheeze. The same old portal of black and purple opened up before him on the end of a spring. "How did they manage to produce such technology for this?" he wondered, and rightfully so.

He didn’t wonder it much, because where he hailed from beheld such exotic boons as to make most technologies the equivalent of putting the cart before the horse.

He stepped bravely into the portal. All he remembered of traveling through the abyss was a series of annoying flashing lights. When he landed, he collapsed to all fours and vomited profusely. The trip to Earth had been a lot easier, and he had to reacclimatize to his home’s gravity. After throwing up several more times, probably because he’d been forcing it, he took in his surroundings of a dense forest filled with gnarled, wretched-looking trees that appeared to thrive on their own dead wood. Identifying the vegetation of purposeful colour would be fruitless. It was a dark, foreboding wood where the trees looked just as lost as any who strayed within its reaches, and the uneven terrain was un-routable for roots, rocks and deceptive solidarity.

Harbinger spun slowly in circles to see if he could find a path, some smoke, anything that would indicate life. After finding nothing, he decided the best thing would be to fly around until he found something, but that was when he heard it: A desperate cry for help. Harbinger focused his hearing in an attempt to find the source of this distress call. Once he was certain he had a fixed location, he charged off deeper into the forest, tossing himself above and below the branches as though flying through them.

Though the atmosphere was muggy and still, Harbinger could hear the air rushing like wind past his ears. Before he knew it, he had shed his human disguise which was out of place in Equestria and turned back into his true form, embracing his scaled flesh once more. He was soaring sleekly above the brambles and in between the claw-like tree limbs. The whistling noise tempted his idle mind with the voice of his brother, remembering how it once boomed like thunder before he’d shackled himself with Discord’s mandates. He didn’t know what his brother was saying to him. He couldn't make out the words. His mind wandered to their battle, and by the time he remembered where he was, his body had crashed through a hollow tree trunk, crumbling the oaken structure with his body. His wings lost their balance and he toppled out into a sort of sunken, loamy glen that hung in the placeless midst of the woods like a vacuous pimple.

Here, he found the source of the voice, but it was too late to do anything worthwhile about it. In front of Harbinger was a dead young pony. A large figure, smaller than Harbinger himself, was hunched over the corpse. It snapped the tail between its jagged jaws, yanked the body into the air, and swallowed the dead equine in just a few starved gulps. The figure turned around in the middle of its meal, its cheeks still bulging as its gleaming eyes glared at Harbinger. Harbinger felt an internal gasp move inside of his chest. Hadn’t all the dragons been killed if they were not joined with Discord? Some had disobeyed the draconequus to fight the humans in remote locations on Earth, but the rounding should have discovered any who could have stayed behind here in Equestria.

The unknown dragon had a gravelly voice that almost gurgled like the peristalsis around his prey. “Who are you?”

"I am Harbinger. Who the hell are you?"

The figure continued to stare. Its eyes were like twinkling stars somewhere far away, but close enough to hurt to look at. The rest of him was like a tattered shadow someone had taken with them everywhere, frayed and difficult to discern. The cramped clearing had a sombre canopy, and this stranger’s body was not so much black as it was devoid of colour. “Harbinger, hm? I know the name.” The figure’s face peeled back in a fanged smile. “I am Paragon.”

A nagging doubt pushed that gasp out of Harbinger’s throat. He recognized Paragon from carvings which depicted his defeat at Discord’s claws centuries ago.

“Come to finish me?” asked Paragon, his voice weedy and halting.

"What? No! You have got it all wrong!”

"Discord is not man enough to take me, so he sends a grunt to finish his dishonour. That figures.”

"Paragon, please. I am not here to kill you!"

"Lies!" snapped Paragon. “Any true dragon thirsts for blood by instinct!” He stomped forward, and Harbinger backed in against the wall of scratching branches behind himself. This dragon he was speaking to should have been their leader; his master. He was a legend among dragons, the cruel incarnate of ferocious, cold-blooded reptilian dominance.

"Listen Paragon, I have left the brotherhood. Discord is a traitor! He killed Spike and three others, then he came for me next.”

"Enough of your mare-crap! That foolish, half-bred trickster doesn’t have the balls to do his own killing. You shall die here!” Paragon heaved back his wretched, flaking form, and spewed forth a jet of darkness, igniting black, light-soaking flames all along the ground, dancing here and there yet not inciting a blaze among the forest.

“But I’m trying to tell you, I’m on your side! *Your* side!”

Paragon rose up, trying to make himself appear larger than he was. The posture didn't work, but the effect did, especially when more of those tinkling, watchful stars lit up along his brow and face. "Never meet your heroes, hatchling."

Then he felt a something on his neck, like someone was breathing on it. Harbinger spun around too late, and was instantly met by a steel rod which dug into his chest, before giving off a very painful, paralyzing shock. His body shook violently before collapsing to the ground where his vision started to fade. The last thing he could make out was a pink blur standing over him, then darkness. When he came to, he was in the same old position he was familiar with: His wrists, torso and ankles were bound to a metal table by leather straps.

When his tongue stopped feeling fuzzy, he asked, "Must people constantly underestimate the power of a dragon?" Perhaps they wouldn't underestimate him if he didn't overlook the fact he looked like a lowly human all the time. He didn't even need half his strength to tear free from his bonds. He cracked his neck to either side once he stood. The room he found himself in was immediately identifiable as a lab, being populated by brewing stands, bubbling test tubes, and weird chemicals in beakers. Each was full of multi-hued liquids with effects he couldn't identify because the technicolour science was beyond him. "What the hell is this place?" he asked aloud as if impatient for whoever was in charge to notice him. Where was his attention? As if by instinct, he rooted through every drawer and cupboard, finding more of the same equipment.

Then somepony found him. He turned to face a gasp and saw Pinkie Pie wearing a white lab coat and a pair of safety goggles. Her nametag said "Pinkie Pie" on it, so Harbinger greeted her by name with a creepy "Hello". Pinkie Pie gathered some serious air time as she inhaled sharply, then with a squeal she flung the tray at him like a Frisbee. He swatted the item away and chased her through the doorway into what appeared to be an office. Pinkie Pie was reaching for an electric cattle prod on a table, but Harbinger full-on bum-rushed her, sending her into the far wall. Instead, he picked up the cattle prod.

Pinkie Pie "eep"-ed again. "You have your freedom! Just go!"

Harbinger twirled the rod like forty-year-old member of the Doncaster Spinners. "I've got more than enough freedom these days. I just wish to converse with your leaders." He snapped the rod in twain over his knee and dropped the pieces to the floor. "You see, I'm offering my services."

"You're not gonna kill them? Or me? After all, I did shock you!"

"I returned the favour by making you shit your pants," said Harbinger. "Not that you wear pants."

Pinkie Pie sprang up with a smile. "Fair point, but I gotta warn ya, we Equestrians aren't too fond of the human race, don'tcha know." Without delay, she led him from the office and the two walked on through the stately, isolated halls of wherever they were.

"Me? I am no wretched human. The very thought is an insult. I'm something much grander: I'm a dragon."

Pinkie nodded. "Ah, I see. You're one of those drug-abusing humans, aren't you? That explains the lack of clothes."

"When I transform, my clothes tear off!" Harbinger growled through his teeth, getting annoyed with excusing this. "I will not be patronised!"

"Ooh, excuse me. I'll try not to be a sycophantic cretin, either, while you laugh at us for being all the same."

The two continued bickering all the way to the end of the corridor where they came to a large set of doors. "They're right through here," said Pinkie, who turned as cheerful as though they'd never been arguing in the first place.

Harbinger felt a bit disarmed. "There aren't any guards here. I doubt your leaders would leave themselves unprotected like this!"

"In case you didn't notice, my lab's the only thing in this corridor, and there's no way in there but through here. Only way into this corridor is through the main hall. Only way into the main hall are huge iron doors with very skilfully-trained guards!" Pinkie Pie explained. Harbinger took a long look at where they'd come from and was satisfied. He nodded, and she pushed the doors open, revealing the great hall where ahead of them sat three thrones. Kaiser Celestia and Prince Blueblood sat on two of the thrones, talking about Luna doing so well in her outsourcing. The third remained vacant. Their conversation was cut off when they noticed their guests.

"How dare you bring a vile human into our dimension?" Celestia said. "Guards! Come at once!"

"That's not necessary," Harbinger said as two guards bustled in. He was absolutely right. Celestia thought otherwise, perhaps assuming him to be an assassin, or finding his naked human appearance to be the most abhorrent sight in the multiverse. The two guards ran at Harbinger, who sighed and waited for them to get close because he was such a badass that being threatened while defenceless was so gauche to him. See, he was sighing and rolling his eyes while two armed guards were preparing to attack him, and that was just so typical.

The first guard was a snowy-white stallion with forest-green hair named Avalanche. His cutie mark was of a snow-peaked mountain. Harbinger grabbed the guard's bladed staff from mid-air, then ducked, spun on his heel, and tripped the guard up. The second guard was a dark-furred stallion named Trojan Magnum, and his cutie mark was a heavy-duty flashlight. He made a slash for Harbinger, but Harbinger countered him with Avalanche's weapon. He pushed Trojan's staff away, and then plunged his blade into his stomach. In the same move, he grabbed Avalanche's beefcake neck and snapped it. Dusting off his hands, he addressed the thrones once more. "Now may we please just have a civilised conversation?"

"Civilized? After what you just did? Red does *not* go with these floors!" Blueblood said.

"But that was *your* fault!" said Harbinger. "I wanted to talk, and you sent your guards to kill me!"

"Can the defensive posturing, human, and speak your mind," said Celestia.

Harbinger ignored the fact that Celestia had just called him a human for the sake of making the conversation easier. "I am here to join you and help you destroy the human resistance!"

Celestia couldn't help but laugh. "You mean to say that you just killed two of my guard so you can betray the resistance?"

Harbinger shook his head. "No, I am not here to betray the resistance, but instead I am here to exact my revenge upon them!"

So it came to pass that Celestia was amused by Harbinger's voluntary nature, and granted him a very small room somewhere in the lower quarters of her palace. The room only had a small shelf, a pile of hay, and a bucket for his toiletry needs. Even being a dragon underneath his façade, as he paced the room he couldn't help feel like it was more a prison than the quarters for a trusted soldier. In fact, if it had iron bars instead of a door, it would have been exactly like an Equestrian prison cell. Harbinger sneered and derided his surroundings, longing for the day he could shed his skin and crawl about the land with the air licking the scales behind his wings again. For the time being, he decided it prudent not to intimidate his "captors" lest they take pre-emptive measures against him. He sat upon the hay and thought of other things, such as how much he hated the ponies, but not as much as the humans. He hated his brother Kane, and wondered what he had been up to in all the time he had spent here, waiting and hiding. He didn't like this war. He didn't like having to side with one set of food to fight another. He didn't like that his food was defended. He should have been stronger than this. He grinded his teeth for his appetite and wondered what it would be like to consume his enemies, to fill himself on human flesh, and then to devour Celestia whole. He spent a great deal of time ruminating on Paragon, but tried not to. He had wanted nothing more than to team up with Paragon, but the sight he had seen him in—and it almost felt now as if the encounter had been a dream—had befuddled his respect for him, and reminded him of his own brother.

Then one day, the doors opened without so much as a knock, and he was approached by three Equestrian guards and Kaiser Celestia herself. "So, dragon, what gave you the nerve to approach me in my kingdom?" she asked.

Harbinger had forgotten he'd told Pinkie Pie of his true nature, but he had the sneaking suspicion Celestia had been able to tell for herself what he was. "As I told you, your highness, I'm here to help destroy humans. I want them dead just as much as any pony does." Celestia gave him a withering, sceptical gaze that indicated he should elaborate if he expected to even sound the slightest bit convincing, but all he added was, "They've caused me great pain."

"Humans versus a mighty dragon? And how might they have done that? We sought your alliance on behalf of Equestria, but you turned us down. You decided to follow that creature I released instead. Oh, yes. You stubborn reptiles refused to listen to our offer, but the one who now leads you was imprisoned by me and my daughter a millennium ago, though she was my sister then. We freed Discord from his statuesque prison for the purpose of fighting these humans, but this is how you repaid us."

Harbinger looked surprised at this news, but hung his head. "I'd rather not say how."

"Isn't that a shame? If you're too shy, I could always offer my guards to take your head if you don't. How's that for motivation? Yes, I know how to defeat a dragon by taking its head. Three fully-armed guards versus one unarmed dragon in human form in a confined space. Seems to me like a no-brainer as to the victor."

"If you don't mind sparing the guards, I haven't killed something in a few hours now, and I'm just itching for a decent meal."

Celestia's smiled widened. "Is that the attitude that drove you all to extinction at the hands of the humans?"

"You have answered your own question. You wanted to know what the humans could have possibly done to hurt me. They nearly wiped out my entire species."

"By the look on your face, I would say there is more to it than that."

"I will admit there is! However, that is all you are getting from me! Now you can accept that I am not here to hurt you, or you can have me set upon by your guards, and watch as I tear apart their bodies! I leave the choice with you!"

And so yet another unnecessary fight ensued over something so petty. Celestia ordered her guards to take his head, and they approached with their bladed staves. Harbinger said she was choosing to have them killed, and that their deaths had nothing to do with his refusal to fight them or even just to say, “The humans killed my wife and kids.” Harbinger ducked under the first guard’s staff which sent the guard stumbling forward. As the second swung his weapon, darted for him then tilted his head back so that the blade left a bloody scratch across his neck. He batted the weapon up and slammed his left hand into the second guard’s chest, which magically snapped his ribcage like twigs. Perhaps there was a streak of osteoporosis among Equestrians. The third guard stabbed forward as Harbinger spun to the side, grabbing her head and pushing her towards the first guard who accidentally impaled her. The second guard was still choking on his knees, and the first was now struggling to remove his weapon from the dead guard. Harbinger tiredly placed his hands on the second guard’s head and twisted with one swift motion, causing a sickening crunch as he snapped the pony’s neck. By this time, the first guard had freed his blade and swung it across Harbinger. Harbinger ducked again (he was very spry, and the guards didn’t learn very quickly, even when Celestia could have told them he pulled that trick too much) and kicked the guard’s front knee, snapping it inwards. He grabbed this guard’s neck and squeezed and squeezed until the pony’s eyes became bloodshot.

“Alright, already! You’ve made your point. You have issues talking about what the humans did to you,” Celestia said.

Harbinger turned to look at her and chuckled as if this had all been very funny instead of a whopping great waste of time. “I told you not to fuck with a dragon.”

“We get it, you big baby. You win. Just spare at least one guard. They do exist to fight the humans, you know.”

“No, you need to learn!” Harbinger huffed. He then tore the guard’s throat using only his hand, and sank his other hand deep into the wound. Moments later, he tore it back out, clutching the full length of the guard’s tongue. "The tongue is a delicacy in most parts of the human realm. You know, it's the one thing I actually agree with them on." Then he dangled the tongue above his mouth and took a huge bite of it, because of course he did. For having led an army that started out eating human innards, Celestia was rather grossed out by this display and nearly threw up in her own mouth, so Harbinger liked to think. When he finished devouring the guard’s tongue while said guard choked to death, he wiped the blood from his mouth and flashed a toothy grin like he was telling that stupid joke about the Aristocrats. “Now, are we allies, or are we enemies? I’ll kill every single pony soldier until you be my friend.”

“For goodness sake, alright already,” Celestia said through gritted teeth.

“Good, good! Now, is there anything you need doing, my highness? Anything I can kill? Because in case you couldn’t tell, I’m in the mood to kill.” Blood dribbled from his mouth as Celestia rolled her eyes. Harbinger had a boner.

The fact that Harbinger was being a bad house guest was the more likely reason for dispatching him to the Everfree Forest, where his target was said to be hiding in an eastern cave. Harbinger thought a lot about how the humans would soon be dying, or they’d be screaming in pain, or how he’d eat lots and lots of humans and tear them apart and eat them piece by piece, and how he’d lead the ponies against them and what have you. He just needed the formality of assassinating this hermit to seize the honour to do so. Apparently he could kill all the pony soldiers he wanted carte blanche without repercussion, but fulfilling this mission would really impress the Kaiser. Maybe he could skip rope with a guard’s intestines for her when he got back or something. That would be nice and subtle. Then once he killed Discord, he could take leadership of his cabal and rule the world. After all, the dragons deserved to be subservient to him.

Harbinger came upon the remnants of a dirt road leading to a giant rock, just as Celestia had informed him. “Just follow the dirt road,” he said, repeating her words. He sprinted along to the dark, jagged entrance in the side of a mountain and practiced his ducking and skulking on his way up close. By now, the sun had descended, so he had the advantage that came with the darkness, whatever that was. Considering he could take out three armed ponies without so much as a stitch on apart from an old potato sack he’d been given, it was probably a moot benefit. He reminded himself of his mission, to go inside and claim the head of the inhabitant. He kept slow and low to the ground, like a snake, yet moved with full awareness of his surroundings and a cunning look in his eye. Celestia had also given him some ragged trousers, and in the pocket was a small knife to kill his target with, even though he’d clearly demonstrated his bare hands had some kind of super strength. Even his enhanced eyes allowed him to see in the darkness of the cave, though it still behoved him to move at a slow and steady pace. Surprisingly, he didn’t have complete night vision.

After an even five minutes, he found a small light, which was rather suspicious as caverns weren’t ordinarily known for their festive decorations. “Here comes death,” Harbinger hissed in a sing-song-y voice not unlike a husband returning home on a sitcom. As he crept closer, he heard the gravelly singing of an old tune he’d not heard for nearly three hundred years. There’s probably been a tune you’ve overheard once that you simply couldn’t find out the name of, particularly as radios tend to blurt out their names so quickly that they’re easy to miss, so you’ve had to try and remember the lyrics to write down later. Perhaps

it’s a song you’ve not heard in a long, long time that you’ve almost completely forgotten, and a few times you’ve found yourself humming an off facsimile; when you hear the actual tune again, it’s not quite what you remember, and the part you like is frustrating in its brevity. I myself haven’t been able to get the tune of a requiem by Claudius out of my ear. Harbinger almost didn’t remember the song at all because of those three centuries, but memories came flooding back to him of the ballad from an old, Danish village that no longer existed. In the ballad, a dragon had slain all of the village’s heroes, so the village had to pay him drug money to feed his insatiable meth habits. The ballad, of course, was about him.

Harbinger wondered how the person in the cave knew such a song. He paused to reflect on the song and all the things he’d done in its lyrics. Some were exaggerations, others were understatements, but he no longer found it very funny because being reminded of those times reminded him of how things were different now. His family had long since digested the descendants of that quaint little mud pile in Denmark, so no logical conclusion came for the song’s presence here aside from a strange and unnerving coincident. He pulled the knife out from under his potato sack-cloak for comfort and continued. The ballad grew louder, the voice so gravelly that it may as well have been the bowels of the cave singing. Harbinger could see the light was a fire, which wasn’t good because this cave was poor on ventilation. He could now make out an archway and a room carved out beyond it, and knew that was where his target was. It was all a touch prophetic, but either way, someone would be dying tonight. Why should it be different from any other night, you know?

The voice stopped singing, but like Harbinger’s earlier greeting, this voice, too, was sing-song-y. “I know you’re there. You really think I would sing that awful ballad if I didn't know you were close, Harbinger?"

Harbinger gulped. He wouldn’t be ashamed to admit he was freaked out right about then, and he had to admit he no longer had the advantage (and hadn’t had it to begin with). “How did you know it was me?”

"I can smell you. I could smell you even when you were outside," replied the voice.

Harbinger shook his head. "No, that doesn't explain how you know who I am, or how you know my ballad."

"Only the most famous dragons get a ballad. Tell me, are you a famous dragon?"

"What does that matter?" asked Harbinger as he moved towards the archway.

"Can't an old man inquire about a few things before he is put to an eternal rest?"

Harbinger gave a nod, though he wasn’t sure he could be seen. He should have been lit up from that side well enough, but he couldn’t see who he was talking to yet. "You can inquire all you want. I won’t be answering you."

“It’s not an inquisition,” said the voice. “You are scared of questions. What have you got to protect behind vagaries?” Harbinger ignored him and reached the archway. He took a moment to ready himself and was about to leap through to meet his target when the unseen old man called out, "I wouldn't do that!"

Harbinger froze again. "Why not?"

“Too busy hiding in the shell fragments of occlusion to be any observant. Look down, whelp.”

Harbinger saw nothing at first, and after a moment of concentration, he saw a very thin trip wire across the width of the archway. He once again chuckled as if it was amusing he would’ve died had his enemy not granted him mercy. The word “amusing” does not mean “humbling”. “I’m here to kill you, and yet you still save my life? What does it set off? What kind of trap?” Harbinger looked up into the sooty ceiling, now very curious.

“None that would kill a dragon,” the voice admitted.

Harbinger felt confused, so he looked annoyed. “So why warn me about it?” He sounded annoyed, too.

“Because it would be a complete waste of a perfectly good trap. It sets off an explosion. I’d rather I didn’t lose my home as well as my life.”

Harbinger scowled and looked around at the voice’s “home”. Even by dragon standards, it wasn’t much of a den. He took the time to lift his leg over the tripwire and planted it on the cave floor on the other side of the archway. He eased through the archway and into the small chamber. There was next to nothing inside. There was a bed roll in the corner, a campfire in the middle of the room, and a small pool of fresh water not too far from that. In front of the pool was the kneeling figure of a wizened man with his back to Harbinger. This was Harbinger's target. "You should have just let me die,” Harbinger said.

His target didn't even turn to face him and gave a laugh like a cough. "Well, I explained that.”

"Yes, but now your home will be useless to you."

"Even the dead need a home. A place they can rest for the eternity that comes with death."

Harbinger took a few steps forward, wondering how he could pace himself for this conversation. The old man wasn't that far away now. "You're really just going to let me take your life? No fuss?"

"What would be the point in fussing over such a stupid thing? Life is expendable. Nothing but a measure of time to fill with measuring oneself against all others. To fill with synaptic pleasure, the wheedling of the weak, and fornication. Physical truth is the only truth."

Harbinger shrugged his shoulders. "If that's how you feel, then fine by me. Just makes my job easier." He drew closer when the man stopped him by speaking once again.

"Oh, I never said that I would just let you take my life." The figure rose to its feet, and though Harbinger could see he was old and balding on the top of his head, with a long, grey mullet, dirty and wrinkled all over and clothed in an unidentifiable brown fabric, he also saw the man was very nearly seven feet all with a huge, muscular torso. "What is the matter? Was you not expecting a man of my size?"[39]

Harbinger gave *yet another* chuckle as a defence mechanism. "I've taken down men bigger than you before with ease."

"Yes, Harbinger. Believe me, I know."

Again, Harbinger had a moment of anticipation. "How do you know my name? This isn't funny! Who are you?"

"This is not a joke. I know many, many things about you. Who I am does not matter. Not anymore." The old man shook his head. Harbinger took a moment to think about who this man could be. It must have been tiresome to draw out such a conversation without bothering to face who he was speaking to. Who would know of Harbinger? No one but a dragon would, and even then there could be a thousand possibilities to who this was. "I must ask, how did you find yourself allies with the ponies?" asked the elder. Expecting Harbinger not to share, he interrupted him. "Is it because they find themselves at war with the humans? After what happened to your family, I would not be surprised that you would want to make the humans extinct."

Harbinger grew angry, which wasn't saying much. "You don't get to talk about my family!"

"Why not? They were good dragons. Your son would have been a fierce worrier."[40]

"Silence!" roared Harbinger. An eerie silence took the cave. The soft crackle of the fire and the whistle of the wind was all that could be heard. Harbinger knew he had to kill this man. He knew that if he was to take the humans down, he would need the ponies' help, but for some strange reason, he could not bring himself to plunge the knife into the man's back. He needed to find out who the man was, and instead of using his force to turn the man around, just so he could see his face and be done with the lengthy bout of insinuation, Harbinger decided to let it play out. After all, if this man was in fact a dragon, then there was no guarantee Harbinger could take him down.

When the old man sensed Harbinger was not brave enough to speak, he broke the silence. "You are hesitant to kill me. Why is that? You wish to know who I am? Would that stay your hand of robbing me of my life?"

"Probably not." Harbinger was being pretty honest.

Without saying another word, the old man turned to face him. At first Harbinger did not see the face. Not until the light from the fire illuminated it in all its hideousness. His skin was chapped and scabbed. His eyes were two sunken pits that fell some place far beneath the back of his skull, clawed into nothing the way a dog digs in dirt. "I know all my cabal by smell, Harbinger." Now, I know who this old man was going to be, and I know that you knew it, too. For what it's worth, I empathize with those who didn't know from the outset that the old man skulking about in a cavern in Equestria that warranted the condemnation by Kaiser Celestia was always going to be Paragon.

Harbinger lowered his knife as he stared at the withered, old human face of Paragon. Too many problems entered his mind, and he was inclined to voice them. "You're dead," he said first. "Discord slew you."

Paragon's face cracked as he smiled and held out his arms. "Nope."

"Then why leave? Why let him take over our clan? That goes against our laws!"

Paragon lowered his head but kept his gaze on Harbinger. He moved past him to sit by the fire. "I left because he shamed me. It's true, Harbinger. Discord and I did duel for leadership, and he did defeat me, but I survived by his mercy." The very word offended Harbinger. Given that the word "mercy" refers to compassion shown to someone in distress, which should tell you a lot about him and his culture. "Discord, as you may have noticed, is no ordinary dragon," Paragon explained.

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[39] Sic.
[40] Ibid.

“He is something less than a dragon, and yet he is more than the sum of his parts. He is a half-breed, a chimera known as a draconequus. He is part dragon and part pony, a blasphemous concoction of our two races that should have been aborted for his impurities. It came as no surprise, then, when he approached me one day, ranting of peace between dragon and humankind. When you possess true power as I once did, such heresies are only pittances, but then he challenged me for rulership. I was the most powerful dragon then. Rulership did not mean just one cabal to me; it meant all of dragon kind. I convinced myself the only way he would learn his place would be to accept, but in reality, I was afraid of what he suggested. I wasn’t afraid of him, or of defeat, but of the ideas of tolerance and love beyond our species. Filth like that defiled my cleanliness even to speak of! So yes, I admit I knew fear.

“Yet still, there was more to be cautious about. He is somehow more than that. I am ancient, and I do not know from whence he came, but he possesses magics more fearsome than the ponies themselves do. He is something like a trickster-god, manipulating the world around himself to his own obscene whim. Our battle waged for three full days, but it was three full days of madness and terror. The tortures he inflicted on my mind were impressive. At first he made a mockery of combat, employing props and pratfalls to confound and irritate me. Then his tricks grew more complex. He made me devour things which wouldn’t digest, and continued to speak to me where I could not crush them. Instead of hurling great behemoths at me to test all my strength and courage, do you know what he did?

“He summoned a tiny, yellow butterfly, and taunted me with it. When I thought I had obliterated it with fire, I found it flitting just out of reach. When I tried to crush it with my jaws, it passed between my fangs to freedom. When it danced upon my nose, I ended up gouging my own eyes out and blinding myself. As I lay there bleeding and sightless, the voices in my stomach grew louder, laughing at me, mocking me!

“His final curse condemned me to this insulting form you see now. I hid myself in disgust more from that than him sparing my life. I begged him to change me back. I did not care for my growing madness or the loss of my eyes. I admitted defeat, but he ‘spared’ me with humanity.”

“A curse!” Harbinger said. “No pony magic is that powerful! They can’t transmogrify us or even spontaneously generate such things from thin air! Even I know that! Discord had us hide our true forms by another method.”

“I thought of that a long time while I was stuck in this disgusting shape. Discord is a being that manipulates chaos, but even he did not do this to me at the outset. I believe he had to weaken me first, to wear down my mental faculties and my vigilance, to take such control over my nature. But still, he did not show mercy, because what he did next was that method of which you speak. The Changelings were another race of olden times you may remember, and something in their biology allowed Discord to alchemize the putrid aberrations you wear now. You obey because he is the victor. You insult everything you are over a stupid tradition. There is no bottom to Discord’s depravity. He claimed to cherish humanity, and yet inflicted it upon our kind as an insult. This proves it a lie. There is nothing he would not do to harm our kind if it amused him, even if he wiped out what we are. He cares only for dragging on the conflict.”

Harbinger felt uneasy about everything he had been told. His mind grasped at the threads in search of something he could latch onto. Anything that made sense was fair game, even at the expense of all the other details. He couldn’t allow himself to be paralyzed with disillusionment. In the end, he couldn’t believe Paragon had been defeated with such trickery. “So you begged for mercy?” he asked. “You didn’t even try to keep fighting? You just threw away everything and gave up on us?”

“I was weak! He turned my own fire against me and burnt me. He drove me mad with illusions. I was already beaten.”

"No! You don't know that! You could have had a chance. You could have killed him, but you didn't! Instead you begged for mercy!" Harbinger allowed himself to be furious. It felt more like who he really was. He’d always looked up to Paragon way back when he ruled over the dragons. He had always seemed so fierce and merciless towards the humans. He’d admired that, considering the great pain that the humans had caused him. Now he’d just found out that the dragon he looked up to, his hero, was nothing but a coward, and everything he had done now seemed like a coward’s move.

Paragon shook his head. "I don't expect you to understand. Either way, Discord would have prevailed.”

"Stop! Just stop saying that, you coward!" Harbinger pushed Paragon further away from him and stepped closer in an attempt to be intimidating. "You were a fierce leader! I looked up to you! When the humans took my wife and my son you were the one who came to me. Who promised me that all humans would pay for what they had done? You did, and then you just gave up! You gave up, and you left, and then I was forced to protect and care for those wretched things! Those who had taken my family were spared, and I was forever condemned to knowing that I could not avenge them!"

"You could have taken Discord's life yourself!" snapped Paragon. “If you’re so strong, if you’re so *good*, you should have risen up and slain the mighty Discord, the wretched mongoloid trickster-god!”

"No, I couldn't have, because I was under the impression that you were the king of all dragons. That you were undefeated, and that you would never be defeated. When he 'killed' you, I assumed that no dragon or man would ever be able to take him down! That is why I was forced to obey!"

Paragon smirked. "So you too were scared. Just admit it, Harbinger. You're too many centuries old to blame the victim. You were scared. You are just as much of a coward as me! You refused to even attempt to fight Discord! You, just like me, valued your life too much to even make an attempt!"

"Don't you twist this onto me!" retorted Harbinger.

"No, twisting things is your tactic, hatchling. This is all about you! You are the coward who refused to fight for what he believed in! You ran away and betrayed your brothers! Joined the ponies! You did all of that, and now you're too scared to even make an attempt at my life!"

"Don't fucking push me!" barked Harbinger.

"Hah! You speak like an insolent child who's just learned to swear. Even in my sorry state, you lack the killer instinct. No wonder your family's dead. How many times since then have you done nothing but run away?"

Harbinger let out an angry roar and brought his blade up, digging it deep into Paragon's throat. Paragon gasped and went crashing back to the floor. Harbinger moved over to Paragon and knelt down beside him. "I am not like you!" He dug both of his hands into the wound in Paragon's neck and tore the wound open wide. Paragon just lay there and waited for Harbinger to finish him off. He even grinned. He had lived with his shame for so long, and now he had just manipulated Harbinger into killing him. Finally he was getting what he had always wanted since his defeat: He was finally being released from his shame. Harbinger tore his way through Paragon's flesh until he reached the spinal cord. Harbinger gripped it tight and stared into Paragon's eyes. "Now you die, and I will be the true leader of the dragons!" He then snapped the spinal cord, along with all of its nerves. Paragon let out one final gasp before his life fled from his body. Finally he was free.

Harbinger let out an angry war cry, and he tore Paragon's head from the rest of the flesh that kept it on the body. He then tore Paragon's robes off of his body and wrapped his head in it. He then climbed to his feet and wiped Paragon's blood off of his hand using the cloak the ponies had given to him. "I will now be feared, and I can finally return back to my cabal as a leader. Discord will be thrown out, and I will be accepted in, as I am Harbinger, and I have slain the mighty Paragon!" He cheered to himself as he now thought himself a god. He'd longed for the power to become the leader of his dragon clan, and now that he'd beheaded a weak and wretched old man, he was.

Chapter Forty-Four.

Making a good first impression. The other Russians.

Daniel found himself looking up at the night sky. He embraced the potent silence and exhaled into the night. It felt good just to be breathing, as if he'd been under a stubborn cold. As his eyes drifted in and out of focus of their own accord, the stars blipped in and out of view, and in those moments, he was looking without really seeing. For the time being, all his troubles were forgotten. He felt as if he'd just died, and now he was in a peaceful and eternal slumber. He no longer had to feel heartache or pain. He could just stare up at the stars forever, and never worry about the friends and family he'd lost. Maybe the cure for insanity was peace.

And then his peace would be shattered by a thick Russian accent directing itself at him. "He is awake now." The coarse, slurring syllables snapped at him with accusation. The voice came from behind him, but Daniel didn't try to see who it was. He heard footsteps rustling leaves and breaking twigs, but the person who leaned over into his view could not have been the one to speak.

Dixie Clemets did not have such an accent, nor a man's voice. She had a brusque Texan accent, and asked, "You feeling okay?" She was scrutinizing Daniel as he just stared dumbly up at her, hoping she'd say he was gone. There was nothing she could do.

After a second, he realized he was stunned by the beauty above him. Sure, she wasn't that much of a looker, her makeup was anything but subtle, and her skin looked weird, but he'd just been through living Hell. But, nah. She was no Laura. Another woman killing herself because of him would start to screw with his sense of reality even worse than talking ponies from a colourful dimension. Dixie was helping Daniel to sit up, and he realized just how out of sorts he still felt. His surroundings were unfamiliar and devoid of any recognizable landmarks. "Where are we?" he asked, gazing out at the hundreds of trees around them.

"We are out in the middle of nowhere. Isn't it just swell?" said the thick Russian accent. Daniel turned to spot a burning campfire and a man sitting on a log. He wore a red beret and a Belarusian armed forces uniform. He was eating an apple and

using a combat knife to cut into it. He slipped another piece of apple into his mouth and glanced at Daniel for a second. He chewed with his mouth open, but waited to swallow before answering the question on Daniel's mind. "Friends call me Ivan."

Leaning back on his arms, Daniel gave a nod. "I'm Daniel." So he was. Ivan slipped another piece of apple into his mouth, but said nothing further, so Daniel looked to Dixie instead. "Why are we out here?"

Dixie sighed. "Moscow is...it's..." She tried to explain, but her words couldn't fall into place.

"It's gone!" interrupted Ivan, finishing off Dixie's sentence for her like a gut-shot fawn.

Daniel just lowered his head. So far after waking up out of his coma the world seemed like Hell to him. He wasn't even surprised, and he'd long since run out of sadness from the events of that day. He cleared his throat, feeling reasonably parched. "Did anyone get out alive besides us?" he asked.

"A few trucks made it out. I don't know where they are heading though," said Dixie.

"It does not matter. The ponies will chase them down and kill them all. Best you forget about them," Ivan said.

Daniel ignored Ivan and focused on talking to Dixie. "I know where they are heading."

"Really? Where?" asked Dixie.

"They're not heading anywhere! They are dead. Trust me, the way the ponies just risked everything to attack Moscow like that, they wanted blood. They wanted everyone's blood. They won't let anyone escape alive." Ivan finished his apple.

Daniel scowled at Ivan. He didn't feel like having his mood tested. "We made it out, didn't we?"

Ivan threw the core of his apple to the floor and sucked the left over juices off of his thumb. "We did, but the other four men I had with me did not."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but if we made it out alive, then so did others. We can't be the only ones," said Daniel.

"So where are they heading then?" Dixie asked.

"There is a railroad terminus a few miles away from the city. They were told to head there. That's where they'll be," Daniel told her.

"Really? A few miles? Is that it?" asked Ivan.

Daniel climbed to his feet and brushed off dirt that'd found its way onto his clothing. "Yeah, is that a problem?"

Ivan squinted and shook his head. "My problem is that you told the only people to escape Moscow that they should travel only a few miles and then take shelter. Even if they did manage to escape the ponies, they will be dead by morning."

Daniel looked up to the night sky. "Well I'd say by the looks of it that we have got a few more hours until then. We better get going then."

"Oh really? And how do you expect to do that?" asked Ivan.

"We walk. Not too far" responded Daniel.

"You don't even know where we are. You think you can get far with your leg?" Ivan asked.

Daniel had forgotten about the wounds he had just recently suffered. He looked down at his legs and all that happened at the HQ came back to him. He felt a pang of sorrow as he looked at where his missing fingers had been. "I'll be fine," he told himself.

Dixie put her hand on Daniel's shoulder. "We both patched you up as best as we could, but your stitches won't hold if you go off walking for miles."

"Add that to the amount of blood you lost, and you will be out again before you know it," Ivan said.

Daniel was getting angry now. "So what then? You just expect me to leave my people to die?"

Ivan nodded and shrugged. "Not much else you can do."

Daniel gave Ivan a stern look and limped over to him. "You listen here. I don't know who you are or who you think you're talking to, but I order you to get us to the railroad terminus! Without complaints! Do you understand?"

Ivan chuckled and stood up from his log, then came face to face with Daniel. He was a big man with an even bigger stature. He was around six foot four and had broad shoulders. He leaned in real close, so that their noses almost touched. "With all due respect, *sir*, but you have no jurisdiction over me. Therefore, you can't order me to do anything."

"You are a member of the resistance, are you not?" Daniel asked him.

"I am."

"Then I have the highest jurisdiction over you!"

Ivan laughed. "No, you don't. I'm with the Minsk resistance, and if my memory serves me well, we don't align ourselves with you very often. We like to keep a low profile." He stalked past Daniel, keeping his eye on him as he sheathed his knife.

Daniel felt like hitting Ivan, but he knew that it would result in him having his ass kicked, considering he felt so weak. He decided to change tact. "Look, we got off on the wrong foot, but I'm asking you, please, just get us to the terminus. You can leave straight away. Just get us there."

Ivan shook his head and sat back down on his log to watch the fire. "Not possible."

Daniel inhaled sharply. "Why not?"

"Because I have my own people to worry about, and I got to get back to them and tell them what happened to Moscow."

"Then let me go. I'll go on my own, and you can travel back to Minsk. We both win."

Ivan shook his head again. "In your condition, you will die before you get there."

"I have to try!"

"What is your problem? You want to die? Is that it? Because believe me when I say your people are gone. The ponies would have ran them down and slaughtered them. They probably even got a couple hostages who told them what the plan was, and they are just waiting for the 'legend' that is Daniel Williams to come strolling over. If it wasn't for me, you would be dead, and I lost four very good men getting you and her out of there. How about you show a little gratitude, and stop trying to run off and get yourself killed?"

Everyone went silent for a moment and Daniel's mind raced over Ivan. "Why were you even in Moscow?" he asked.

"What?" Ivan looked taken off guard.

"Why were you in Moscow?" Daniel repeated.

Ivan glared at the fire. "I was supposed to be checking in with Peter Williams. He sent a notice out to every nearby resistance base informing them that he would like them to report in on a monthly basis, just to make sure everything was fine."

"But you don't 'align' yourselves with us," said Daniel. Ivan remained silent, so Daniel moved closer. "Those were your words. You don't align yourselves with us, so why would you be responding to our orders?" Still Ivan avoided the question and moved off his log. Daniel kept after him. "Hey, answer me! What were you doing responding to our orders if you aren't even in our resistance?"

Ivan turned back to him. "Or what? Go on. What will you do if I don't, huh? That's right: Nothing. Quit acting tough. It doesn't work for you." Daniel clenched his right fist and gritted his teeth together. Ivan picked up on this and laughed. "What? You going to hit me? I'll give you one shot, and then I'll—"

Daniel swung his fist around and it crashed against Ivan's left cheekbone, cutting his sentence short as his head jolted to the right. Ivan remained silent and still for a moment. He couldn't believe that Daniel had just hit him. Slowly, he turned an intimidating look upon him. Daniel cleared his throat like someone had just thrown a fit at a public function. "Right. Now we got that established, I think we should—"

Ivan tackled Daniel to the ground violently, cutting his sentence off in a similar fashion. He knelt over Daniel and threw punches down into his face. Dixie watched the fight and shouted at them to stop this, to knock it off, but they ignored her. Daniel blocked one of Ivan's swings with his forearm, and then threw his head forward. Ivan let out a cry of pain as Daniel's forehead slammed into the tip of his nose. Daniel then swung another right fist into Ivan's face, and Ivan rolled off of him. The two switched positions, and now Daniel was the one to slam his fists down into Ivan's face. "I said stop it now!" Dixie shouted. The men continued to ignore her, instead opting for their little testosterone fuelled "I'm the alpha male" fight. Ivan wrapped his bear-like hands around Daniel's throat and dragged him down closer, then slammed his forehead into Daniel's repeatedly. Daniel was stunned momentarily, and Ivan tossed him to the grass before climbing to his feet to stamp on Daniel's torso. Daniel immediately felt the wind being knocked out of his body, but Ivan continued to stamp down.

Dixie at this point had lost her temper and she moved close behind Ivan. "I said stop!" She grabbed Ivan by his right arm and twisted it inwards towards his stomach. Ivan let out a cry of pain while Dixie turned her body, pulled Ivan's arm over

her shoulder, pulled it down, and then brought the rest of Ivan's body over her shoulder. Ivan let out another cry of pain as he crashed to the dirt. The nurse looked quite shocked that she'd pulled off such a manoeuvre one usually sees on television, but she dusted off her hands and brushed her hair away from her eyes. "When I tell you to stop, you better stop! We have got enough problems to deal with without adding fighting each other to the mix." Ivan and Daniel both lay on the ground staring at her with amazement.

"Where the hell did you learn how to fight?" Daniel asked. "In fact, how did you escape Moscow?"

"Right now, that is not important." Dixie turned down to Ivan. "Answer his question."

Ivan spat on the ground and climbed to his feet. "You think just because you got the drop on me from behind that you can now beat me?"

Dixie sighed and swung her left foot up into his groin. Ivan let out a cry of pain and dropped to his knees. "Just answer his question."

"Fuck you!" barked Ivan, now hunched over cradling his groin. "You need ball-busters to fight your battles for you?"

"Don't be a sore loser. Just do as I say, and you won't be hurt" said Dixie as if she hadn't just committed an act of gratuitous violence.

Ivan looked up at her face and could see she was being serious. "We respond to your father's orders because we were promised supplies. That's it. We take your supplies, but we refuse to help. I didn't want to mention that as it's kind of dishonourable."

"Yeah, I'll say, you piece of shit." Daniel climbed to his feet.

Dixie looked to him. "Satisfied now? You're not gonna hit him again, are you?"

Daniel nodded and shook his head like he didn't know what to think. "Just one more unnecessary failure. Another million humans dead because some individuals are only looking out for themselves." He moved towards a rucksack which was resting near the log Ivan had been sitting on.

"You leave that alone!" snapped Ivan, staying still as he could not yet move from the pain that the kick to the groin had brought him.

"Settle down. Just looking for a map." Daniel lifted the rucksack and opened it.

"I said leave it!"

"Just shut up," said Dixie. Ivan grunted and went silent.

Daniel searched through Ivan's bag and found a torch, a spare change of clothes, a water canteen, a picture of a pretty woman, and an old revolver. He dropped the rucksack back down. "You don't have a map?"

Ivan chuckled. "You city boys don't even know your way around the country."

Dixie gave Ivan a weird look. "You're from Minsk. You're not exactly a country boy."

"Fuck you," was Ivan's response.

"Hey! I need a map! Do you have one or not?" Daniel asked.

"No! I don't need one," Ivan said.

Daniel sighed. "So which way do I go then?"

Ivan remained silent, so Dixie sighed and grabbed hold of Ivan's ear, twisting it. "Ah, fuck! Fine!" Ivan said. The pain in his ear was unbearable. "Fine. It's five miles that way." He pointed to the west direction.

"How do you know which terminus I'm talking about?" asked Daniel.

"There is only one around here for twenty miles, and it's west." Ivan was finally recovering enough to climb to his feet.

Daniel started to limp off in the west direction when Dixie interrupted him. "Daniel, wait. We're coming with you." Dixie anticipated a strange look from Ivan, so she turned to him. "Unless you want to be put through more pain."

Ivan rolled his eyes. "For fuck sake, fine, but I lead the way, and if it all looks like an ambush or a trap, we turn back!"

"Fine," replied Daniel, knowing he wouldn't turn back for anything.

"Lead the way," said Dixie.

Ivan grabbed his rucksack and sighed. "I should have left you people."

"Well you didn't, so isn't that just a shame?" said Dixie with a cheeky grin.

Ivan marched off in the west direction, and then paused for a moment. "What about his leg?"

"If he passes out, you can carry him," Dixie said.

Ivan sighed once again and moved on. "Hurry up then. I'm not walking all night." The three of them moved out west, Ivan leading the way and Daniel and Dixie close behind. Soon the sun would be rising and with it, a new day. Hopefully one that was less soul crushing, but it was doubtful. The Russian sun that rose after nearly an hour of walking and the morning song of birds did nothing to abstain from this impression. The lights and the songs felt as fake as the sentiments of cheer such things supposedly carried. Daniel felt like a worm; willing to hide underground and out of sight from being eaten. He didn't want to say anything, but he felt tired and weak and his leg felt dead. Between Dixie's violent tendencies and everything Ivan stood for, neither of them were the sort of people he wanted to confide in, but he couldn't confide in any of his friends. He thought back to that day he began training and he'd asked his father to put his friends in Delta Squad with him. He never would have been able to defeat Twilight Sparkle without their help. These thoughts only weighed on him until each step put him on the verge of collapse.

Since about the last twenty minutes, Dixie had noticed Daniel's silence and the pale tint his skin had taken on. "Are you okay?" she asked. Daniel gave an unconvincing nod with and even more unconvincing smile. "Really? Then you won't mind answering my question with actual words rather than body gestures," she said with a huff.

Daniel cleared his throat and took a deep breath. Even though she was trying to intimidate him, he didn't really feel like answering, but she had the distinct impression that the sort of person who entitled herself to physical assault was the sort to hold a grudge. "I'm fine." His tone sounded similar to that of a dying man.

"Okay, we need to stop for a moment," said Dixie. Ivan had been ignoring Daniel and Dixie the entire walk. This time wasn't any different. He continued on marching forward. "I said we need to stop!" Dixie snapped. Ivan continued to ignore her. "If you don't stop, I will seriously hurt you!"

Ivan gave a sigh and stopped, swivelling his body around to look at his travel companions. "What? Why?"

"I said we need to stop," repeated Dixie as she and Daniel came to a stop.

"Is that seriously the reason? You're more full of yourself than I am."

"Look at him. He doesn't exactly look well." Dixie tapped both her hands on Daniel's shoulders like a mother trying to get her child to pose for a photograph.

Daniel leaned against a tree for support. "I'm fine," he said, his voice a groan not because he was fatigued but because he didn't appreciate Dixie calling him out over something he was trying to keep from inhibiting the group.

"See? He says he's fine. That means he's fine. We keep moving," said Ivan, which was a bit rich, coming from the man who had recently confessed to accepting remuneration for aid he did not provide.

"He is not fine!" insisted Dixie. She turned to Daniel. "Admit it. You're not fine."

Daniel waved his hand down. "I'm fine. Let's just keep moving." The asking only made him feel worse. He knew she only wanted to hear what she wanted to hear, and that the confirmation would only make Ivan think even less of him.

Dixie shook her head. "Five minutes is all I am asking for," she told Ivan.

"Fine! But no more than five," he said. He just stood there and glared in the direction they'd been headed.

Daniel shook his head and pushed away from the tree. Yet again he insisted he was fine, right before collapsing to the ground, unconscious. Dixie let out a long sigh as if this was a whopping great inconvenience. "Oh for fuck sake, is he really unconscious again?" Ivan asked.

"Looks like it," Dixie said, hands on her hips.

"God fucking damn it! I knew this would happen!"

"How far have we got left to go?" asked Dixie.

Ivan took a moment to think. "About a mile. Maybe two."

Dixie gave a nod. "Then we can carry him."

"I said maybe two miles! I also said that I would not carry him, and I meant it!"

"Just help me, okay?" said Dixie as she moved towards Daniel's unconscious body. “Here, just shut up and take his left arm, and I’ll take his right.”

Ivan let out and angry sigh before slowly moving towards Daniel's body. "I wish I had left you people." The two of them knelt down and wrapped each of Daniel's arms around them, then lifted him as they stood up. "This is fucking pathetic," said Ivan as they began to move off through the woods.

"Quit your damn whining!" said Dixie. After two hours, Daniel awoke to find himself in a small room on a dirty bed, with both Yuri and Dixie sitting beside him and discussing Moscow. He was still mostly asleep at first, so when they spoke, his dreams were perverted with the horrific memories he’d had to endure, and he also caught a few things he hadn’t witnessed. He couldn’t remember what he’d been dreaming beforehand, but he was sure it was better than this.

Daniel sat up and shook his head, which dizzied him. "Please tell me I didn’t pass out again.”

Dixie and Yuri jumped when they had realised Daniel was awake, but they soon got over it. "Yeah, you went unconscious again, but don't worry, you're all patched up now,” Dixie said.

Daniel rubbed sweat from his head. "Are we at the terminus? How many made it out?"

"We are,” Yuri said. “We got two hundred soldiers out. One hundred and fifty of those soldiers are gravely wounded and or dying. On top of that, though, we got nearly six hundred civilians out with an additional fifty wounded."

Daniel gave a slow nod to Yuri. "Were you in charge?"

Yuri nodded. "I was, sir."

"What's your rank, soldier?" asked Daniel.

"I'm a sergeant, sir, but I'm part of Task Force 143. Well, what's left of it."

"I'm promoting you to lieutenant, and you are now the leader of Task Force 143," Daniel said.

Yuri gave a nod of gratitude. "Thank you, sir. I won't let you down. Do I get a dental plan?”

“We’ll talk later.” Daniel looked to Dixie now. "Where is Ivan?"

"He is still here somewhere. He wanted to talk with you before he left for Minsk," replied Dixie.

"Okay. Any chance you got any crutches laying around?" Daniel asked.

Yuri shook his head. "Unfortunately not, sir, and believe me, I have looked. A lot of people lost legs in Moscow. Especially left legs. Or at least took a bullet or a large pair of corn holders to the leg. Crutches would be very useful."

Daniel sighed. "This just gets better and better."

Dixie turned in her chair and spotted something which surprised her. She grabbed an ivory cane from the floor that had been left there by a bisexual Malaysian elephant hunter wearing a stolen fireman’s uniform. "I did find this. It's not exactly ideal, but it’s something. I thought you would be wanting to get around as soon as possible." She handed the cane to him. Daniel thanked her with a smile. "You’re welcome,” she said as he examined the cane. The ivory was engraved with a pattern of what looked to be a roaring bear. It was a fine pattern, and the silver handle had the head of a bear as its design.

He gave a slight chuckle. "Seems good enough to me." Daniel slipped his legs off of the bed and took the cane in his left hand, as the missing fingers on his right hand, as well as the bandage that was now wrapped around it, made gripping anything difficult. Using the cane for support, he rose to stand and managed to balance himself with ease. He cracked a smile for the first time in a long time. "It's perfect, in fact."

"Glad you like it.” Dixie returned his smile.

"Do you need help?" asked Yuri as he rose from his chair and extended his left arm. His right one was now in a cast and a sling after being shot in the shoulder. Daniel thanked him for and allayed his concerns, so Yuri said, "I think it's time you addressed the people. It will lift their hearts to know at least one of their leaders is alive.”

Daniel felt something sink within him like a stone dropped into a pond. Addressing the people. His people. He really had to become the leader of the human resistance now. It wasn’t just some destiny thrust upon him by his father and older brother. Of all the time spent in training or on decisive missions, too much of it had been spent brainwashed or comatose, and he’d never even advanced to the stage where he was a public figurehead. He remembered his older brother having given speeches, but truth be told, he never bothered to memorize the words that he’d said. They were just among the many things about his brother he’d chosen to forget rather than grieve. Grieving was pain. But he’d seemed so strong. So decisive. "Yes, that would be a good idea,” Daniel said. “Plus I need to start thinking about how we will retaliate against the ponies.”

"Retaliate?" asked Dixie.

"Yes. The ponies attacked Russia at its heart. A thing like that cannot go unanswered."

"What do you have in mind?" asked Yuri.

Daniel slammed his cane on the floor. "I think it's time we took a trip over to Equestria and lay waste to these fascists once and for all!"

Outside, when Ivan was told of Daniel's plan, his initial thought was, "It's madness!"

"That is what they shall think! They won't assume that we are planning a counter attack. We will catch them completely off guard, much like they did to us. We will have a major advantage. One that could win us the war!" Daniel said. He had led himself into an old office that once belonged to the railroad conductor, and Yuri and Dixie had followed him in protest.

Ivan still thought it was crazy. "It's crazy! Just take a look at what you got left. Tell me honestly, how many of your men can actually fight?"

"About two hundred give or take a few," said Yuri. "Ever since the ponies returned, they've outnumbered us by a greater ratio than ever, likely even more than at the outset."

Ivan gave Daniel a strange look and shook his head. "And you wish to launch an attack on the Equestrians with such low numbers?"

"Our numbers are low at the moment, but if you bring your armies to battle with us, then we would have enough men to get the job done," said Daniel.

"Hell no! You don't know that! Didn't you hear the man? I am not risking my people's lives for this bizarre crusade!"

"This is not a 'bizarre crusade'! This is striking back against an enemy who now think themselves undefeatable!" said Daniel.

"Well I think they have proven that! They have a right to think that! They did wipe out your god damn resistance capital!"

"They attacked us like cowards!"

"This isn't about striking back. This is about revenge! You wake up from a coma and have your entire life taken from you all over again in a matter of days, and you're pissed about it! This is about you wanting to get even."

"They don't deserve this victory! They killed a lot of great men, and I demand justice!"

"And they shall get it in due time, but going after them right away and risking all those who are still living is not the right thing to do! You say they killed a lot of great men? Well going on this revenge plot will only see more fall. If you want to go and get yourself and many others killed then be my guest, but I will not have my people fall as well!" Ivan started to move towards the door of the office.

"Get back here!" Daniel shouted.

Ivan stopped to stone-face Daniel. "You're hurting. I get that. But don't you dare try to dictate what I do or do not do. You forget I am not with the resistance, and therefore I do not follow your command."

Ivan left the office as Daniel fell silent, his eyes glaring daggers at the back of him. When he left, he flipped over a nearby table and yelled an obscenity that shook the room's other two occupants. "Sir, calm down," Yuri said, which went over about as well as it ever does.

It wasn't as if his words would drive Daniel to some epiphany. He didn't stop, look at himself, upright the table, and say, "My god, you're right! Calm down! Why didn't I think of this? I know exactly how we can pick ourselves up after this blight now!" Instead, he said, "Don't tell me to calm down!" because being told to calm down wasn't helping.

Dixie moved over to Yuri. "Let's leave him," she said, touching Yuri on the shoulder. The two of them exited the office.

Daniel took a moment to think now that he was left alone. He shook his head as tears filled his eyes. "It's not right!" he said with a soft and broken tone. "It's not right."

Dixie caught up to Ivan, who was making his way towards the dirt road which exited the terminus. "Ivan, wait!"

Ivan's shoulders went limp as he gazed up at the sky and mouthed "Why me?" to the clouds. He then swung around to respond. "What do you want? Because let me tell you, I'm not changing my mind."

Dixie shook her head. "Don't worry, I didn't expect you to. I just wanted to say thanks."

Ivan was taken slightly off guard as he was expecting Dixie to try and threaten him into helping Daniel. "Well that's more like it. Sure, no problem."

"So what are you going to do now?" she asked.

Ivan took a deep breath. "I'm probably going to head back to Minsk, tell them what happened to Moscow, and see if they want to move on to somewhere else, or if they want to stay put."

"Move on to somewhere else? Why?" asked Dixie.

Ivan frowned at her. "Because. Moscow has fallen. The ponies will surely move on to take over the rest of this place, or to look for those who escaped."

"I guess that makes sense," Dixie said, "but the people here are in dire need of help."

"If you want, you can come with me. I'm not going to lie, it's a very long walk, but it's better than staying here."

Dixie shook her head. "You didn't take a car? Thanks, but no thanks. There aren't many people here with knowledge on medical treatment, and there are a lot of people who need it badly. I think my skills are better put to use here."

"That's very *brave* of you," said Ivan as though he was reading a birthday card.

"Not really. The battle is over now."

"Hah. For now. Just wait until that mad fuck leads what men he has left to their deaths."

"He's just grieving; that's all. Like you said, he has just woken up from a coma to find out that his lover committed suicide. On top of that, the ponies attack and take everything from him. His family, his friends, his home. You would be out for revenge, too. Even someone playing the anti-hero like you."

Ivan rolled his eyes. "Probably," he admitted, "but he needs to stop thinking about revenge and start thinking like a leader. These people need him, and trying to lead them to their deaths is not what a good leader would do."

"He won't do it. Not unless he has a good chance. That's what I believe."

Ivan leaned over. "You really believe that? Because I hope for your sake you're right. If you're wrong, there is always a place for you in Minsk, though I'm sorry to say our graveyards are at capacity too." Ivan then continued off on his way. Dixie let out a sigh and turned back to terminus.

Tyrone awoke in the medical bay that had been set up next to the tracks in the terminus. He groaned to remind himself he was alive. He could remember clearly all the things that had happened in the battle of Moscow. He could even remember losing all control of his body, so the first thing he did was try to move his hand, and he smiled at the results. His control over his own body had returned. He sat up and let out a sigh of relief, then cracked his neck side to side before taking a look around him. So far all he could see were two white, plastic curtains on either side of him with an opening to the front. He was obviously in a medical tent, and the curtains were separating him from the other patients. He himself was laid on top of a foldup bed. This was usually used for operating in the field, but was now acting as something for the wounded soldiers to lie on. He climbed off of it and cracked his back, being so practiced at making annoying noises on the days he'd actually bothered to show up for school, usually to deal. "Man that thing's uncomfortable," he said to himself before moving out of his little section and into the rest of the tent.

The tent was huge and held around thirty wounded soldiers, all of which were separated by the plastic curtains. There were only four doctors, and they were all trying to tend to the needs of the other soldiers. Tyrone moved over to a young female doctor as she was collecting some bandages. "Er, hey."

The woman looked to him, and Tyrone could tell by her face that she was under a lot of stress. "I don't have time to talk. I got a lot of patients to look after!" she snapped.

"Yeah I know. I was just saying I'm going to leave now."

The woman did not realise that Tyrone had been one of the patients. "Okay, good for you," she said as she moved off to the other patients.

Tyrone shrugged. Before he moved to leave, he looked into each of the small sections that had been created for each individual patient. This was easy as the doctors had left the fronts of the curtains wide open to quicken their check-ups. He found men with missing limbs, burns, bullet wounds, stab wounds, and the occasional bite wound, where a pony had come close enough to a soldier to take a chomp out of them. He then noticed Tom in one of the small sections, sitting up on one of the folding beds with a thick bandage wrapped around his neck. Tyrone let out a smile to see that Tom was okay. The fact he was

wounded was to be expected. Tom appeared to be chatting with someone, but his expression was tense. When he peered closer, he saw Bella Horridge clutching Claire. He did not know to be confused, but he did know to stay out of the way. Moving aside, he asked himself, what was a little eavesdropping between friends?

By the time Tyrone started eavesdropping, Tom had stopped speaking. “I don’t know what you found. It could be pony snipers for all I care. The reason we’re alive,” Bella was saying in a slow, didactic tone, “is because we weren’t home at the time. I took Claire out for the day to visit her birth father up in Belarus.” Tyrone couldn’t hear what Tom was saying, and only realized he’d been muttering something by the time Belle responded again. In the meantime, he kept thinking, *please don’t mention us, please don’t mention us.* “Don’t do this, Tom. Claire needs her daddy. She can’t have her life confused by a soldier who’s never home, fighting with *ponies* all the time.” Tyrone caught Tom saying something in a choked voice, but again missed his actual words. “Stop it, Tom. You’re upsetting my baby.” And with that, the conversation had ended. Tyrone swept behind the side of the curtain as Bella stepped out with her child in her arms. He waited several long moments until she’d left.

Tyrone lowered his head and decided to leave the tent. He didn't want to bug Tom with any questions, especially now. He made it out of the tent undetected and took a deep breath of fresh air, letting the outside breeze flush out the atmosphere from inside the tent. As he did this, he saw Daniel approaching the tent, using his new cane as a support for walking. He waved him down with a smile. "You made it!"

Daniel looked up to see him and smiled. "Barely. You look like you did well."

Tyrone nodded and patted Daniel’s arms affectionately. "Yes, I did. Hey, have you seen Irish?"

Daniel shook his head. "No. I practically only just arrived myself. I didn't leave with the evacuation trucks. I hear they set up a canteen area, though. You should check there.”

Tyrone’s doubting smile turned to a big grin of hope. "If there's beer then he will definitely be there." The two exchanged smiles, but Tyrone’s vanished after a beat. "Oh, uh, Tom's in there if you need him, but he might not be in a good mood. It seems things have gone ugly between him and Bella. Bound to happen, but it could’ve happened at a better time.”

Daniel’s face fell. “Tyrone, Bella and Claire didn’t make it. The ponies butchered them.”

Tyrone appeared confused. “No, Daniel. I just say him talking to them inside. They left just a minute before I did.” This time Daniel looked confused, and he glanced around as if he could still catch a glimpse on Bella in the crowds that mulled along the terminus. He was so puzzled by this news that he said nothing in response. Tyrone took a deep breath. "I'm going to go look for Irish."

"Yeah, good luck on finding him.” Daniel kept his head craned for the sight of Bella, but as Tyrone moved on, he did, too, and entered the tent. Inside, the four doctors were out of sight, treating the patients, so he took a moment looking for his friend. He moved through the tent in the wrong direction at first, looking in on all the wounded soldiers and thinking about what Ivan had said regarding his plan. The more Daniel thought about it, the more he realised Ivan had been right. By the looks of it, these men had been to Hell and fought the devil himself before being spat back out into the real world. They looked as if their souls were scarred for life just as much as their bodies. He realized at once what they must have been through, and felt ashamed at how unfair it was to ask them to go to war so soon.

Daniel finally found Tom's small section of the tent, and with him was Rachael Anderson, who was apparently conscripted as one of the medical officers here.

"Are you sure you okay?" Rachael was asking Tom.

He answered with a slow nod. "I'm fine, thank you." His voice sounded horrible. The bullet must have put a lot of strain on it. He and Rachael had not yet noticed Daniel, who waited for them to finish their little talk before he moved in. “Honestly, you have done more than enough for me. Just relax. Go rest. You look like you could use with it.”

Rachael smiled like she wished she could relax, but of course she had other soldiers to help. “Don’t know if I can do that anytime soon, but if you need me, I'm here. I understand what it means to lose your family, though.” She didn’t elaborate on how she’d been forced to leave her parents behind.

"War never gets easy,” Tom said. “I've witnessed it most of my life, but trust me: Sleep will eventually come, and it's best to rest."

Rachael tightened her lips and nodded slowly. “Well, I'll be back later."

"I'll be right here," said Tom.

Rachael climbed to her feet and turned to leave, bumping into Daniel in the process. "Oh, hello again," she said.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"No, it's fine. Just didn't know you were there." She nodded back towards Tom. "He's all yours. Between you and me, he needs you right now."

Daniel gave her a smile and looked past her to Tom. He thought about all he'd witnessed and all he'd lost, and he thought about how seeing Tyrone again, someone familiar, eased his heartache a touch. "And I need him," he said. He needed his friends. He moved past Rachael and sat in the chair that she had been sitting in.

Tom picked his head up and boggled at Daniel. He didn't know what to say first. "Nice cane."

Daniel smiled. "I think it suits me, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. You look like a glorified homosexual," said Tom, smiling.

Daniel shook his head. "Good to see that you still haven't lost your sense of humour."

"I try." Tom took a deep breath between his words.

"Yes, very hard, it would seem," Daniel joked.

"Ha, fucking ha," said Tom before clearing his throat. "You're so funny."

"So I've been told."

"By liars." Tom gave Daniel a weak little tap on the wrist with his fist. "Whoever said you were funny lied."

Daniel sighed and shook his head. "You don't quit, do you?"

Tom gave a weak smile and the two went silent for a while. The averted their eyes for a moment, but found one another again. Tom cleared his throat, which proved to be painful, and spoke. "I'm sorry for the whole trying to kill you thing," he said.

Daniel blushed. He didn't like to think about it. "It's fine. I suppose we are even now. After all, in New York, it was my turn."

Tom laughed at how strange the situation felt to him now. "You tried to break a train on me. There's nothing subtle between us, is there?"

"Yes, well, none of that matters now. We both are still here and well," said Daniel. "I never want something like that to come between us again." Daniel looked down to gather his words, but felt like they wouldn't be enough. He felt like what he wanted to ask might hurt Tom, so to dispel that, he took a hold of his friend's hand as a sort of reminder of what could be felt. He looked Tom in the eyes again and asked, "So what happened between you and Claire? Tyrone tells me she is alive."

Tom's face went blank. He shut his eyes, shuddered, and forced a smile. "Tyrone's alive? Why didn't he say hi?" Knowing he couldn't get away with that, he changed tact to share the news. "Those corpses weren't Bella and Claire. I guess they were burnt and unrecognizable pony snipers, hiding out on the upper floors of our homes. We'll probably hear something like it was a premature Molotov cocktail or something." Realizing he was still avoiding the subject, he explained to Daniel pretty much what Tyrone had overheard. It was obvious he was trying to rise above the pain, but perhaps it didn't feel as bad as the physical tortures he'd been through of late. "Bella's been whoring around behind my back. Fine. Whatever. What I don't get is she lost her father, and this is what she's done? If she lost her dad, you'd think she'd care more about having a dad for our kid. I guess her kid. Turns out Claire was never mine. I am so done with women, man."

"Gee, that—that is a surprise. I am really sorry." Daniel patted Tom on the shoulder.

Tom looked hard at Daniel and grabbed his arm. "Yeah, so am I."

The two fell silent once more until Daniel thought of something else to talk about. He looked over his shoulder at the curtains and said, "You and that Rachael girl seem to be getting on well."

Tom shook his head wildly. "Yeah, she's sweet, but I can't get into that game again. I just lost Bella, man. I feel like I can't trust a woman who's lost something, and a woman who hasn't wouldn't be able to put up with me. You get me? Besides, her dad shot me. Talk about the awkward silences over a Christmas turkey. But a bullet well-deserved if you ask me."

Daniel gave a slight grin. "Won't find me arguing there."

"There's a group of people that are going to be heading to London. Mostly the elderly, the more severely wounded, small children and non-combative civilians. Rachael and her sister will be going as medical officers, but she suggested I should go with them."

Daniel gave him a strange look. "You said no, I hope."

Tom blinked at Daniel. "I said yes."

Daniel almost flinched. "But why? Wouldn't Bella be heading that way?"

Tom shrugged. "She said something about a guy in Belarus. I can't stay here. Not after what happened. It's too painful. I just need to get away from it all. I can't go on like this."

"But I—we need you here for when we strike back against the Equestrians."

"What are you going on about?" Tom laughed. "Isn't it a bit obvious the ponies win everything?"

"That's not true," Daniel said. "We used to beat them. We've taken out several of their commanders over the years. The losses have been great, yes, but our strikes have always been decisive. I'm planning a strike back against the ponies as soon as everyone is able, that is. I plan to strike them in their own world like they did to us."

Tom looked disbelieving at first, and then smiled. "Their world? Daniel, I know as well as you do that they don't even take prisoners over there. No human's ever been proven to set foot in the land they boast about. People stopped asking in the first year whether it was a planet or an alternate dimension. We don't even know how they all disappeared a year and so ago. I guess all I can do is wish you luck."

"Don't you want revenge for what those cowards did?" asked Daniel. "For Logan? For Shaun? For our home?"

"Of course I do, but I can't. I just can't fight any more. I'm done. I need to start my life anew."

"That's the whole problem!" Daniel raised his voice. "Nobody can live their life anew while these ponies exist! They've ruined the human race and made it shit! Literally, in many cases! The ponies are an evil scourge and everything about them is wrong. What they do to men is a crime against nature, and an end needs to be put to it. It's wrong. I will annul them all. We can't let them get away with the things they've done!"

"They didn't get away with anything. I've killed more than enough of those swine, and look where it got me. I've lost friends, brothers, family members, and now my girlfriend and who I thought was my daughter. I've had enough. I just want to live out what little time I have left in piece. I'm done with war." Tom looked away from Daniel at nothing.

"But you can't!" Daniel was attracting cold stares now. "We need to end these bastards once and for all!"

"No, we don't. You do." Tom looked at him again.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying that this is something that you feel you have to do, not something I have to do. I'm sorry, but I won't be joining you." And just as easily, he looked away.

"Tom! You're not thinking about this rationally. It must be whatever medication they got you on. Those ponies are predators molesting the human race. It's everyone's responsibility to stop them. Our survival counts on it. Equestria will destroy the whole human race if left unchecked."

Tom coughed and wheezed to shout back at Daniel, but couldn't. "I'm thinking perfectly clearly. I'm not going any further into this war, but I believe that you can do this. You don't need me, okay? Just go ahead on."

"I can't believe this. You would turn from your brothers in arms?" Daniel stood from his chair.

Tom looked appalled now. "Of course not! I'd honour them with a bottle of Brockman like anybody else. I'd be doing it by living out my life and telling the next generations to come of their bravery and their courage in battle. I will tell of how they died fighting for freedom, and how they crushed the Pony Reich. Men like Logan and like Shaun did not just die so that we could throw our lives away to join them in death. I would live and see their memories properly honoured."

Daniel shook his head and turned to storm out. "Unbelievable!" He now felt as if the world was against him. He had awoken from a coma to find half the people he loved dead, like that one guy who slept for twenty years. His world had been shattered by ponies while he'd been living in a dream, and in the process he'd lost even more loved ones. Now everyone was turning their backs on him when he needed them most. When humanity needed them most. Ivan was the worst betrayer, having refused to give his armies to lend aid to Moscow, and now Tom, Daniel's lifelong friend, was talking retirement.

"This is ridiculous!" Daniel frothed at the mouth with fury. Once he left the medical tent, he found some place relatively empty and shouted angrily at the trees. "Cowards! The lot of them! Turn your backs on me! On your country! On your people!" He walked past an old trash can and slammed his foot into it. The trash can toppled over, spilling mounds of overflowing garbage across the railroad tracks. Not content yet, he took to beating it with his cane. "No good pieces of shit!"

That is when he heard the nasally tones of Dixie. "You know, I doubt the bin did anything to you."

Daniel went slightly red at his outburst being discovered, made all the worse by how pushy she could be. "What do you want?" he asked, not disguising his bitterness.

"First, don't take that tone with me. I wouldn't mind knowing why you felt it necessary to violently assault an inanimate object." She approached him with a daring smile.

"None of your business." Daniel muttered. He hooked the trash can with his cane and up-righted it, and felt a bit better than he could do this with ease.

"Don't you take that tone with me. You have seen how I can kick ass. Piss me off and Ivan won't be the only one who had his ass handed to him by a woman." Dixie started laughing like she was telling jokes, and her eyes had disconcerting shines to them.

Realizing he was being bullied around, Daniel took a deep breath and exhaled. He then rubbed the back of his head for whatever reason it is some people like to rub the backs of their heads when they're caught in an argument. "It does not matter."

"Clearly it does."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't want to talk about it."

"Yeah, well, maybe you don't have a choice!"

"Yeah, well, maybe it isn't any of your business. Why do you want to know so bad? You with the Waste Management Bureau?" He leaned up against the edge of the train platform.

Dixie joined him, crossing her arms. For a second she pretended to look grumpy. "Nope. I've just got nothing better to do."

"Yeah, well, please go bug someone else."

"Oh, I'm sorry, am I bugging you? Well ain't that a shame? Because I was your nurse for nearly three years, and you want to know what is 'bugging'? Having to clean out your damn diaper every day!"

Even though it is a medical professional's duty to take care of a patient's biological functions when they cannot care for themselves, Daniel felt his face turning beet red. "I was in a coma!"

"Yes, and now you're not, so why don't you man up and accept the world for what it has become? Sure, you lost people close to you, but who hasn't as of late? Stop feeling sorry for yourself, and man the fuck up! Otherwise, just give up your command over these people to someone who deserves the title." Dixie shoved away from the side of the train platform and started strutting away.

Daniel recoiled to stare at her. No one had properly spoken to him like that before since he had come into power. "How dare you!"

"How dare I what? Give you a reality check? Well damn me for pointing out the obvious and for saying what needs to be said! You're being pathetic and that is not a good trait for a 'leader' to have!"

Daniel shook his head. "So you're against me now as well, are you?"

"No! No one is against you! Your problem is you don't like to receive any criticism! You're acting like a child, and it's about time someone told you!"

Daniel felt quite hurt by Dixie's unexpected words and grew even angrier. He'd had enough of her bullying. He'd had enough of everyone disappearing or dying. The last thing he felt was appropriate was some woman with a bossy a voice, a bossy attitude, and bossy words kicking him when he was down. "Fuck you!" he blurted out.

Again, she didn't even grant him this. "No, fuck you! I am not going to wait here for you to have another hissy fit and send up unprepared soldiers into battle just so you can regain your false sense of pride and honour!" Dixie turned and stormed off.

Daniel waited until she was gone because he didn't want her to be lured into ripping into him again over what he was about to do next. He let out a roar with the intent to make himself hoarse, and resumed beating the trash can with his cane all over again. "Aw, fuck you all!" Dixie was right. Daniel was losing it, and before long, if he didn't snap out of it, then he would lead all his men to their deaths. He needed to come back down to earth, and fast, before it was too late.

Chapter Forty-Fucking-Five.

The passion of the Irish. Onyx is a detective. Harbinger spoils the party. The Aristocrats.

Moscow was a mausoleum. It was a city of the dead, where its citizens could be found littering the streets like ordinary pedestrians on their daily routine of shopping, socializing, and sneaking around, except those pedestrians were no longer moving, no longer seeing, and no longer speaking. In the old days, people used to celebrate New Year's Eve by gathering

thousands of strangers out in the open late at night. If you've ever been to or thrown a party that involved sitting around in awkward silence, then this was a little like both of those things combined. Even those who still remained alive, the Equestrian forces, felt inconvenienced by their own success, as it was difficult to move anywhere without having to step over a dead body, human or pony. It wasn't that they had any disrespect for the enemy's dead, but it was tedious to navigate platoons of fallen soldiers and the craters left behind by heavy artillery. Such as it was, the ponies were ordered to clear the streets and any doorways of the dead, keeping their dead and the humans separate. At times, they stacked the bodies like cordwood inside of the shops and such. "Cordwood" isn't a specific type of wood; it's wood that's been stacked into a "cord" which is just an oddly chosen term for a specific measurement of stacking firewood.

After that, the Equestrian forces were ordered to return to Equestria as Onyx and a small contingency remained behind. This confused the ponies, who demanded that they pursue the humans and finish them off, but Onyx acted as if they'd already done that. "Better to let them run to the nearest settlement," he said. "The Kaiser and her entourage wish to see the sacking of the humans' greatest stronghold for herself. That will give the humans time to reveal where they'll hide out next." Onyx had already been commended by a courier, but awaited to receive his praise from Kaiser Celestia herself.

The street outside of the Human Resistance's conquered headquarters had been prepared in haste for the event. Onyx stood before a second-floor balcony in the yard of the HQ. He turned the handle of the Black Box he possessed, and an egg-shaped portal fizzled into view, a vortex of swirling emptiness that ripped through the open air and spilled out like any doorway leading onto the platform. A small gaggle of royal pony guards spilled out onto the deck first, a slew of them carrying with them three great thrones, and they were followed not long thereafter by Rainbow Dash and Prince Blueblood. Last from the portal was Kaiser Celestia herself, the brilliant white alicorn adorned in golden accessories around her hooves and fetlocks, a jewelled crown tucked behind her long and twisted horn and in front of her glittering, effervescent mane and scarlet and orange hues. The portal whooshed closed behind them.

"Mother," Prince Blueblood began, "Are you sure this is enough precaution for the human world? There could be a sniper abound!"

"Then they would be filled with such awe they would be blinded. We have achieved total victory here today," she said. Celestia then stood at the precipice of the balcony and gazed down with a warm smile. "Ah, here he is! The man who destroyed the resistance."

Onyx smiled and gave a curtsy. "Thank you, Kaiser, but your praises are too much. The resistance still is out there."

"Yes, but not for long, thanks to you," said Blueblood, who stood to Celestia's right. The three royal ponies took their seats on the secondary thrones. Onyx gave a thankful nod, but found it so unusual who was sitting in them that he had to open his big mouth about it.

"My Kaiser, if you don't mind me asking, where is Queen Luna?"

Celestia shot Rainbow Dash a suspicious look. "She is missing. Rainbow Dash will be resuming her role until she turns up again." Rainbow Dash gulped. She knew her mother was suspicious of her. She just had to try her best to hide what she had done, but it was extremely difficult to refrain from pointing out how Luna had just sat around in Equestria while the war went on, while Rainbow Dash had been on Earth during *her* reign, enacting decisive strategies. Thankfully, Celestia moved on from the subject of her missing daughter. "Anyway, do you know why we have come here today?"

Onyx feigned ignorance, though he did make a guess. "To witness the results of your victory over the humans' most powerful city. Beyond that, I couldn't dare to imagine, Kaiser."

"Well, don't worry. We are very, very pleased with you. You have done us a great honour by taking down Moscow." Celestia paused and looked to Rainbow Dash. "Something that not everypony seemed to have the talent to do." She then looked back to Onyx, and Rainbow Dash bit down on her own bottom lip to stop herself from saying anything she would regret. "And on top of that, you managed to capture more than enough resistance soldiers. They will prove as a good morale boost for the ponies of Equestria today, so we thought you deserved a promotion. You are no longer a general of our armies, but instead you are a member of our royal family of pony princesses." The other ponies looked at one another and whickered quietly.

Onyx gasped. "That is such an honour. You would give this to me?"

"Yes, we would. Tomorrow after we have dealt with all the prisoners, we shall hold a royal assembly. There we shall accept you into our family, and you will be crowned one of us. We realize this is a bit premature, but is there anything you would request of us to commemorate this holiest of blessings?"

A tear dripped from one of Onyx's misshapen eyes and soaked between the scars of his Picasso face. "All I've ever wanted is to get stronger," he said. "To dual-wield chainsaws and make mine the official music band of Equestria: 'Nothing Ever After'." He bowed deeply at Celestia's approval. "Thank you, my Kaiser."

"You have no need to call me Kaiser any longer. That is what a common soldier calls me. Now you shall now call me Mother. Now go and have fun. Tomorrow, you become one of us. You shall be granted your dual chainsaws and your band will be the rocking-est band in Equestria."

Onyx smiled. It was an ugly sight. "I shall do my best then, to stop these humans from stealing the planet from Mother." He saluted his new 'family' before turning and leaving.

Once he was gone, Rainbow Dash turned to her mother. "I still think this is a bad idea."

"And I do not care what you think," snapped Celestia. "I would think you would get that by now."

"Mother! I am queen now, surely you should show me more respect."

"The only reason you are queen is because your sister is missing, and the ponies know you. They probably still trust your leadership, damn fools that they are, but make no mistake. You are still a disappointment to me." Celestia leaned in close. "By the way, a queen does not tell her Kaiser how to respect her."

"Mother, please." Rainbow Dash started to whine.

"I don't want to hear it! Now go! Go take care of the prisoners. The festivities shall start, and then they must be transferred to our armada."

Rainbow Dash climbed off of her throne. "Yes, mother."

Celestia gave her a cold look until she left. "I don't trust that filly," said Celestia.

"You could always drop her from our family," said Blueblood. "You're the Kaiser, remember?"

"Don't you worry, son. I will, but she has yet to serve a purpose. Once her sister is found, dead or alive, then I shall drop her from this family, thus ridding this family of all embarrassment."

The night had come, and Irish was locked away in a tiny concrete cell with iron bars keeping him contained and nothing more than a pile of hay in the corner for him to rest on. The cell looked like something out of a medieval film (that is, a film *about*, not *from* the middle ages), and it smelt like rotting flesh. He and the other prisoners had been locked up in Moscow's prison located next to the gin shop on Collectivism Lane. He sat in silence in the corner of his cell, holding his left hand in his right and staring out into the dimly-lit hallway. Most men in his predicament would be lost in their own thoughts, but for him, the constant sound of fellow resistance soldiers crying out in pain stopped him from thinking anything other than *When is it my turn? When will I be the one crying out in pain?*

There was one particular soldier whose screams never seemed to end; they just kept going on and on, like Top Gear, without any indication they would stop or why they were occurring in the first place. Then they did stop, only to be replaced by a deep and disturbing silence. Irish was not even certain when the silence fell, because the voice had ingrained itself in his mind's ear, and he heard it like tinnitus when his thoughts emptied. The silence brought with it tension, and Irish imagined the ponies would simply dispose of the soldier's body and move onto the next play thing. After some repetition, the door to the hallway groaned open, followed by marching hoof beats. Three ponies stopped outside his cell and stared at him through the bars. *This is it*, thought Irish.

"Not him," grunted one of the ponies.

"Rainbow Dash wants him," said another.

The third Pony spat on Irish through the bars and gave a snort. "Your time will come soon, human!" Then the three ponies moved on, and seconds later, the screaming of yet another soldier began. Irish could only sit by and watch as a young soldier was dragged by his arms back down the hallway, screaming and begging for mercy whilst the ponies just laughed and spat at him. Spitting must have been a new habit for them. Irish closed his eyes as the screaming resumed again. Life seemed to once again find him in a never-ending nightmare. He lay down in the hay and covered his ears, trying to shake the taunts of death to get some rest. He awoke to his cell opening just as the sun started to rise. Two Equestrian guards dragged him to his feet. He only had time to open his eyes before he found himself being punched repeatedly in the stomach by a third guard. He wanted to collapse to the floor, but the other two ponies were having fun jolting him upright when he sagged.

"That's enough," said a female voice. The third guard stopped hitting Irish and stepped aside. Irish kept his head lowered as he caught his breath, but he recognized Rainbow Dash when she stepped forward and pushed his chin up with a hoof. He wanted to spit back at her, but he couldn't muster the spittle or the wind. "Well, well, well, look who we have here."

Irish raised his head slightly and gave a grin. "A whore? Because that's all I can see."

Rainbow Dash's smile vanished into a cold stare. "We shall see who has the last laugh when you are begging for mercy, eh!"

Irish gave a convincing, yet very fake laugh. "We will see who is laughing when the resistance take your head!"

"Oh, how cute. You really believe that, don't you? You really don't see that your puny resistance is gone, eh."

"Gone? We will never go whilst we still have the lives of men, women, and children to fight for!"

Rainbow Dash gave an overenthusiastic laugh and shook her head. "That's just it; you don't. Moscow is gone. Your forces are wiped clean from this Earth. Those lives you say you fight for; they no longer have anyone fighting in their corner. All that remains to do now is to round them all up and publicly execute them. It is over, eh. Just accept it. It is pathetic to think otherwise."

"You think Moscow is our only base?" Irish scoffed.

"No, but it was your main one, where over sixty percent of your forces resided and all of your leaders. Well, at least your decent ones, which isn't saying much."

"You know nothing. We have hundreds of armies and leaders spread all over the world. You have defeated nothing. Moscow was tiny compared to some of our other strongholds!" Irish lied.

Rainbow Dash laughed. "Stupid hoo-mon. You really think we could have taken down Moscow without a little inside help? No, that would have been a suicide mission. We had somepony who was high up. Two someponies who you may know. One's name was Sergeant Johnson. His first name, I never cared to learn, eh. The other was Andrew Grant something. They were your downfall. They were the men who betrayed you, and they are the reason will die here."

Irish shook his head, but inside, he shuddered. "You lie. They would never betray us."

Rainbow Dash gave yet another evil chuckle. "You know they would. You *know* they would, just the same as your leader, Daniel, betrayed you over a year ago, thanks to the pony obedience toxin. But fine, don't believe me. It does not matter, eh. Just know that I know your bluff, and it serves no purpose. Now it's time for you to meet your bitter end! Haw haw haw!"

"Can't be any worse than sitting here listening to you!" joked Irish, trying hard to hide his fear behind his cock attitude.

"Even in death you continue to keep up your annoying and terrible jokes! I'm going to get a tomato and throw it at you."

"I find them quite humorous, if I do say so myself." Irish turned to one of the ponies holding him. "How about you? You found it funny, didn't you?" The pony slammed its head into his nose, breaking it. Irish's head recoiled back, and he let out a cry of pain. "A simple no would have sufficed!"

"Okay, everypony calm down," said Rainbow Dash with a patronising tone. She tilted her head and stared at Irish. "Are you okay?" she asked with a whopping side of sarcasm.

"Yes. Nothing can disrupt the beauty of this face," he said.

"Good. Then it is time for you to experience real pain, eh, just like the pain I felt when you and your pesky little friends defeated my friend, Twilight Sparkle."

"And you. Don't forget we captured you without a fight." Irish smiled.

"I whupped your flanks twice over after that and turned Daniel against you! Yet that was then my mother stripped me of my title and handed it to my sister! But now, since she is missing, once again I am in control."

"Ugh. I don't care," said Irish. "I don't care about you having mummy issues. What's a matter? Jealous your sister gets to be the one who suckles on your mother's teat?"

Rainbow Dash didn't appreciate *that* joke. She squished his broken nose under her hoof and twisted it. Irish bellowed in pain as Rainbow Dash spoke to him. "Now you listen here, you little worm! These 'jokes' are not hiding anything! I know you're scared! I know you don't want to die here, but guess what: You will die here, and it will be slow. Very, very slow." Irish continued screaming. Rainbow Dash released his nose and spat on his face. "Now do you understand?"

Irish gave a nod. "Yeah, I understand you are nothing but a stupid little cunt who has let herself believe she has won! The truth is you can kill me, but it will not affect the resistance, for I am nothing but a loyal soldier, unlike you: A spoilt little piece of shit with a life so empty that she must compete with her siblings to gain the affection of a whore she calls mother!"

Rainbow Dash smiled. "Finally you show real emotion. Come. Bring him to the HQ, and we shall see his life taken from him!" The ponies laughed as they dragged Irish out of the cell. He didn't even resist, knowing it would amount to nothing. Rainbow Dash taunted him from behind with her cruel laughter. "Now you will die!"

It took the pony guards a total of ten minutes to drag Irish through the corridors of the prison chambers, up some stairs, and out a door to the streets of Moscow. The whole way there, he just thought back to the times he had with all of his friends in Delta Squad, the laughs they shared, the tears they shared, the brotherly bond they shared, and the blood they had all shed. These thoughts are what made him smile in this otherwise gloomy atmosphere.

"You're very quiet for a man about to meet his end," said Rainbow Dash, following the guards who dragged Irish through the streets like a common animal.

"I may be about to meet my end, but I am lifted by the thought that soon it shall be you who will meet the end, and I know for a fact that you will drop to your knees and beg for your life, but you will not be spared, and then I get to kick your ass in the afterlife," said Irish.

Rainbow Dash shook her head. "You are such a stupid little man, eh."

"And you are a self-pretentious bitch!"

"Keep it up! I will have the last laugh soon enough!"

Irish went silent when he heard the roar of a crowd. He lifted his head to see a string of Polo ponies cheering in front of the HRHQ steps as he was dragged through the street. The crowd parted as Irish was dragged along, making it easier for them to spit and throw things at him, with the occasional quick kick to the ribs. Irish said nothing, just closing his eyes and trying to return to his happy place. Before he did, he caught a few strange, fleeting glances of objects hoisted above the crowds around him, and he thought that he made out the shapes of humans looming above the ponies, but their gobs of phlegm forced him to keep his eyes shut. Rainbow Dash laughed. "You see how eager they are to see you die? No way I am going to disappoint them!" Irish remained silent.

The guards continued to drag him right up to the stairs erected at the HQ's balcony. They lifted him off of the ground and the crowd went silent as he was presented to the Kaiser. When Irish opened his eyes, he saw Prince Blueblood and Kaiser Celestia standing at the edge there with big smiles on their faces. "Oh my. So this is him?" asked Blueblood.

"Yes it is!" replied Rainbow Dash with pride. "Don't I finally get a bit of praise, Mother?"

"For what?" asked Celestia, boredly.

"For bringing you the man who helped defeat us."

"Twice," interrupted Irish. One of the guards kicked him hard in the stomach and let him drop to his knees.

"But it was not you who brought him here, now was it?" Celestia asked.

"Well, I—"

"You did nothing! You simply just pointed him out! When your sister shows up, I shall give her the praise for bringing us such a great surprise!"

Irish gave a chuckle and leaned towards Rainbow Dash. "Oh, that's got to feel worse than my nose right now."

"Shut up!" Rainbow Dash slammed her knee into his face. Irish recoiled, and he could now feel that two of his teeth had been knocked out and were resting on his tongue, along with a good amount of his own blood. He kept his mouth closed so that he could use this later.[41]

Celestia leaned in close to Irish and gave him a cold stare. "This one acts as if he does not fear death, and he talks out of turn!"

"Show the queen some respect!" demanded one of the guards.

Irish smiled and spat his blood and teeth into Celestia's face. The crowd let out a gasp, and Celestia recoiled back in horror, letting out a cry. "Is that good enough?" asked Irish, showing off the space between his teeth when he grinned.

Both guards slammed his head to the concrete, and one pulled out a blade. Rainbow Dash was trying to stop herself from bursting out into laughter. "Now you have done it!" growled one of the guards as they raised their blade, ready to pierce the back of Irish's skull.

"Wait!" ordered Celestia, and the guard stopped. "Go fetch the crucifix and nails and hammer!" ordered Celestia before leaning low towards Irish. "How does it feel knowing you will be nailed to the symbol of your own god, and realising he will not save you?"

[41] Spoiler alert.

Irish laughed. "Now I find that offensive. You assume just because I'm Irish that that mean I'm also a Christian. You see, I think you will find that I'm an atheist!"

“Crucifixion” is a word which here means “nailing someone to two planks of wood made to resemble a cross.” It was somewhat popular around Rome about two thousand years ago, and if you’re wondering if it was a particularly painful form of execution, you can find out yourself by stabbing nails through both hands large enough to suspend you off the ground, and then stab another nail through both feet. The victims would have to carry this heavy cross to where they would be murdered, and then be left hanging like so many scarecrows, oftentimes until their bowels burst.

"You laugh now, but soon you will beg me to stop the pain."

"Save it! I already got the same speech from your underachieving daughter.”

Celestia looked to Rainbow Dash, who looked back, hoping to find that her mother was ready to defend her. Instead, Celestia just stood and turned her head to the crowd. "Ponies of Equestria! The time for this animal to be put to death like all the rest has come!" By now, the guards brought up the crucifix, hammer and nails, and Irish was dragged to his feet. The crowd cheered as the guards stood the crucifix up. Looking out over the crowd, Irish saw that many other humans before him had been crucified already, and some were still shuddering, emitting low groans of pain that could no longer be heard amidst the hollers. "Today marks a glorious day for Equestria, the day we celebrate the fall of the resistance and the dawn of a new era!"

The crowd let out another cheer as Irish was pushed against the crucifix, and his arms were placed stretched out across it. He closed his eyes and tried desperately to think of a happy place, as he knew what was coming. Two guards held his hands in place, whilst one other took the hammer and the nails, lining the first nail up with the palm of Irish's right hand. "Now we shall see as this human cries! As he begs for mercy! He shall pay for all his crimes against our great nation!" The crowd cheered once more, and Celestia turned her head to the guard with the hammer and nails, and not another guard. "Nail him to the cross!"

Irish took a deep breath as the guard, an earth mare named Dogwood, lined up the hammer with the head of the nail. She drew back the hammer. There was a moment of silence as the crowd watched in suspense, and then she brought the hammer slamming down onto the head of the nail. Irish screamed in pain as the nail dug its way deep into his palm, puncturing through most of his hand and scraping the bone. The crowd let out a victorious cheer, but Irish was not in a celebratory mood. Dogwood lined up the hammer once again.

"I told you! I knew you would scream, eh," said Rainbow Dash with a laugh.

"Go to Hell!" cried Irish, despite his above claim that he was an atheist.

Dogwood struck the nail once more, and Irish let out a scream that was louder than the first. Tears ran out of his eyes. The pain was nearly unbearable. The nail was now jutting through the lateral beam of the cross, so the guard moved over to Irish’s other hand. She lined up the second nail as the crowd continued to cheer. She pulled back the hammer, and this time used all of her strength swinging it onto the head of the nail. This was enough to send it shooting through his hand, muscle and bone, and lodging itself in the wood. Irish once more bellowed in terrific pain, but his sobs were smothered by the laughing cheers of the audience. After so many of these, Dogwood was happy to see she’d done it right on the first try and announced, “Nailed it!”

Celestia raised a hoof and the crowd fell silent. "At last the human knows his end is nigh, and he cries like a little girl!" The crowd laughed.

"Fuck you! You sick fucks! You all will burn in Hell!" sobbed the atheist, Irish. “Get me down from here before I get really cross with you all!”

"Burning in Hell? Oh that's just given me a pleasant idea. Guards, fetch me some oil and a couple matches,” said Celestia.

Irish shook his head as a guard disappeared into the HQ to fetch the oil and matches. "No! No, you sick fucks!"

"That's right, beg! Beg, you worthless ant!" laughed Celestia. The guard returned with the oil and matches and handed them over to her. She smiled and gazed longingly into Irish’s eyes. “You think the pain you just felt was bad? Wait until you feel this! Ha ha ha!" She doused Irish in the oil like someone taking a leak on an electric fence.

"No! Please, please no!" Irish begged, but it only made Celestia’s wings pop out harder.

"Yes, beg! Beg, human!"

"No! You sick fuck! Just kill me! Please! Don't do this! Please!"

"’Wah wah wah’,” Celestia said, mocking his cries. “Beg! Beg for mercy, even though there will be none!" The crowd was going wild. They really went for her taunts and jibes. She dropped the oil and bit open the matchbox, dexterously flicking out a single match. She struck it against the side of the box and cackled maniacally as a tiny little flame appeared at the head.

She showed this to the crowd, and they went berserk with excitement, stamping their hooves and yelling for more. Irish sobbed and begged, but nopony even heard him. "This, my ponies! This is the flame that shall light the way through our new future. This is the end of the dark era, and here, here is the light at the end of a very dark tunnel." She then threw the match onto Irish.

Everything appeared in slow motion for Irish as he watched the match fly towards him. This was it. This was his bitter end. He turned his head to Rainbow Dash and watched as she laughed at him. Then he closed his eyes and watched his entire life flash before them. He saw his family working at the circus, his friends telling him to quiet following them and to sit at a different table at the Ivory before he joined Delta Squad. The faces of everyone he had ever loved floated up at him, including the time he accidentally walked in on his grandparents having sex—more specifically, his mother's father and his father's mother. He even saw his first girlfriend, Kelley O'Neil, a professional cross-dresser with a club foot, and he remembered the feelings he felt when he first lay with her and she told him to stay on his side of the futon. He also remembered the good times, such as when he first got addicted to smoking Laramies at age twelve. Then the match hit him, and the only feeling he felt now was the feeling of his skin being melted off of his bones as he was engulfed in flames. He let out a final painful scream which nearly popped the ears of everypony around. It was over.

"Man, he smells so good!" somepony shouted.

From far and away, the sounds of gaiety and celebration pervaded Moscow, which discordant but cheery percussion echoing throughout the abandoned streets. Ponies banged out the instrumentation of their tribal songs on the helmets of human soldiers using human bones. Others bounced in arrhythmical dances as they engaged in choruses of relief that the day had been won, some leaping about and turning somersaults as they could not contain the excitement they felt at their magnificent victory.

After much indulgence, Rainbow Dash departed from the festivities and lost herself in the headquarters of the Human Resistance. She found her way into Peter Williams's office which smelled of sawdust and fire. She scrambled over the scraps of books and shredded furniture to upturn the chair and sit behind the mutilated desk. It wasn't as nice as Luna's office back in Equestria which she had moved into after her sudden "disappearance" to conduct the same work Luna once did and she herself used to do. She leaned back in the chair which was still comfy, and let out a sigh of relief. "I missed this," she said, feeling no remorse for what she had done to her sister. It wasn't as pleasant as the desk in Luna's office, which she worried she would never sit behind again. She worried she would never again have been addressed as "Queen". That word made her feel happy. Like she belonged. Having ponies look up to her like they use to after she executed all those resistance soldiers felt like things were back to normal again.

Rainbow Dash looked down to the baby bump on her stomach, and she began to rub her hooves over it. It had been a long time since she had been impregnated, and she had been pregnant for that entire time. This was incredibly unusual; ponies knew the only explanation for it was her baby had to be an abomination. A half-human, half-pony hybrid. That would explain the extended time it had taken to grow in her womb (though she wasn't an obstetrician by any stretch of the imagination). The unfamiliar cells needed their time to bind and grow into a single organism; no easy task, to be sure, but one that was close to completion. She could feel it. She knew that soon the baby would be born. "I can't wait to meet you," she said to her own stomach. She had drawn a smiley face on a paper plate and strapped it around her belly.

She knew her baby would be rejected by just about everypony. She knew that it would never rule, and that it would be treated differently, but she didn't care. She knew she would still love it all the same. It would be the first thing that was truly hers. Everything else she had owned in life had been given to her by her mother: Everything, from clothes to armies, from food to weapons. Nothing had truly been hers until now. Even Daniel could not say he gave it to her; it had been taken from him under the proxy of drugs, and humans did not have rights as far as ponies were concerned.

The busted doors and broken bookshelves rattled and scraped as Celestia entered with a pair of guards. Rainbow Dash looked up and tried her best to smile. "Ah, Mother, what brings you here?"

"This is my conquered city, and I shall go where I please. Just as it is my party, and I shall cry if I want to."

"I didn't mean anything by it," Rainbow Dash said with a slight stutter.

"No, I'm sure you didn't," said Celestia, and ooh, she was being *so* sarcastic. She moved her obese, cake-scarfing arse over to the desk and ordered her guards to fetch her some water. A third guard had spontaneously arrived unannounced, and all three mumbled their sycophantic promises before departing. Celestia sighed and shook her head and tutted for a good ten seconds straight.

Rainbow Dash, thinking it odd the Kaiser would visit a dilapidated human office, asked, "So, what brings you here?"

"You seem to want to know why I'm here pretty badly!" Celestia shouted. "Why is that? Is it maybe because you dislike my company?"

"What? No, Mother, I just was wondering is all." It probably comes as no surprise to know that Rainbow Dash did indeed despise her mother's company.

"Save your lying tongue! I know you dislike my company, but trust me, I despise yours!" said Celestia. Rainbow Dash gulped and lowered her head, being plot-whipped for about the zillionth time. "Now! I am here to see if you have heard anything from your sister."

Rainbow Dash raised her head and tried her best not to look suspicious. Your own mother probably knows the look, so just ask her. "No, I haven't," she replied very slowly.

"Are you sure? Because I had somepony do some digging, and they found out you were the last pony to visit her the night she disappeared." Celestia kept her focus on Rainbow's face the entire time.

"Er, yes, I did come to see her," said Rainbow Dash. The word "incriminating" here means "confessing to be the last pony to see somepony alive". "Not about anything important, though," she added.

"Your sister is gone! Of course it's important! Now tell me."

"I just, er, I just…" Oh, why couldn't Celestia give Rainbow Dash time to think up a lie? She wanted to hide behind her paper plate right then.

"You just what?"

"I just came to speak to her about how things were going," Rainbow Dash tried.

"Oh really? Because last time I checked, you and your sister were not too friendly with each other."

"Yes, that is true, but I realised I had been a bit of a brat, and I wanted to make it up to her." *Big* lie.

"Oh really? How big of you," said Celestia, again being, like *so* totally *not* sarcastic, I promise.

Rainbow Dash took a deep breath. She knew her mother had suspicions. Suspicions which needed to be thrown. She had to act. "Why are you asking me these questions?" was the best she could come up with.

"Like I said, the pony I have investigating claims to have found that you were the last one to see her. I needed to see what that was about." Celestia flicked a thick splinter of wood off of the overturned desk.

"Well, I have told you," Rainbow Dash said. There followed a pregnant pause in their already scintillating conversation. "So who is this pony?"

Celestia let out a dry chuckle. "Why would you want to know? Is it so you can slit their throat before they find anything that you don't want them to?"

Rainbow Dash blinked as she rolled her eyes. She groaned and rubbed her temples with both fore-hooves. Some days it was a real hassle to live in an evil backstabbing regime. Traitor baiting was a real pain in the flank. "There isn't anything for me to hide," she said, exasperated. "I'm just questioning the validity of your accusations."

Celestia smiled her smile that was meant more for herself than whom she was smiling at. "Well then, I guess there really isn't anything for you to worry about, is there?" She leaned in close to her daughter, and her tone switched to a low and dark one. "However, if by some miracle it did turn out that you knew something more than you are letting on, and that in turn led to us discovering the body of your sister, then you best believe you will feel true pain. I will do horrible, horrible things to you."

Rainbow Dash's eyes went wide and she gulped. "Like what?" she asked as if she wanted to know.

Celestia stared Rainbow Dash in the eyes and gave her a cold expression. "I'll beat you bloody, then I'll hand you to my stallion guards and let them have their fun. Once they are done, I will dig out that monstrosity you got growing in your belly with a rusty and blunt blade. Then I'll have you patched up whilst I cook it in front of you." She took a moment to think of more twisted things. During this time, Rainbow Dash just sat frozen to her spot, her eyes wide. "Oh, then I'll leave you locked up for days with no food until you're so hungry that you'll eat the damn thing! Then I will have you nailed to a cross just like those soldiers, and I will have you skinned alive on there! *Then* I'll leave you to *die*. Ooh." Somewhere, Seth McFarlane was smiling.

Rainbow Dash could feel herself feel sick; she was so nervous and mortified. Celestia gave an *evil* grin and stood up from her chair. "But I guess none of that will need to happen as you are telling me the truth, right?" You probably can't tell, but she was being sarcastic again.

Rainbow Dash gave a fast nod. "Yes, Mother, of course I am."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow morning. Don't forget that Onyx becomes one of us when the new day dawns!" Celestia gave her scowling daughter one last look over, smiled, and turned to leave.

Once the door shut behind her mother, Rainbow Dash nearly broke down. "Oh god! She knows, she knows!"

Celestia did not know for sure, but she definitely had her suspicions, and she was a mare who was known to trust her instincts. Soon she would know the truth, and that meant only bad things were to come for Rainbow Dash. Like the humans, she awaited the next day with dread, unlike Onyx and the Equestrians who awaited Onyx's acceptance into the royal pony family.

Come dawn, the Equestrians flooded the streets just outside the Moscow headquarters. At the top of the steps to the balcony were Celestia, Onyx, Prince Blueblood and Rainbow Dash. The charred corpse of Irish had been left pinned to the cross right below the stairs where everypony could see it, and Rainbow Dash chuckled at the sight. *That's what happens when you cross me,* she thought to herself.

The ceremony was about ready to begin. Celestia whispered to Onyx, "Did you obtain the information I asked of you?"

Onyx gave a nod. He was resplendent in the pair of chainsaws strapped to his back, a t-shirt reading "Nowhere Ever After" beneath his usual jacket, and a dainty tiara on his head just like Celestia's. He was joined by two of his band members to perform their one song which Onyx himself sang in his grating bass voice while leaping in place on either foot and twirling his chainsaw over his head. "I am Sephiroth! I am cool, and you're not! I have a really long sword that I spin when I'm bored! I'm Sephiroth!" The song ended and he dismissed Needleface and Kevin Smith, then approached Celestia. "Our suspicions have been confirmed."

"Are you sure of this?" asked Celestia.

Onyx thought about that for a long, quiet moment, then said, "I am."

"Very well, then. Thank you for finding that out."

"You are welcome, Mother."

Celestia stood behind a podium on which rested a microphone and a golden medal with a fine silk strap. She cleared her throat to silence the crowd of Equestrians who were loud with chatter. "My little ponies, today is a fine day." At their Kaiser's words, they shut up the hell up. "Today we bring a new member into our royal family, an honour awarded to only the noblest of ponies. However, today we invite the first human into our family. Now some of you may think this as unfair, as there are so many true ponies who have served the kingdom well, and also because of the fact we're at war against humans. It'd be like electing a tiger president. If you were a human, that is. However, trust me when I say this is one human, perhaps the only human, who is truly worthy of such an honour! Today we Invite Onyx, Destroyer of Moscow and Vanquisher of the Resistance among the likes of the Pony Princesses!" She paused for a guard to hold up a sign saying "Applause". The crowd gave a mighty cheer until Celestia resumed. "Onyx did what no pony has done before, not in our battles across the globe, from Hainan to Monsoon, from New York to Cuba: He brought the resistance to their knees, and he bled them dry! He showed our foes that we are not to be trifled with, and with his victory, we shall move on to completely wipe the resistance clean of their world with ease, and we shall reclaim their world as our own!" The crowd let out another cheer when prompted.

"Onyx, step forward, and kneel!" Celestia said. Onyx gave a nod and obeyed. Celestia bowed her head so the sun glinted off of her majestic horn, which was almost as long as a broadsword. Onyx bowed his head as Celestia raised her horn high. "I hereby accept you, Onyx, into our royal family of pony princesses!" She bowed her head as well to lower the length of her horn and gently touch it to his left shoulder. "Oh, wait. But first, you must swear to always be loyal to our cause, and that you shall always willingly serve the Equestrians when asked upon. Sometimes we forget to ask some of them that, and it goes awry."

"I accept to always be a loyal to your causes and to always willingly serve when called upon," Onyx repeated woodenly.

"And do you swear to risk your life whenever necessary to protect our lands? That's important, too."

"I do," said Onyx.

Celestia lowered her horn down so that it touched Onyx's right shoulder. "Very well, then. I hereby declare you Princess Onyx Tibersire, the Slayer of the Reds!" The crowd cheered and stamped as Celestia raised her head once more and permitted Onyx to stand. She then raised the golden medal by threading her horn through its silk strap and offered it unto him. "Here I award you with not only a place in our royal family, but I also award you with the Golden Medal of the Sun, a medal only a hoof-picked few of Equestrians have earned, none of which who are still of this world, or Equestria!" The crowd let out yet another cheer upon being reminded of how many had fallen. Onyx bowed his head and Celestia slipped the medal over his helmet and down onto his trunk of a neck. The crowd's furore hit its apex, one in which Celestia and Blueblood took part in. Rainbow Dash put very little effort into applauding Onyx, instead seething with envy. After everything she had done, she never received a golden medal of honour for her efforts on the battlefield, yet here he was, getting one after taking down only one city. To her it was preposterous compared to her four.

Onyx stepped back next to Blueblood and Rainbow Dash. Celestia remained at the front, returning to the microphone. She waited until the audience simmered down, then resumed her address. "It was ten years ago this very day that I repeated those same words when welcoming another fine soldier into our royal family," she said. Rainbow Dash tuned in now as she knew Celestia was talking of her. "I welcomed a soldier into our family who showed great promise and courage, time and time again. A soldier who was no stranger to war after battling the Changelings and helping in wiping them from the face of our planet. That soldier was Rainbow Dash." The crowd gave another cheer and Celestia turned her head to Rainbow Dash. Keeping eye contact with her, her speech continued. "I was so proud that day, as I was certain that I had made the right choice. She was the perfect candidate." Rainbow Dash couldn't help but blush at Celestia's sudden kindness, since she was particularly thick and couldn't see the painfully obvious face-heel turn coming up. Celestia turned back to the crowd. "But a candidate is an election shy of a president. I am here to say that I was wrong."

The teleprompter pony flipped around the card that said "Applause". On its other side, the word "Gasp" was written. The crowd gasped and Rainbow Dash felt her heart drop. Celestia continued. "Today I was informed of something that has made me sick to my stomach, and I'm not talking about Applejack's baked bads. Today I was told that your Queen Luna was murdered!"

The teleprompter pony raised the same card. The crowd let out another gasp. Rainbow Dash's heartrate started to pick up, and she could feel herself beginning to sweat. *I think she's talking about me*, thought Rainbow Dash. *Could she possibly suspect? No, there was no evidence! I was careful. There couldn't have been any evidence left alive, could there?* Rainbow Dash battled with herself in her thoughts.

"And who is the culprit, you may ask?" Celestia asked, though nopony asked anything, since she'd pretty much outright implied it was Rainbow Dash given that she was just saying how wrong she was about Rainbow Dash's candidacy for princess-hood and then in the next breath reporting Luna's murder. "The murderer stands here before you!"

She knows! came a loud and strong voice in Rainbow Dash's head that was both loud and strong. The teleprompter scribbled over the word "gasp" with the word "consternation", which means "the crowd now let out angry cries of disapproval". Celestia raised her hoof to Rainbow Dash. "Guards, seize her! Seize her, you fools!" Rainbow Dash responded with a big "No!" as two strong, well-built stallions stepped forward and took a hold of her. "This mare killed her own sister out of jealousy and bitterness, and for this she shall pay with her own blood and that of the abomination which grows inside her!" The crowd let out an angry and hateful cheer as they all cursed Rainbow Dash's name. It had been no more than five minutes since they'd been cheering for her. "Today we shall take the child that grows with in her. Then, three days from now, she will be publicly executed, just like the soldiers of the resistance were!" The crowd flipped back to cheering.

Rainbow Dash sobbed with fear. "Mother, please don't do this! I didn't do anything! It wasn't me, it wasn't me!"

"Silence, you liar! Tell it to Shia LaBeouf! I had Onyx look into it! He found out everything!"

"He lies! Luna's been in Equestria since this war began. When did he ever leave Moscow? I did nothing!" Rainbow Dash continued to sob. Apparently she couldn't handle a huge crowd of people accusing her of things and growing ever more bloodthirsty.

"It is you who is lying! You shall die for what you have done!" Celestia cackled and swung her head about, brandishing her horn.

"No, Mother, please don't do this!" begged Rainbow Dash.

"You did this!" Celestia pointed her hoof towards Rainbow. "You shouldn't have let your jealousy get the best of you. You should have taken my constant verbal abuse and liked it, the way human audiences grovel over their idiot television boxes! Onyx, sic her! But remember: Kill the baby, not her."

Onyx ripped both of his chainsaws off of his back, which had been strapped in such a way that they revved up as he did this. "Yes, Mother!"

Rainbow let out an uncharacteristically falsetto scream and ducked under the first swing of Onyx's roaring blades. Celestia cheered on, speaking into the microphone to emcee the fight. "Onyx will now kill the abomination which lives inside of her!" The crowd joined their Kaiser in cheering, yelling for them to fight, fight, fight. Rainbow Dash tried to duck behind her throne as tears streamed down her cheeks. Onyx chased her around a few times. She tried to hide behind the podium, but Celestia kicked her back onto her throne. Onyx raised his chainsaw and placed the tip of the churning blade against her stomach. "Dew eet!" ordered Celestia. "Keel her babby!"

"With pleasure, Mother." Onyx pushed the end of the chainsaw into Rainbow Dash's gut, tearing through the paper plate with ease and teasing the spinning blades past her sky-blue fur and into her flesh. Blood and pus oozed as he dug the saw steadily in her womb, not deep enough to kill her, but deep enough to kill her unborn child. "I am Lord of the Edge." The guards now held Rainbow Dash in place so she could not move, even as she screamed and shook in horrific pain.

Celestia moved in close to Rainbow Dash and knelt beside her. "You think this is bad? Trust me, the next three days, you will be begging for death." She smiled for the cheering crowds as Onyx removed the chainsaw and the guards allowed her to collapse to the floor in shock. "Transfer the remaining prisoners to the armada. The humans have breathed long enough!"

Chapter Forty-Six.

The last member of Delta Squad. Humble humility.

That same morning, Daniel found himself alone at a folding table in the terminus canteen. Three people worked behind the counter, rationing the dwindling food supply amongst the refugees. They'd warned him when he'd gone to get a sandwich for breakfast that they had less than three days' worth left. This was a bad thing, and even he knew that, but he had too much on his mind right now. He wanted to figure out a way he could lead a good attack on the ponies, and when he peeled the crust off of his sandwich, he saw it was nothing special: Just a plain chicken sandwich without even any butter. He grimaced at the dryness of his meal, and on his third bite, Tyrone pulled up a chair across the table from him.

"We need to talk," Tyrone said.

"Can't I eat first?" asked Daniel.

Tyrone looked at Daniel's sandwich, then back up to him. "No, this is important."

Daniel swallowed his mouthful before resting the sandwich down on a paper plate. "Go ahead."

"We got problems. I can't find Irish. I think they left him behind."

Daniel's lower jaw went a little slack. "Left him behind? No, I'm sure they wouldn't do that."

"Well he ain't here. I spent all day yesterday looking. They must have left him. I'm sure of it."

Daniel stared down at his plate and wondered if anybody would want the rest of a sandwich he'd bitten into. "Maybe he didn't make it out."

Tyrone pounded on the table, shaking his head. "No, he made it out! I know he must have! Come on, Daniel, what's wrong with you? We need to go find him!"

Daniel shook at the slap to the table, but couldn't hold his gaze on Tyrone. "Nothing's wrong. How can you be sure?"

"Because! I know, okay? Irish must have. If I did, then he must have. He is probably trapped in Moscow still."

"Okay, I'll humour you. Say he is alive, and he is in Moscow. What can we do about it?"

Tyrone stood and turned away, eager to go, but he stopped himself and turned back to Daniel. "We can round up some men and go get him! That's what we can do about it!"

"You want to risk what few men we have left to go to Moscow? To save one guy? No, it's too risky." Daniel reached for his sandwich, but all he did was fondle it.

Tyrone slammed a heavy fist down on the table which nearly buckled under the pressure. "What in the hell, man? This isn't just any one guy, damn it! This is Irish! He is our brother! Man, now I know there's something wrong with you! The real Daniel would be all over trying to rescue a member of Delta Squad!"

Daniel stared at Tyrone with hopeless eyes. "I only ever had one brother, and he died a long time ago." He couldn't believe he'd just said that. The muscles at the corners of his mouth seemed to die. He quickly stuffed a bite of sandwich into his mouth so that he couldn't say anything else, but it tasted like nothing.

Tyrone stood there, shocked, and sank back into the chair, dumbstruck. "I can't believe it. Irish isn't dead. I bet you he's still alive. What the hell happened to you?"

"Nothing happened to me!" Daniel said, his mouth still full because he didn't have the heart to chew. He hoped he'd choke. "If you want to go into Moscow on a wild goose chase and risk your life, then be my guest, but you go alone! I'm not risking everyone's lives for this."

Tyrone stood up from the table and gave it one final slap. "Fine. I will. I'll send Irish your regards." He then turned and stormed off. Daniel gave a shrug of his shoulders and picked at his sandwich. He didn't feel right. He felt unwell. A pang hit him and his entire body buckled and slumped forward over the table. His eyes felt wet, and he tried to imagine the food had been poisoned. It wasn't just that he'd refused to look for Irish that made him ache. He recognized he felt absolutely nothing now, and that was what brought tears to his eyes.

When he noticed Yuri had shown up to sit down, he snapped out of his stupor. He wiped his eyes and sniffed and hastily shoved the rest of his meal into his mouth. Yuri had brought a small paper plate with a very small portion of boiled pierogis; not his preferred meal, but at this point it was take what you could get. “Hey, what was that about?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Daniel said.

Yuri took a seat where Tyrone had been sitting, and Daniel let out an annoyed sigh. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“Yeah, we got a problem. We are running low on food.”

Daniel gritted his teeth. “Yes, I know that.”

“Right, so what are we going to do about it?”

“I don't know. What are we going to do about it?”

“You’re our leader. We need you to make a decision,” Yuri said impatiently.

Daniel slammed both his hands down on the table, but forced himself into a smile that he shared with the ceiling. “Then I guess we should get more food instead of starve to death! God damn it! Can I not be left alone to eat in peace without everyone coming over to bother me?”

Yuri glared at Daniel. “No, as a matter of fact, you can’t! Cramming food in your face like manna from Heaven! You need to man the fuck up! Pull yourself together, you childish piece of shit! These people are counting on you, and you need to lead them!”

Daniel stood and swept his arm aside. “I am going to lead them! I will lead them right to the ponies’ front door, and I will show these fascists justice!” He was not using his indoor voice.

Neither was Yuri who also stood up from the table. “Oh, that's your plan, is it? March a half-wounded, half-inexperienced army against a fully-experienced and unscathed army? Haven't you got enough people killed already? Haven't these people been through enough without your ‘help’?”

“How dare you! I have done everything for these people!”

“No, you haven't! These people were getting on fine until you woke up. Now you’re planning on marching them to their deaths for some stupid eye for an eye crap!”

“They killed my family!”

“They killed everyone's family! You think you’re the only one who has suffered loss here? Take a look around! Everyone is dealing with loss: Loss of brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers. Loss of friends and comrades. Everyone has lost someone! You need to grow up and accept your responsibilities or hand them over to someone else!”

Daniel went silent and stared at Yuri. His voice went very quiet, but he pushed his words through the choking sensation in his throat. “Fine, you think it's so easy? You take over. I'm done.” He pushed his paper plate aside and left it on the table, then stormed off as quick as he could hobble on his cane.

Yuri was flabbergasted. “Fine, I will! And I'll do a damn sight better than you!” He huffed and looked around.

Dixie had been watching the argument transpire from across the room. She’d gotten a fairly good idea what they were discussing from their loss of volume control, and when Yuri ushered himself from the canteen, she invited herself to follow him at a light jog. “What's going on?” she asked when she’d caught up. “What did he do now?”

“That stupid son of a bitch!” snapped Yuri. “He’s still obsessed with going to Equestria on a vengeance plot. He means to get us all killed!”

“Okay, calm down. Did you even try reasoning with him?” It was hard to put her hands on her hips while walking.

“Yes, I tried that.” Yuri rolled his eyes. “He’s crazy if he thinks we can actually pull it off. He's lost his damn mind.”

Dixie interrupted Yuri. “We can’t let him do that.”

“Y-yes, I know, but what can we do? These people look up to him. They trust him. They need their leader, or they’ll all descend into chaos, but their leader’s going to lead them all to their doom. Now he wants to quit and lay it all on me.”

“I see,” Dixie said. “So what *are* we going to do about the rations?”

“We could head to Minsk. I happened to meet that Ivan Matskevich fellow yesterday. He runs things over in Belarus, and I’m hoping he might help, though he kind of rubs me the wrong way.”

“I don't know. He didn't leave with good feelings towards Daniel, but he did say he could help. You think maybe he could take over? Be a leader? At least for a while, just until Daniel gets his head back where it needs to be. And if Ivan doesn’t wanna comply, we can play hardball.”

Yuri gave a nod. “Da. That might actually work. We should leave now, though. We can’t afford to waste any time with three days of food left. I can’t believe a third of the camp wants to head all the way to London.”

“Fine,” said Dixie. “Let’s go find us a vehicle. And don’t give me the whole ‘You’re not coming with’ speech. I happen to have some experience with Mr. Matske-whatever.”

“I wasn’t going to. No way I’m showing up unannounced by myself.” It took Yuri and Dixie several hours to reach Minsk. They drove one of the bullet-ridden heavy vehicles that was used to evacuate the people of Moscow. Minsk was different to Moscow. It was more fortified, surprisingly. They had giant gates and walls built up around the city, and they had around twelve men on the main gate at any one time. The wall was lined with heavy MG's and the occasional mortar, and the vending machines had Coke Zero instead of that Diet Coke bullshit. As Yuri and Dixie pulled up in their vehicle, three soldiers moved towards it, whilst two stood at the front, aiming AK47's at them.

A tall, well-built-up soldier with short ginger hair and a handlebar moustache of the same colour approached Yuri at the driver's side of the truck. “Who are you, and why are you here?” he asked in a strong South Dakotan accent.

“We are here to see Ivan Matskevich,” said Yuri.

“Is he expecting you?” asked the soldier.

“Probably, but we don’t have an appointment,” Yuri joked. More serious, he added, “It’s important anyway.”

The soldier gave a nod. “Okay, what's your name and reason for your visit?” he asked.

“My name is Yuri Raslov. I'm from the Moscow survivors’ camp, and I need to talk to him about Daniel Williams.” When the soldier gave a nod and slipped away, Yuri whispered to Dixie, “It’s best not to say we’re refugees. In all likelihood, they won’t be willing to take us in.”

The soldier called to a young Asian soldier by the gates. “Glenn, tell Ivan that a man named Yuri is here to speak about a Daniel Williams!”

“Yes, sir, Abraham!” Glenn reached for his radio to broadcast to Ivan. There was an awkward silence as Abraham returned to stare at Dixie and Yuri, waiting for the response. Glenn shouted over, “He says send them through!”

Abraham did nothing to hide his surprise and patted the truck. “Who the heck *are* you people? Alright, go on through, but keep your headlights off!” Once he shouted to the gate guards to open up, they obeyed, and Yuri drove slowly into Minsk. He felt like they were trekking into some loathed cavern where unseen creatures lay sleeping all around them, just on the verge of waking up. He and Dixie did not have to ride far before being met by Ivan who stood in the middle of an unlit road. He gave them a wave, and Yuri pulled up the handbrake and shut off the truck.

“You want to wait here?” Yuri asked Dixie.

“I didn't come all the way down here just to wait in the damn truck. I'm coming with you.”

They both opened their doors and departed from the vehicle. “Must get kind of dark around here at night, doesn’t it?” asked Yuri.

“Keeps the pegasi from finding us at night. Think you’re ready to take my advice and join my community?” Ivan looked to Dixie as he said this.

Dixie rolled her eyes. “Not quite.”

Yuri gave her a confused look, but he was also surprised by Ivan’s generosity. “You don’t mind taking on hundreds of refugees?”

“We could use the labour,” Ivan said. “Manpower’s hard to come by in a dwindling population.”

“You sure you’re not just feeling guilty about leaving Moscow to die?” Dixie asked.

Ivan narrowed his eyes at them. “Let’s not go crazy. If you’re not seeking sanctuary, then why are you both here?”

“We need to talk to you about Daniel,” said Yuri.

“Yes, I know that, but what about him? I only met him a couple days ago and he’s stubborn as hell. What do you expect I can tell you other than he hits like a girl, and I don’t care what dust he eats?”

“He is trying to lead us into Equestria on a revenge plot,” said Dixie.

“Yeah, I know. You were there when he told me. That's why I left, apart from my duty being here. He is going to get you all killed.” Ivan tightened his lips in a certain expression. He couldn’t break a smile, but he was damn sure of the outcome.

Dixie shoved her way in front of Yuri. “We need you to take over watching our group, leading it. At least until Daniel gets back to normal.”

Ivan scrutinized Dixie hard. He stared her over, looked to Yuri, then back at her again. “You’re quite take-charge for a coma ward nurse,” he said wisely. “Now you’re making decisions on behalf of Moscow’s refugees? Do any of them know you’re out here?”

“Well, not as such,” Yuri said, leaning around Dixie, “but we believe time is of the essence.”

Ivan gave a chuckle. “You really think it's that easy? Why not just send your people here, to Minsk? It’s easier than commuting to wherever the hell they’re hiding out. Let’s rationalize this. First of all, who would look after my people in my absence? And second of all, have you discussed this with your people? With Daniel? Because if not, then I can't just roll on in demanding control over all those people like some sort of evil dictator. Unlike some places, we don’t swing that way in Minsk.”

“The people will accept you, especially when they find out what Daniel is planning. Isn't there someone here you can trust to look after your people for a short while?” responded Yuri.

“Let me stop you right there,” Ivan said. “You shouldn’t tell your people anything about Daniel Williams’s butt-hurt crusade. If he’s your leader, that smacks of mutiny. Just make this simple and bring your people here. There’s no reason I should abandon my people to babysit yours.”

“This isn't time for jokes!” snapped Dixie. “Remember I can hurt you.”

Ivan smirked. “Sure it is.”

“Look, Ivan, we wouldn't have come if we didn't need your help,” said Yuri. “We just need you to discuss things. Negotiate. That’s all. Help us work out the details to move to Belarus.”

Ivan nodded. “Alright, I’ll see what I can do. You go back and I’ll make arrangements. I’ll be there by tomorrow.”

Yuri smiled and nodded. “Thank you. You’re saving us. I mean that.” Ivan nodded again at him.

Dixie leaned forward with deliberation. “Thank you, Ivan.”

He returned with a wink. “No problem.” He smirked at Dixie’s following blush.

Yuri made his way back to the truck with Dixie behind them. They both buckled up, then Yuri slipped the key into the ignition and started up the engine. “Are we doing the right thing here?” Dixie asked.

Yuri gave a nod. “Yeah, it's for the best. We can't let Daniel's bloodthirsty ambitions take us all down. We didn't survive Moscow just to be taken down by our own leader. It's not forever, just until he gets back on his feet. We just can’t sit around and *wait* for that to happen.”

Ivan gave them another wave and a smirk as they pulled off. Abraham approached him. “So what's going on then?”

Ivan didn’t smile, and he didn’t frown. “Abraham, it looks like we just expanded our little empire.”

That night, Tyrone had stocked one of the remaining Humvees with ammunition, fuel, and a few bottles of water just in case it broke down on him and he’d have to walk back. In terms of weapons, he was taking a simple M16 assault riffle with him with only half an ammo clip already loaded in and one spare. Ammo was scarce, so if he did run into trouble, he would have to think about running rather than fighting. As a secondary weapon, he had a simple M9 Beretta with only one ammo clip, no spare. He had dressed in light clothing that was all grey. He needed to be able to move easily and as stealthily through the city as possible. In his boot, he had tucked away a long-bladed hunting knife. He was ready.

Tyrone climbed into the driver’s seat and turned on the engine. It roared to life, and he pressed down on the gas pedal. It took him nearly an hour to reach Moscow, although there was very little traffic after the pony apocalypse, and he didn’t strictly need to follow the roads, either. As he moved deeper into the city, he slowed down to the point he ended up going only around ten miles per hour. The city was dead. No one was around except for the dead. The ponies had all departed by this time, except for the dead ones that still lay in the streets alongside resistance soldiers, left to rot like they weren’t worth a thing. Tyrone shook his head slowly. *What a damn shame*, he thought to himself. The thought crossed his mind that somewhere out there in the dead city was Irish, that his body was among the thousands of others. He pushed it from his mind. *No! Think positive!* Little did he know that lying dead with the rest of these poor souls would have been a much more dignified fate; a lot

less painful and brutal death. No, instead Irish was a charred corpse hanging from a cross. Tyrone did not know this yet, and there was a chance he would never know, if he never even made it that way.

A few blocks further into Moscow, Tyrone was forced to exit his vehicle. The coldness of the city was biting, so he took out a pack of Nails cigarettes and lit one just to have a glowing flame nearby. A pile of dead lay in the road, as well as destroyed vehicles and rubble from fallen buildings. He slipped the Humvee into an alleyway for his return back. He then tore off one of the sleeves of his long, grey-coloured jumper and tied it around the lamppost which stood right outside of the alleyway. Now he would know where to look when coming back for the Humvee. He took his weapons and a bottle of water and moved on through the city. It wasn't long before he came across the two Silverbacks that he and Irish had used. As soon as he spotted them, he rushed forward to the one Irish had been in. *That's it! He could be trapped in there!* Tyrone hoped that was the case, as that would mean Irish was still alive, provided he hadn't dehydrated in the several days since the battle. Of course, as several chapters have been transcribed here to attest to the fact, reality hit him a harsh blow: The back had been opened up, and Irish was no longer inside. "Son of a bitch!" Tyrone cursed with bitter anger, but it had no effect. He smashed a fist against the Silverback's framework. That had no effect, either.

Tyrone sighed heavily to join the raging plumes of exhalation that had gathered in this particular stretch of the war. This (Irish's absence, not the sighing) either meant one of two things: The ponies had Irish (which we know because the research was presented earlier), or he was wandering the city, lost (probably ruled out by this point). Tyrone wanted to find out which of these it was, so he looked around for any signs of Irish: Drunkenness, people not laughing at jokes, that sort of thing. He spotted a small CCTV camera tucked away in the corner of a shop's front window, facing directly at Tyrone. *That's it!* He thought, slamming his fist into his palm. He moved a few steps and the camera pointed towards him. He took a few steps sideways, and it turned towards him. A white bull terrier ran across the road, but the camera didn't follow it. Tyrone frowned at the camera and approached the shop. If Irish had been taken or walked off himself, the camera would have recorded it, and then Tyrone would know.

The storefront had been caved in on the left-hand side, and Tyrone had not. He entered in quickly through the gaping hole. The inside of the store had been obliterated by bullet holes and tipped over shelves, even though they'd done nothing to him. Two dead resistance soldiers lay beneath the rubble, their heads poking out and their dead eyes staring up. Their hands had been posed to cop each other's groins. Tyrone passed by them without looking to them. He didn't have time to mourn the dead of whom he never knew, even if it was a bit rude. He hopped the front counter, even though he could have easily walked around, and moved towards the back room. The door was open and stained with a bloody hand print that looked fresh, and also some overpriced coffee that had been spilled on it more than three years ago. A static noise was coming from the inside, which was surprising because nobody was working in the power plants. He paused upon hearing this and readied his M16. He waited, frozen to the spot for a moment whilst he tuned his hearing. There was a sort of ruffling noise beyond the static, like someone was moving around in there. Then came a sudden and loud bang followed by the sound of shattering glass. He jumped back slightly.

Tyrone took a deep breath and began to move slowly towards the door. He pushed it open with the barrel of his M16, and it gave a subtle creak as it swung on its rusty hinges. There was one of three possibilities: One, the person who owned the store would be in this back room; Two, a pony soldier or two would be in there, and Tyrone would have to kill them before they got him; Or three, it was just a rat. Or even four, Family Guy jumped the shark in the second season when it became Are You Being Served. In the lower part of his gut, Tyrone hoped it would be a rat. Rats were sorely underrated creatures capable of cunning intellect. If it was just a civilian, then he would have to abandon his search for Irish to escort them back, and if it was a pony or two, he would have to engage in a firefight, and he wasn't a good fire trainer. None of the scenarios were ideal for him.

Glass crunched beneath his boots as he stepped in through the door frame. He could see the security equipment to the left, and as he turned his head to the right, he let out a heavy sigh. It wasn't a rat; instead, it was a dead man holding his two dead children in his arms, and next to him was a badly wounded pony, who was tucked away in the corner. One of the children had a "Save the Whales" t-shirt and a bum leg, and the other had a t-shirt which said "Free Tibet" and a talking doll that said "Mama". And their father had a t-shirt advertising an anti-AIDS charity. And they had a pet seal that had been beaten with a club. And then somepony had poured tar on the seal. That was definitely worth one of Tyrone's *heaviest* sighs.

Tyrone's eyes locked with the pony's. The pony was shaking as she held up a hoof coated with the blood of the dead family, as well as her own. Tyrone examined the pony for a moment. She was unarmed and had a deep stab wound in her gut. He considered pulling the trigger, but that would be a waste of bullets. "Please don't hurt me," the pony begged. Tyrone remained silent as he rested his M16 against the wall next to him. The pony gave a faint smile. "Thank you." she gasped. Tyrone knelt down and pulled out the hunting knife from his boot. The pony saw this and began to shake her head. "No! No, no, please! Please don't!" Tyrone approached the pony in silence, and the pony continued to beg. As he knelt next to it, he didn't even try to comfort the pony. He just jammed the blade straight up into its throat. The pony let out a "huergk" and choked on its own blood. When he was done, Tyrone turned back to the security operating system, casually sheathing his weapon.

The security system was still operating, and the same tape had been left in for the past two days; it had stopped recording early that day. Tyrone took hold of the control which rested on top of the system, and he rewound the tape. It at first passed through a series of captures of pony soldiers pacing rapidly back and forth and muttering among each other. The tape had no sound, so he had no idea what they were saying. He kept searching through hours' worth of footage until it came to Irish being dragged out of the Silverback. It went by too quickly for Tyrone to see what happened, but he managed to catch Irish's face in the last few passing seconds. He paused the tape and set it forward to see what was happening to Irish, and although he felt angry due to the mistreatment of his friend, he also felt relieved. Irish was alive, as far as he knew.

Tyrone had made his way back through the city and was approaching the HRHQ where all those prisoners had been crucified in time for the pony coronation. He figured checking out the major monuments would be worthwhile, and his mind was filled with images of Irish alive and locked away in some pony dungeon. He just had to save him. He had to. He thought about what Irish had said when they were first reunited, before they were assigned to their new squads. He had abandoned Irish then, or at least that was how Irish had seen the situation, and he wasn't going to abandon him now.

His hopes were dashed when he arrived on the wide streets outside the HQ. The base was a shambles, even more ruined than when he last remembered seeing them, and he could scarcely see them now for all the crosses. The place resembled the welcome wagon for a neighbourhood of cops living in Baltimore. Dead bodies gaped in all directions, twisted in all manner of shapes from where the ponies had practiced the process of crucifixion. The street was now a dense forest of tttttt

Chrissie didn't respond. She just summoned Tyrone with a hand gesture as she moved around towards the back of the truck. As he followed her, he looked in through the truck window to see an unconscious soldier dressed in the Cuban resistance uniform. On the left breast of the uniform he had the name “Gonzales”. Chrissie opened up the back of the truck and Tyrone let out a gasp as his eyes set upon a nuclear bomb. “Is that what I think it is?” he asked.

“Yes. Do you think your Humvee can carry that?” she asked sarcastically.

“I'll go syphon the fuel,” said Tyrone.

It was late evening when Dixie and Yuri returned to the resistance camp, and their absence had not gone unnoticed by Daniel, who was resting on his cane at the front entrance of the terminus, waiting for them both. Yuri cursed under his breath when his headlights illuminated Daniel. Dixie had dozed off, and as she was a light sleeper, she was awoken by Yuri's utterance. “What's wrong?” she asked as she sat up right in her chair and rubbed her eyes. Yuri gave a nod forward and her eyes followed his direction. She joined him in cursing like an adulteress who’d been caught coming home by her cuckold. Yuri pulled up the handbrake of the truck and switched off the engine.

Daniel approached the driver door with a stern expression as Yuri climbed out. “Where the hell have you two been?”

“We went to see Ivan,” Yuri said.

“You mean you went behind my back,” Daniel said, correcting it with his own view of things.

“No one is going behind your back,” Dixie said.

Daniel gritted his teeth. He’d had enough of Dixie’s bossing him around. “Really? Because it seems like you’re trying to replace me as your leader!”

“You said you wanted to quit, remember? You said that just this morning,” Yuri said. He managed to catch himself from raising his voice. “We need some help if we’re going to survive.”

Daniel tilted his head suspiciously. “And I suppose that is meant to make things better? Meant to soften the blow? Do you have any idea the sacrifices I have made for these people?” He pointed back towards the terminus with his cane. “I risked my life time and time again for them! You think they will so easily replace me?”

“You have been gone a long time. A year ago, these people all thought you were dead! Hell, half these people are too young to remember what you did for them, and the ones that are old enough to know, well, they are grateful. This isn't about you, though, it's about them, and they need what's best for their survival. Not your ego.” Though Yuri spoke with honesty, he managed to keep his temper under control. He cared too much at this point for what happened to the refugees, and their crucial survival was in his grasp. He wouldn’t fight Daniel’s emotions any longer.

Daniel felt anger brewing deep inside him like cheap, disgusting MRE coffee. The sudden loss of so many he held dear to his heart, mixed in with the loss of his home and his city, and now this betrayal, as he saw it, was all too much for him to handle. He swung his cane with anger towards Yuri. Yuri was caught off guard, and the cane struck him across his left cheekbone. He stumbled to the ground with a yelp, and a wound had now been opened along his face. It stung, and he thought he could feel the wet blood beading on it down his face. Daniel stared down at him, the cane dripping with Yuri's fresh blood. His hands trembled as he realised what he had done.

Yuri wiped a trail of blood away from his cheek and climbed back to his feet, his face was twisted with anger. “You see? This is why you are no longer fit to lead these people, because your temper and your instinct to resort to violence is what is going to get them killed!” Yuri kept his tone low but stern. Dixie had clasped her hands over her mouth, and she ignored their conversation as she inspected Yuri’s wound.

Daniel remained silent as he looked upon what he had done. *What the hell am I doing?* he thought to himself. Shame washed over him in such great quantity that it felt as if he would drown in it.

Dixie shook her head. “What the hell is wrong with you?” She pushed Daniel away, but he barely felt it. She could see Yuri’s wound was fairly weak.

Daniel found the sense of presence to stammer an apology before the claws of remorse dug too far into him. “I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me.”

“Save it. You’re done. Yuri is right. You are not fit to lead these people.” Dixie ended it there as she and Yuri moved on past Daniel back into the terminus.

Daniel stood frozen for a moment, then dragged himself off to his tent. He could barely even talk. He stabbed his cane into the ground and pulled himself along as if he was climbing a steep mountain. Once at his bedding, he dropped to his knees, put his head in his hands, and sobbed. He was finally letting all his grief and anger out, squeezing his face like a bloated sponge.

After many hours of crying, he still felt he did not have enough tears for those he had lost and those he had hurt, and he prayed that Irish would be alright.

The early morning was filled with the chirping of birds who resided in the woodland which surrounded the terminus. Daniel stepped out of his bed chambers and into the morning light, having not gotten much sleep. He took a deep breath. His head felt clear. He knew that everything he had done and said in the past forty-eight hours was wrong, and he was ready to accept his punishment. As he sought out Dixie and Yuri, he found the five trucks being loaded up with people and possessions. Many were saying goodbye to other members of the camp, and Daniel realized these was the people who were leaving to try for London. He knew this because he spotted Tom, then Rachael and her sister, Lauren, mingled into the crowd. A heavy sadness filled Daniel's heart. He didn't want Tom to go, but it was what Tom wanted, and he couldn't stop him just to satisfy his own selfish desires. It was time to make things right and say goodbye to a friend he may never see again.

Daniel hobbled his way over, still adjusting to using his cane. It was no easy task, especially when moving along the uneven grounds around the terminus. He'd made it three-quarters of the way there when Tom spotted him and hurried over to him. "So you're actually going then?" Daniel asked when the two came into speaking range. Tom gave a slow nod but did not speak. Daniel lowered his head. "Tom, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking, and I was being selfish. I just hope you can forgive me. At least I hope you can understand what I was feeling at the time. Please. I'm sorry."

Tom could see the sincerity and the pain in Daniel's eyes. He gave a slow and understanding nod. "It's okay, Daniel. I forgive you." The two stood there in an uncomfortable silence.

Daniel smiled and held out a hand. "Good luck. I hope you find happiness wherever you end up."

Tom grabbed Daniel's hand and pulled him into a brotherly hug. "I'll always forgive you, man." His voice was wavering. It sounded as if he was on the verge of an emotional breakdown. They held the hug as they thought of their comrades they would never touch again. Tom thought of Logan in particular, and Daniel thought of his sister and Irish. They both thought of Nick and Tyrone, and knew they'd had their last drink at the Ivory. At once, Tom regretted he was leaving. Daniel regretted his resignation.

The two pulled away, their eyes red, and Daniel took a deep breath. "I guess this is good bye. Everything's changed."

"Yeah, I guess it is," said Tom. Neither man could decide to look at the ground or at one another's eyes.

Daniel could feel tears building in his eyes. He had lost a brother before, and now he was losing another. "It was an honour serving with you."

"Yeah. It was an honour serving with you," Tom said. There was a silence for a moment. The two felt the sadness seize the situation. They teetered where they stood, waiting for some impetus to come long and find some excuse to escape this war together. Maybe they could both go to London, or maybe they could use their training to survive out in the wilderness away from all the horrors that had come between them. "Hey, you be careful out here. I would hate to think what's going to happen to you without me being here to save your scrawny ass," Tom joked.

Daniel gave a slight chuckle. "Yeah, you wish. I saved your ass more times."

"Bullshit."

"Da, well, at least I never shot you."

Tom laughed, which sounded raspy thanks to his wound. "What can I say? You were possessed or some shit, and in fact, you may not have shot me, but you sure did try to wreck me with that train."

Daniel shrugged and smiled. "And I'll do it again." The two chuckled.

"Well, it's time to go," Tom forced himself to say. "Goodbye, and be safe, Daniel."

Daniel gave Tom a nod and said, "Yeah, you too." With that, Tom boarded one of the trucks with ten other people, and the two parted ways. Tom reached out of the back window of the truck, and Daniel gave his hand a shake, walking along behind the truck as it rolled away, until it was moving too fast to keep up. He couldn't help but feel like this was the last time he would see his dear friend, and maybe he was right. By the time the truck had gone, leaving only tire tracks and engine smoke in their wake, Daniel let out a heavy sigh. "Goodbye, comrade."

The sound of an incoming helicopter descended upon the terminus, and Daniel looked up to see Ivan coming down in one of his Black Hawks. He sighed again. It was time to not only lose his friend, but also his people. Once the chopper landed, Ivan exited and stalled for a while, looking at the chopper even though his pilot had it handled. He looked over his shoulder to see Daniel was looking at him, then begrudgingly walked over to extend a reluctant handshake. "I trust you know why I'm here?" Ivan asked. Daniel just answered with a solemn nod, and Ivan continued. "Good. That could've been a lot more awkward than it needed to be. Is there somewhere private to talk about this?"

“There is an old conductor’s office. We can talk in there.” Daniel led the way for Ivan, who ordered Abraham to watch the chopper. Many heads turned to inspect this surprise visitor. On his way, Daniel passed Dixie, who was looking at a man's infected foot after he took a bullet in Moscow and in the head. She saw Ivan and Daniel and looked away almost immediately, as if she hadn't seen them, and as if she was harbouring some sort of shame. Daniel didn't think anything of it. He knew now he was wrong, and he was getting ready to deal with his punishment.

“Just take a seat right there,” said Daniel once he and Ivan had stepped into the small room. The conductor’s office had a small table in the centre with two chairs on either side of it. On the middle of the table were two small glasses and an old bottle of scotch.

Ivan took a seat and stared at the scotch. “This yours?” He pointed a wanting finger towards the bottle.

Daniel shook his head. “Didn't even know it was here.” He rested his cane against the wall.

“You mind I have a drink?” Ivan asked, trying in vain to dust off one of the glasses. Daniel gave a shrug as he pulled the chair out from the table and took a seat. Ivan gave a greedy smile as he popped the top of the bottle and filled his glass. “You want one?” he asked. Daniel shook his head. “Dude, you’re never going to be popular if you don’t drink. Do you even smoke, bro? Pfft. More for me, I guess.” Ivan placed the bottle down on the table without putting the top back on, planning to finish the quarter of the bottle that was left. He downed the glass he had poured himself in seconds. “I guess we should get discussing,” he said as he poured himself another glass.

Daniel watched as Ivan packed the booze away. “Yeah, I guess.”

Ivan hiccupped and slumped forward, laughing and pointing. “Don't be like that. It ain't like it's forever. You people just think you could use a break is all. I don't intend of overstaying my welcome. I gotta babysit enough people as it is.”

Daniel gave a slow and unconvinced nod. “Uh huh.”

Once Ivan had downed the second glass, the talk between him and Daniel commenced. The procedure was long and painful, like getting braces put on, but since he’d finished off the scotch, Ivan had nothing else to do with his time. “So do we have a deal or what?” Ivan hiccupped.

Daniel had sat there, watching Ivan get drunker and drunker on so little scotch. He could feel himself getting annoyed, but this time, instead of being irritated that everything was being taken away from him by those around him, he was perturbed at how difficult it was to get through one dipsomaniac to give away the stuff they earlier demanded he lose. Daniel concurred with Ivan and summed up their negotiation on the following terms.

First, Ivan would look after and lead Daniel's Moscow resistance, or what was left of it, for a full and uninterrupted year. During that time, Daniel could act as an advisor and council member of the new council Ivan would set up. There, Daniel could contribute ideas but not make the final decisions. Also, during that time, if for some reason Ivan passed away or was not in a position to contribute, his son, Joseph Matskevich, would take his place.

Second, Daniel would agree to undergo health treatments and rehabilitations to improve his natural fatigue, as Ivan was worried he was weak after being in a coma for so long.

And finally, Ivan would stay in the terminus camp for a short while with Daniel and his people before signing an overseer to do his bidding and report back to him.

Ivan clapped his hands together, but missed. “Great. I'm glad you finally came around to the idea.” Daniel nodded and hung his head. He felt the plan was imperfect, but it would have to do. The pair exit the office and return to the helicopter where Ivan spoke with Abraham. “We are going to leave today. Tell our people what is going on and that I am going to be here for a while. In that time, you will take charge until I return. When I return, you will oversee things here. Are we clear?” explained Ivan, finishing up with a question. Abraham gave a curt and loyal nod.

“What about the ponies?” Daniel asked, the lust for revenge creeping back in.

“We will play it defensive for now, unless things drastically change in our favour, or we create a weapon powerful enough to ensure victory. But I doubt *that* would happen. Ha ha ha! We’d have to have, like, a nuke or something, am I right?” Ivan was cut off by the loud sound of a beeping horn. “What the hell?”

A truck pull up next to them, and out leapt Tyrone and Chrissie. “Daniel! Daniel, you got to see this!” said Tyrone.

“What? What is it?” Daniel asked.

Ivan stepped in between Tyrone and Daniel and held up a hand to Tyrone. “Hold up a minute. I am the new leader and whatever Daniel has to see, I have to see.”

Tyrone gave a confused look. “Wait, what? You’re the leader now? I was gone no less than a few hours; what the fuck happened? Now I need permission to speak to my closest friend?”

Chrissie let out a sigh and stepped forward. “We haven't got time for this! Look. I have a wounded man in my truck. Can someone please take him to get looked at?”

Ivan gave a nod to Abraham, and Abraham understood his orders. He grabbed hold of Daryl and lifted him out of the truck onto both of his shoulders, before carrying off towards the medical tent. Ivan then turned to Chrissie. “Now that that's been handled, who might you be, and what the hell is he blabbering on about?”

Tyrone’s jaw dropped at being treated like a boy by Ivan’s demeaning phrasing. Chrissie grimaced, having noticed this, but time was of the essence. “I am Special Operative Chrissie Marques.”

Ivan smiled and patted her on the head before adopting a patronizing tone. “Okay, Chrissie, you mind telling me what it is he was blabbering on about?”

Chrissie tried to give Tyrone an apologetic look, but after the past few days she’d been having, she wasn’t in a sympathetic mood. She signalled for everyone to follow her to the back of the truck. As they went, Tyrone whispered to Daniel, “What does he mean, he is the leader?”

“Later,” Daniel said, curious about what Chrissie had to show them. She stopped at the back of the truck and opened it up. Everyone looked inside with amazement at the nuclear device.

“This is incredible. Where did you get this?” asked Daniel.

Chrissie looked from side to side and rubbed her arm. “Cuba,” she admitted.

“What the hell is it?” asked Ivan.

“It’s a nuclear weapon,” Chrissie said. “You make it explode and it spews radioactive destruction for miles and miles. We probably should have covered it in bubble wrap or something, but it hasn’t made any noise, so I’m guessing it’s good.”

“Wait,” said Tyrone. “So how’s Cuba? We haven’t heard from them since before the battle of Moscow.”

Chrissie lowered her head and thought of her husband, Rodrigo. “Cuba is gone. We had to take the nuke to get it away from the ponies. Me and that guy who was in my truck are the only survivors.” She gave a shudder to fight back the tears.

“Cuba is gone?” asked Daniel with sorrow.

Tyrone looked shocked. “Oh, damn. What happened to Bravo Squad? Have you heard from Nicholas Bronson or Becky Williams?”

“No time for that,” insisted Ivan. “Look at this! This is exactly what I was talking about. This is what we need to kill the ponies once and for all. This gives us a reason to fight, and I shall be the leader that brings about victory for humanity!” Ivan pumped his fist in the air. Daniel flinched as though he’d been socked in the gut. He glared towards Ivan, but when he swept his gaze at the others, they were still just gawking at the weapon. They didn’t care that Ivan was willing to turn on his heel for the sake of his ego. Daniel sighed and decided to look at it from the perspective of at least Ivan was willing to take him up on his wishes now. Ivan turned to Daniel. “Do you think you can rally your men one last time whilst I prepare mine?”

Daniel's face was infected with a huge grin. “It would be my pleasure.”

“Good! Tonight we go to war for the last time!”

It didn’t take Daniel long to rally everyone, as they’d already been gathering around to check out the helicopter. Ivan said unto Abraham to return to Minsk with all that he had to report, and it was good. Daniel leapt onto the station platform to address the crowds. “My friends—no—my family, this is a great day for us, for today we finally exact our revenge upon the pony scum!”

The crowd gave a confused mutter and Yuri, who was among them, spoke out. “Not this again! Ivan!”

“I and Ivan agree on this now, for we have a new weapon. We have a nuclear bomb! Isn’t that just great?” Daniel grinned. The crowd gave a gasp. “Yes! It is true. We have obtained a nuclear weapon, and we will use it to annihilate the ponies once and for all!”

“Oh yeah? Where did we get this nuke?” asked an unconvinced soldier amongst the crowd.

Daniel lowered his head. “I am afraid it was a last parting gift from our comrades in Cuba.” The crowd shouted and frantically panic. Daniel calmed them with hand gestures asking them to be quiet. He would’ve used finger puppets, too, but he lost them in Moscow. “People! People!” He shouted until they stopped to hear him out. “For four years, our species has faced

death like never before. Our lands were stolen from us by a deadly new species, and our race has suffered countless deaths. Entire nations were dominated by a cruel new evil, and it's been hard as hell to get a decent cup of coffee. Many our allied nations have not persevered to this day. Many of our comrades, too, have perished in what has become the bloodiest war in mankind's history. I have seen measureless uprisings, revolutions, and resistances, all crushed beneath hoof of fascism. However, that will *not* happen on this day! On this day, it is their land that shall be conquered, and their blood that shall be spilt! This is our day, comrades, this is Red Vengeance™! Today, we will strike at the Hoof of Fascism™, and they shall taste the Blade of Communism™! They came to our motherland, seeking the blood of the Soviet People™, but on this day, on this day, they shall drown in their own!" The crowd gave a cheer and were convinced. The final battle of the war between Ponies and humans felt only hours away, and it was going to be bloody: Very, very bloody.

Chapter Forty-Seven.

Trash on Dash. Pinkie Pie's left field. The fleet is underway.

The hallway leading to the dungeons was small, cramped, and dark, and there was a strong smell of manure lingering in the air. Rainbow Dash had the last, thirtieth cell on the right side of the corridor where the stench was worst. She looked malnourished and beat after just a few hours spent locked up. She no longer had her Pregnancy Bump™, and instead her stomach now just sagged. She also sported a huge black eye and a bloody nose, and there was a low and constant rumbling throughout the cell that made it difficult to concentrate and get some rest. Two stallion guards had just shut her cell and were strolling away. "I don't know about you," said one to the other with a ribald chuckle, "but I fully enjoyed that."

"The best part was where she begged for mercy, and you just slapped her and continued! No subtlety for us, no sir!" said the other.

On their way, they passed by Pinkie Pie, who asked herself, "What the hay are *they* talking about?" She then hummed and trotted further down the corridor until she heard Rainbow Dash weeping. "Hiya, Rainbow Dash! How're ya doing?"

Rainbow Dash sniffled and raised her head to look at Pinkie Pie. She hid her eyes beneath her wings so Pinkie couldn't see she'd been crying. "Pinkie! Ugh. I'm find. Just a little beat down is all. What're *you* doing here?"

Pinkie Pie could see Rainbow Dash was in a state a bit more serious than a simple "beat down", but she decided not to broach the subject. "Glad to hear prison's not that bad, but you should've sent me a letter! I thought you'd forget who I was, silly! I just heard the news about you murdering Queen Luna, so I figured something was wrong and wanted to see how you were feeling! I couldn't make it to the coronation myself, but I did hear they roasted that Irish fellow! Sounds like he suffered a great deal! About time after making us suffer defeat after defeat, right? I've been listening in on all the movements of Delta Squad. Isn't it nice that some of them have finally kicked the bucket? Personally, I feel as if they truly deserved it. So, wanna tell me what happened with your sister?"

Rainbow Dash shook her head. "It was self-defence." She sounded pretty convinced of that. Her voice cracked with emotion. "She tried to hurt my baby."

"Did you tell your mother that?"

Rainbow Dash could feel tears coming, but she just managed to fight them back. "She said my baby was a freak! She never listened to me. I was always the one she regretted bringing into the royal fold. She has been trying to get rid of me since my defeat at Berlin, and when she saw an opportunity to do so, she jumped to it."

"Why didn't you come to me for help?" asked Pinkie Pie.

Rainbow Dash gave a sarcastic burst of laughter. "Like you would have helped me!"

Pinkie Pie felt slightly hurt after that comment. "I would have helped you! What would make you think otherwise?"

"You! You have been kissing Luna's and Celestia's plots since we returned to Equestria. You probably would have given me up as soon as you were able, just like Twilight betrayed Fluttershy."

Pinkie Pie sighed. "You poor, foolish foal. You foalish fool. I have not been kissing their plots. I have simply been biding my time!"

"What do you mean, 'biding your time'? Do you plan to kill them?" Rainbow Dash lowered her wings and stood up.

"No." Pinkie Pie held out the syllable for a couple of seconds.

"Then what are you biding time for?" Rainbow Dash quirked a brow.

Pinkie Pie took a quick look around to make sure no one was listening, then she leaned closer to the bars of Rainbow Dash's cell. "The return of the gods," she whispered.

Rainbow Dash groaned and collapsed to her underside again. "Oh, Pinkie Pie, you have got to be kidding me!”

"No, trust me! I have been communicating with them.” Pinkie Pie held a hoof near her face and made a shifty-eyed expression. “The gods are real, and they are coming here. They want to end this pointless war. They plan to eradicate both sides and only spare those who are willing to join them!"

Rainbow Dash stood up and approached the bars, rolling her eyes. “Pinkie Pie, you are so random.”

"I’m not crazy! Please, for once believe in me!”

Rainbow Dash studied Pinkie's face. She still didn't believe her, but she could tell that by the look on Pinkie's face that she believed it. "Okay, just out of interest, how have you been communicating with 'the gods'?" She didn’t pretend to sound convinced.

Pinkie smiled as she believed she had the trust of her friend. "That was hard, but I found a ham radio that once belonged to the Changelings."

"The Changelings? What do they have to do with this?"

"Well, the Changelings called upon the gods for help. However, the gods saw them as the evil ones of our two sides, so they wiped them out for us.”

Rainbow Dash squinted hard. “No, Pinkie, we eliminated the Changelings. You, Twilight, Applejack, Fluttershy, Rarity and I. We helped destroy them.”

"No! No, you helped take out one of their last camps after we drove their queen out of Canterlot. The gods took out the rest. Celestia knew this, and she covered it up by saying it was a covert operation. She took the credit for winning the war!"

Rainbow Dash was feeling confused, yet intrigued. "Okay, so if they did eliminate the Changelings, then why did they not show themselves to us? I mean, they were here already, eh. Why didn't they just prove they existed?"

"Because they do not care who believes in their existence. They just care about maintaining the worlds they have created," said Pinkie Pie.

Rainbow Dash let out another sigh. Take a drink. "So when Celestia banished the practice and the further use of magic in Equestria, and when she told us all it was the gods who told her to do that, then she was telling the truth?" She was interested in seeing how far Pinkie Pie could drag this on for. “Why?”

"Because they foretold of our invasion on the human world," said Pinkie.

“What?” said Rainbow Dash. “No, why couldn’t we use magic? Not ‘why do the gods get to tell us what to do’. Twilight told me we had to do things the human way because we had to follow the rules of an alternate reality. She also said that Earth doesn’t possess the same natural forces that permit magic in Equestria. Something about a quantum flux mana field or some egghead hoof-waving explanation like that.”

"They said the magic would have gained us too quick a victory. That's why they did it. They wanted us to have a fair fight. Twilight was right, though. Think of the electromagnetic field that allows a compass to work. Earth doesn’t have the sort of thing that allows a unicorn’s horn to work.”

"Ugh. This is too hard to follow!” Rainbow Dash started crying again. “What do the gods care how we kill humans?”

"Because they created the humans too! They love us both equally and wanted to see which was the more powerful race!" Pinkie Pie beamed.

Rainbow Dash looked both confused and profoundly unhappy. "So we have the same gods as the humans? That’s not as crazy as loving us equally. If that’s the case, then why are they coming to 'eradicate' both our species? Have they thought this through at all?” By this point, even she was becoming interested in Pinkie Pie’s “fairy tale”.

Pinkie took a moment to clear her throat. "Well, you see, after watching over our war since it started, the gods realised that both our species had become too powerful, and so they believed that the victor would go on to develop the technology to space travel. As both our species have proven to be bloodthirsty and greedy, they foretold that we would try to overthrow them. If we developed any further, then we might succeed.”

Rainbow Dash frowned. “I wish Twilight was here, eh. She was much better at explaining this stuff, and contradicting it. The ponies only became bloodthirsty for the purpose of this war. That’s why we restructured our entire royal family. So these alien gods, who could hypothetically be killed by us, love us so much that they’re just going to kill us all?”

"No, not all. Those who join them will be spared, and will go on to lend aid to their new creation of life,” said Pinkie.

"New creation of life?" asked Rainbow Dash. “Why kill us if they’re just going to create new life?”

"Because they feel that even if they told us to not try to over throw them, that we would do it anyway due to our greedy and bloodthirsty nature. Once they eradicate us, they plan to make a more passive species and see how that evolves.”

Rainbow Dash half-lidded her eyes. “You keep saying ‘greedy and bloodthirsty’, Pinkie, and while that’s certainly true now, I’m just not feeling it simply because you repeat it. And anyways, how do they know that will work?"

"They don't. It's a trial and error thing. Apparently they have done it many times before. They just learn from their mistakes and move on."

Rainbow Dash had now had enough. There was something desperately important she needed to say in response to that, but she just couldn’t think of it. She was mentally fatigued after all the abuse she had faced, and she had to face that she just wasn’t as smart as Twilight had been. She wondered why the heck if Twilight was the smart one that she’d been killed first, and Rainbow Dash herself had survived for so long. She shook her head, until Twilight’s voice rang in her head. She was incensed at her own epiphany. "Wait a gosh darn minute there, Pinkie Pie. You’re saying that the Guardians create species, profess to love them, then make them fight to extinction, and the winners get killed off for being too strong? Well good luck to them, I guess. Sounds like they haven’t heard the definition of insanity.” She turned her back on Pinkie Pie and laid down on her side, waving a weak wing at her.

Pinkie Pie looked back down to the corridor which led to the cell. "Look, I probably should get to leaving now. I'll come back tomorrow when I’ve got more exposition!”

"No point. Two more days and I'll be dead."

"No, you won't. Please believe in me, my queen!”

"Pinkie Pie, just quit it. I am no longer your queen." said Rainbow Dash.

"You are and always have been the one true queen of Equestria. Hopefully the gods give you a title of equal importance when we join them in their mission!"

Rainbow Dash couldn't help smile at the kind words from her lifelong friend. “I doubt it’s gonna come to that, Pinkie Pie. However this war’s gonna turn out, I’m not gonna be around to see it. You will, since you don’t even do anything, just sit around and do bake cupcakes or whatever all day. I don’t even know where I’m gonna be buried. I don’t even know where I’m being kept prisoner. This sure doesn’t look like Canterlot’s dungeons to me.”

“Oh, but they’re not, silly!” Pinkie Pie smiled and opened a port hole on the wall at the end of the hall outside Rainbow’s cell. “We’re on the flagship of the Equestrian Zeppelin Armada that I built myself! See, I saw that our forces were running amok all over the world, taking on the likes of Cuba and Moscow the same as ever, getting ponies killed, so I thought to myself, what could this war use? More balloons! So I spent the whole past year building three massive dirigibles for the Equestrian forces to use!”

Rainbow Dash’s jaw dropped. She could just see a small oval of blue from her angle in the cell. Indeed, Pinkie Pie had constructed that which she said: Three enormous “dirigibles”, a word which here means “an air ship suspended by a massive balloon”. They hung in the air over Moscow, crafted with elongated balloons on top painted in fantastical imagery and carrying three ships of golden struts below. The flagship’s balloon looked like a well-decorated and whimsical whale. “Tell me, RD, do you prefer the word ‘zeppelin’ or ‘dirigible’?”

On the bridge of the Equestrian flagship, Kaiser Celestia sat on her throne, with Prince Blueblood to her left and Onyx to her right in what was once Rainbow Dash’s seat. His chainsaws were at his side, and his helmet had been taken to be repaired and modified. “I say,” said Blueblood, “Onyx, do you wear that mask to hide from ponies judging you for your ugliness?”

“I wear that mask,” Onyx said, “to judge others, because I’m used to looking through their veils! They’re all phonies, and I’m what’s real!”

"Speaking of such,” said Celestia, “I'm glad you found that hag out before she had a chance to kill any more of us!"

"When are we having her executed, Mother?" asked Blueblood.

"In a few days, after she has properly been seen to. Right now, I have two stallions down there showing her how cruel we can really be." responded Celestia.

"Good. She deserves it," said Blueblood with a smile. “Just like the Jews.”

Celestia turned to Onyx. "Tell me, Onyx, how did you know that she had killed Luna?"

Onyx cleared his throat and waved his hand, only too happy to lapse into his explanation. "Ah, that was easy. She was careful, I will give her that. She disposed of the two guards and the murder weapon by burying them with your daughter's body. It was almost impossible to find her, so I asked around to see if any of the residents of your town had seen her the night before Luna had gone missing. That is when I came across a pony who claimed she had seen Rainbow Dash and a pair of royal staff sneaking off into the hedge maze. She assumed they had some sort of affair going on, and she was happy to gossip about it. So I decided to check the hedges out. I wandered around for hours until I eventually found a part of the land that looked to have been recently disturbed. I went and got a shovel and dug up the land, and that is where I had found the bodies, as well as the murder weapon."

"I knew she was a jealous one, but I never thought her to be so monstrous," Blueblood said.

Celestia lowered her head. "We all never expected her to turn out this way. If we did, then I would have never accepted her into this family. She should have just listened to me when I told her Luna was better than her at everything, and that everything Rainbow Dash did reeked of failure. Then she wouldn't have gotten so jealous."

Two guards entered the bridge. "My Kaiser, Harbinger has arrived," said one of them.

"Send him in."

Onyx turned his head to Celestia. "Harbinger?" He did not recognize the name.

"While you were away, we were approached by someone who claimed to be a dragon. He showed a great skill in combat, so I sent him to deal with a real dragon who stalks our lands," Celestia explained.

"And is he a dragon?" asked Onyx.

"We shall see. If he managed to slay the beast which terrorised us, then I guess so. If not, then you can kill him."

Onyx gushed. "Oh, thank you, Mother. I should be glad to kill both him and the dragon should he fail."

The guards moved aside as Harbinger entered, still wearing the ragged robes that Celestia had given him. His face was masked by the hood, meaning Onyx could not recognize him on sight. He held his robe in his hands like a bowl that was clearly filled and clearly dripping blood. Celestia frowned at the mess this made of her good floor. "Have you completed your task?"

"I have!" Harbinger answered, trying to make his voice sound raspy and dramatic.

"Show, don't tell, Harbinger," Celestia said.

Harbinger pitched his robe forward, and Paragon's head rolled out. Its eyes and mouth were still open, and the skin was deathly pale. Blueblood squealed at the grotesque sight and scurried his legs onto his seat. Celestia signalled for the guards to collect the severed head, and Harbinger pulled his hood behind his head. Onyx leaned forward in his throne. "You have done well," Celestia began.

Onyx interrupted her. "Don't I know you?"

Everyone turned to look at Onyx. No one ever interrupted Kaiser Celestia. She did not like to be interrupted, but considering he was new to the throne, she decided to let it slide. Harbinger looked to Onyx and immediately realised who he was just by the armour and the sword. "No, I don't think so," he lied, dropping his raspy voice. "You are mistaken."

"No, I am pretty sure I do." Onyx now rose from his throne.

"Onyx, what are you going on about?" asked Celestia.

"I know this man," he said. "He was in Africa." Onyx reached for his dual chainsaws. "He attacked Makarov, and we fought. He took the other Black Box; the devices which create the gateway to this world."

"Please, you are mistaken," Harbinger said.

"If he is mistaken, then how did you even arrive in Canterlot?" asked Blueblood.

Harbinger's eyes went wide and he tried to desperately think of what he could say, but nothing was coming to mind. "That's a good point," said Celestia. Onyx started to move slowly towards Harbinger, who stammered uselessly. Celestia looked to the guards. "Seize him," she ordered them.

"That isn't a good idea. Remember what happened last seven times you tried that," Harbinger said.

"This time they got Onyx helping them," Celestia said.

Harbinger sighed. "Fucking ponies!" he hissed. The two guards charged at him. He dodged under the swing of one of the guards' bladed staves. The blade just narrowly missed him, so he spun on his heel to face them. The second guard stabbed

forward, but he dodged to the side and brought his dagger out from his robes. He swung it around at the second guard who just managed to dodge as the first made another attack. The first guard swung his blade down, but Harbinger leaped back to avoid it. Onyx had moved behind Harbinger and slashed across the back of his legs with both chainsaws. Harbinger let out a cry of pain after this sudden attack because it was painful, so much so that he dropped to his knees. Then both of the guards lunged forward with their bladed staves. Harbinger knocked the first guard's staff to the side with a swing of his dagger, but the second guard managed to stab his blade into Harbinger's rib cage. Harbinger Let Out a Cry of Pain™ as the guard tore his blade out from him. Onyx dropped the handle of his chainsaw down onto the back of Harbinger's head. Harbinger let out a growl as he fell face first to the cold marble floor.

Celestia let out a cheer and stomped her hooves in applause. "You weren't so good that time, were you? Hey? You went down with great ease!"

Onyx moved around to the front of Harbinger. "You will be the second dragon I have killed in the past few days."

Harbinger looked up to him. "Not today!" he roared. He stabbed his dagger down into Onyx's foot. Onyx Let Out a Cry of Pain™, and Harbinger leaped to his feet. The guards made quick attacks at him, but he managed to skirt their blades with the grace of a ballet dancer. He grabbed hold of the first guard's staff, and tore it from his grasp. The second guard then lunged forward. Harbinger used the first guard's staff to knock the second guard's staff aside before bringing up his weapon and slashing across the second guard's throat, slicing it open. The first guard dropped to the floor and scurried away.

"What are you doing? Kill him, you coward!"

Harbinger looked to her and hissed. "You stupid bitch! I warned you not to mess with me!" He threw the staff forward, and Celestia gasped as it came flying towards her.

"Mother, no!" Blueblood dove in front of her just in time for the staff to dig its way deep into his chest and tunnel its way through his gut. He dropped like a sack of potatoes. Celestia screamed out a big no as she watched her son's life expire before her very eyes. His very last words as he gaped at his blood-soaked hoof were, "Damn, I've soiled my cummerbund."

Onyx pulled the dagger out of his foot and charged towards Harbinger who was now rushing for the door and snagging Paragon's head on the way out. Onyx settled his chainsaws and did not give chase once Harbinger was gone. Instead, he turned to Celestia who was now on her knees, cradling the dead body of her son and sobbing. Blueblood had been the only one of the royal family who was actually a child of Celestia. That is why she kept him out of all the fighting: So that she could keep him safe, and now he was dead.

"My Kaiser," Onyx said, wanting to see if she was okay. "Mother?"

Celestia shot Onyx a cold stare and seethed at him. "You! You did this!"

"What? I did nothing!" said Onyx. "Nothing could be my fault!"

"You let him take my colt!" she cried. This is when ten more guards came rushing onto the bridge after hearing all the commotion. "Seize him! He did this! I want his head!" she commanded. "Kill him!"

"Yes, my Kaiser," said the guards as they moved to Onyx.

Onyx shook his head and sighed. "After everything I have done for you." Once again, he drew and revved his pair of chainsaws. "Come, then. Who wishes to die first?"

All ten of the guards raised their staffs. "Stick together! He can't take us all!" ordered one of the guards.

Onyx shook his head. "Cowards! That's what all you ponies are! Treacherous cowards! Bravery would be to face me one on one!" The guards moved in a single-file line towards Onyx, their staves ready, and their minds focused. "Come on, then! Try it! I'll kill you all!" snapped Onyx. Once close enough, the guards all stabbed forward. Onyx swung one growling chainsaw across, knocking three of the staves out of the way so that they stabbed past him. The other seven found their way into his legs and his torso. Onyx didn't like his legs to be touched, and he collapsed to the floor instantly, dropping his weapons. The guards tore their staves from him before stabbing again. He let out a gasp as his chest was filled with the blades of all ten guards at once. They then tore the blades from him once again like they were playing the xylophone.

"Have him put in prison and revived! I want him to suffer!" Celestia barked through her tears, still rocking Blueblood's corpse in her front hooves. The guards nodded and grabbed hold of Onyx's body to drag him away. Yet another betrayal had found itself amongst the Equestrian army. This only meant that Celestia's number of enemies were rising, and her list of allies found itself shrinking. This would soon become a lot of trouble for her and her ponies.

Rainbow Dash awoke from a cell door slamming to find a surprise awaiting her in the opposite cell to her. She even had to rub her eyes just to make sure she wasn't seeing things. When there was no doubt that her eyes weren't deceiving her, she crawled to the bars of her prison cell and spoke. "Well, well, look who we have here!" Onyx was in the opposite cell and was

facing her. He remained silent and just stared at her. “What happened?” she asked. “Did you get betrayed, too? Did you get sentenced to death? Well, good! I hope you fucking rot, you bastard!” Onyx tilted his head to the side so she would know he was choosing to ignore her. This infuriated Rainbow Dash. She stood and slammed her front hooves against the bars of her cell. The bars let out a ring as they shuddered under the force she placed upon then. “Answer me, you sick fuck!” she demanded. Believe it or not, Onyx gave a chuckle. “Oh, you think this is funny? I will fucking kill you for what you did! You hear me, you sick fuck? I will kill you!” Rainbow Dash's voice was so loud that it echoed through the corridors.

Onyx straightened his head and cleared his throat. “Has anyone told you that you are cute when you’re angry?”

Rainbow Dash gave him a look of disbelief. She could not believe how calm he sounded given his current predicament, nor that he wasn't even showing a shred of remorse for what he had done. “You're evil! You will pay for what you did to my child!”

“You think you scare me?” asked Onyx.

Rainbow Dash shook her head slowly. “No, you’re too stupid to be scared. You’re so scared of dropping your tough guy exterior you have to hide behind a mask most days. You’re worse than me! But you will be scared. One of these days, you will fear me.”

“One of these days? I doubt you have more than two left.” Onyx chuckled again at the fact Rainbow Dash would die.

“You will die for what you did! I swear it! Even if I have to get you from the afterlife, I will have my revenge.”

Onyx laughed loudly and tilted his head back, looking up at the ceiling of his cell. “Oh, you mortal beings. Human or pony, you all are so naïve. Take it from someone who has died countless times, there is no life after death. There are no gods or angels or devils and demons to greet you upon the shores of the afterlife. There is nothing but darkness! An eternal darkness in which you just slip into, never to be seen again.” Onyx looked back to Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow Dash held back her tears. She could just picture her unborn child now, lost and afraid in a pit of darkness, robbed of any chance of life. A tear managed to escape despite her best efforts, and it rolled down her cheek. She bit down on her lip and shook her head. “Yeah, well, the way you and Celestia act, you both think you’re a god. I’ll find a way, though. That much I can promise you, eh.” Her voice cracked slightly.

Onyx chuckled again. “I'm sure you will,” he said, sounding unconvinced.

The door at the end of the corridor opened up, and two highly-noted Queen's guards came strolling in. Rainbow Dash looked through her cell bars and could recognize one of the guards as a stallion named Steel Hooves. He was in charge of the Queen's guard. Although Rainbow Dash had never seen him herself, she knew it was him by his famous blade arm. This was a genetic mutation which was very rare among the ponies. When the ponies first made the serum that gave themselves human arms so they could handle weapons, which had not been mentioned since the reign of Twilight, one of Steel Hooves’ arms became deformed and turned into a steel blade instead of an arm. This was said to be because of his steel hooves, but nopony really knew why.

Rainbow Dash looked to Onyx and smiled. “They are coming for you. You’re going to die, you bastard!”

Onyx grinned under his mask. “We shall see.”

Steel Hooves stopped in between Rainbow Dash's and Onyx's cells. He looked to Rainbow Dash and nodded. “Celestia wants her,” he said. The second guard unlocked Rainbow Dash’s cell.

Rainbow Dash leapt to the back wall in fear. “What? Why does she want me?”

The guards opened the cell door and moved in towards Rainbow Dash. “Hurry up. Celestia wants this over and done with quickly,” said Steel Hooves.

“No, please! What's happening?” Rainbow Dash asked. The guard grabbed her by the foreleg, turned her around, and slammed her to the wall.

“You execution has been moved to today, as your brother's funeral will be on the original day,” he explained poorly whilst manacling Rainbow Dash.

“What? No, this can't be! Please don't!” Tears streamed from Rainbow Dash’s eyes. She was in serious danger of dehydration by this point.

“Sorry. Orders are orders,” said the guard.

“Stop talking to her, and get moving!” Steel Hooves snapped.

The guard pulled Rainbow Dash from the cell, and she continued to beg. “No, please! Please, no, not now! Please not now! No, not now, please, no, no, not now, please, please, no, please, not now, please, not now, not now, no no, not now!” Suffice it to say, the guard continued to drag her until they were in the corridor.

Onyx had, by this point, climbed to his feet and removed his mask. Rainbow Dash's eyes met with his disfigured face as she was started to be pulled down the corridor. He gave her a creepy grin. He looked like a child showing off chewed food. “Before you die, just remember what I said, and know you will have no revenge, no satisfaction for what I did to your unborn child. I killed it, and I enjoyed it.”

Rainbow Dash screamed and kicked, but it was no use. All she could do was be led to her death, and hope something or somepony would intervene. “No, please! Please, not now! Not now!” Rainbow Dash failed to shut the fuck up all the while Steel Hooves and the unimportant guard, probably named Tough Guy or something like that, struggled with her up the stairs to the upper decks of the flagship.

“Shut up!” barked Steel Hooves. If only he’d said it to Onyx as well, then he’d be all set.

At least, he would be if either were inclined to obey him. “No! Please! Please, I didn't do it! None of it! I swear! Please don't let me die for something I had no part in!” Rainbow Dash’s uncharacteristic lies were beyond tiresome, just as Onyx’s threats were tiresome, Celestia’s ignorance was tiresome, and so much death was tiresome. It really would have been a relief, at this point, for her to just lay down and die, and you might be feeling the same, but there really is only a bit more than one chapter left in this leg of the war. One more chapter, and another final, concluding book.

Steel Hooves stopped and took his one actual hand off of Rainbow Dash’s arm. Despite being physically tortured for some time now, Rainbow Dash chose to see this as a glimmer of hope, because when you yammer on endlessly about something non-stop, that *usually* means someone has caved in. Either that or she should change her name to Railroad Dash because she was being set up for another cruel joke at her expense. “Oh, thank you.” She sighed with relief. Steel Hooves then used his one good hand to deliver a very harsh and disorienting slap to Rainbow Dash's face that was both harsh and disorienting. She squealed and fell to her knees. She didn’t think the abuse was very funny anymore.

“I said, ‘shut the buck up!’” Steel Hooves grabbed her by her mane like a French dancer and dragged her up the stairs. Rainbow Dash cried louder and sobbed as now she was not only in pain, but also being led to her death. Which you could have said about the last hour of this ordeal, really. The scene protracted itself further as she wept like a Vaudevillian performance. She resumed saying “please” and “you have to believe me” even though she’d long since demonstrated herself as a doer rather than a crier. She wailed and shook her hooves, she blubbered and quaked, and no end was in sight for the floods of tears that streamed from her reddened eyes.

The guard who was helping Steel Hooves stopped. Steel Hooves turned to him with a bitter anger, which seemed to be the default mode of Equestrians these days. “What are you doing?” he shouted.

Tough Guy looked to Rainbow Dash and shrugged. “Well, what if she is telling the truth?”

“So what if she is?” Steel Hooves asked. “We have orders from Celestia! Orders we must fulfil! My god, I’m only fifty years from retirement, but I’ll be damned to have a black mark on my record like a failed execution! And I get it, Tough Guy. I get that you’re tired of your tough guy exterior. So help me, so am I. God damn it, I get tired of this job sometimes, too, but it’s not about your or me. It’s not even about our commitment to duty. If doing our jobs proves to be some kind of outrageous mistake, then it’s those who grant those orders that have to choke on the repercussions. Do you understand me, Tough Guy?”

“But, sir, she might be innocent,” said Tough Guy, implying that Equestrians were deeply invested in right and wrong. “Isn’t a strictly deontological morality conducive to a more sceptical theory of ethics, under which what is ethical is dependent upon an arbitrary authority?”

Steel Hooves frowned. “Are you focusing your logic on the outcomes of an action, or the motivations behind them? Either way, what qualifies an action as ‘good’ beyond the purview of an authoritarian dictation? That may be ethical subjectivism, but Kantianism suggests that inherent qualities we may define as ‘good’ fail to be intrinsically good. Being smart, for example, doesn’t make you a good person, because plenty of smart people use their intellect to exploit dumber people. Look at Rainbow Dash, for example. She knew what she did to Queen Luna, and she chose to conceal that truth from the rest of us.”

“If you want to discuss objectivism,” Tough Guy said, “then we can’t say that either of us know for certain that Rainbow Dash murdered her. We’re just taking that on faith from what other ponies have said. I’m not disagreeing with Kant, but we don’t necessarily know what intellect really is. It’s like ephemera, or qualia, and still up for debate. After all, people can fake intelligence with confidence. All one has to do is act like they know what they’re talking about, even unwittingly, even with good intentions, and the listener more often than not eat it up.”

“Ethics isn’t the be-all-end-all of reality. At the risk of digressing into utilitarianism, you and I still need to consider the consequences if we don’t follow through on our actions. If we refuse to bring Rainbow Dash to be executed—stop crying, geez!

Call yourself a Junior Speedster?—then we face disciplinary action, and in our fascist regime, it's not uncommon for death to be that punitive response. We were hired because our roles provide utility in our society. Therefore, it is not unthinkable that should you or I be incapable of fulfilling our duties, say, because of our untimely demises, we would be replaced. Due to the uncertainty principle, as cannot guarantee that our ethical actions will remain in future, because our replacements may very well decide to bring the prisoner to her execution."

"Right, I think I see where you're going with this," said Tough Guy. "Next you're going to ask me which is better, letting a train run down six immobilised ponies, or diverting it along a track that will run down only one immobilised pony. Is that right?"

"At any rate, neither of us are likely to be performing the actual execution itself. What we're neglecting here is the ethical obligation of the executioner. But like I said, who cares? Orders are orders," said Steel Hooves. "And don't even get me started on philosophical zombies."

"In that case, we'd still have to perform an unethical action and live with it. I'm still not sure if I'm comfortable with that," said Tough Guy.

Rainbow Dash could see the guard was feeling sorry for her and was buying in to her lies, so she decided to play on it. She wrapped herself around Tough Guy's back left hoof. After her beatings, it was all she could really do. In her own, weak way, she was still fighting. "Yes! Yes, please, I'm innocent. Don't let him take me! Please, oh god, please!" she sobbed.

The guard looked down at her and his heart weighed heavy. "Hey, hey. Don't get me wrong, I reject divine command theory. I'm just saying, there's an unmitigated uncertainty principle here." He then looked back to Steel Hooves and shook his head. "Sir, we can't. We can't do this. She is innocent. She even said so."

"Oh? Really? Are you sure?" asked Steel Hooves with a hint of sarcasm in his tone, in case you couldn't tell because you were too busy reading through your role-play Tumblr Asks. "Is that your final answer?"

"Yes, sir, I am. We can't do this. I won't take her out there to die for crimes she did not commit." responded the guard.

"Thank you!" gasped Rainbow Dash as she thought she was now going to be set free. She must have taken a few heavy blows to the head if she really believed that. As Kevin Spacey might say, even a baby who was stupid and dumb could see that.

"Oh, so you're refusing to follow an order given to you by the Kaiser herself?" asked Steel Hooves.

Tough Guy thought for about five minutes straight, smacking his lips and saying "um" and "er" a lot. "I am, sir, and I think you should, too."

"Oh? Really? You think I should?"

"Yes."

"You think that I should."

"Pretty sure."

"You're pretty sure about that?"

"Yep."

"You think I should give up doing my job."

"I, uh. Wait, hold on, let me think it over for a sec. Yes. Yes, definitely."

"Oh, well, let me give you a suitable reply." Steel Hooves then stabbed into Tough Guy's face with his bladed arm. He punctured cleanly inwards, leaving a stupid, cross-eyed grin on the other stallion's face. Rainbow Dash screamed as blood fountained out of the guard's face and rained down onto her face and rushed down into her open mouth.

"You see what you did, you lying, deceiving whore? Try to tell me you didn't do it one more time, and I promise you I will cut out your tongue!" Steel Hooves waved his blade towards Rainbow Dash's throat. "Jesus H. Christ, don't make me kill you before I bring you off to get killed." Rainbow Dash shut her mouth and sobbed once again as Steel Hooves dragged her up the steps and right into the flagship's bridge room where Celestia was waiting with Pinkie Pie.

Pinkie Pie flailed a limb at Rainbow Dash in an elated greeting. "Hiya, Rainbow Dash!"

Celestia shot Pinkie Pie a cold and unforgiving stare. "This is a traitor to our race, Pinkie Pie."

"What are you doing with her?" asked Pinkie with a concerned tone, which was also apparent because her question itself was concerned.

“Pinkie, help me! Help me, please!” sobbed Rainbow Dash. “Implicate yourself in aiding and abetting me like that last guard did!”

“I said shut up!” Steel Hooves shouted, almost using the Royal Canterlot Voice™ as he used his bladed hand to deliver a more painful blow to the side of Rainbow Dash’s head. Like a sassy bully vying for attention, Rainbow Dash started hooting and hollering as she threw her front limbs into the air and fell to the floor. A fresh cut formed straight across her cheek. Pinkie Pie shuddered at the display, either from revulsion at violence, or from the humiliating theatrics that had gone on long enough.

“I am moving her execution to today. Is that a problem?” Celestia asked.

Pinkie Pie looked back to Rainbow Dash who was sobbing, and then looked back to Celestia. “Well, it is a bit quick to get a cake baked, but I did bring ingredients with me! Sometimes I like to make the cupcakes in my mouth. They taste better!”

“Pinkie, please! I can’t take any more gas lighting!” Rainbow Dash sobbed.

Celestia looked to a pale green pegasus mare standing not too far away. This pegasus was named Final Exit, and her cutie mark looked like a gallows, so you can guess what *her* special talent was going to be, and it wasn’t that she was a three-time winner in the spelling bee championships. Final Exit was polishing a huge scimitar. She held it aloft and sliced it clean through a length of twine holding a guillotine in place. The guillotine blade descended with a cool “shunk!” that snapped off the wooden lock of an intricate puzzle box that began clicking its gears into place. The trunk sprang open, and Final Exit reached inside and pulled out a German Luger. She stepped within arm’s length of Rainbow Dash, cocked the weapon, and unsteadily aimed it at her while sticking her tongue out of the side of her mouth.

Steel Hooves pulled Rainbow Dash up onto her knees and yanked her head back so that her eyes were in line with the barrel of the handgun. “Hey. Aim at her. At *her,”* he said, since he was pretty close, holding her in place like that.

Fear dug deeper into Rainbow Dash and she let out a scream. If you were to guess that the next words out of her mouth would be, “No! Mother, please! Don't do this,” then you would be absolutely goddamn correct.

“Silence! You killed Luna, your own sister, and after I’ve been telling you for years how wonderful and precious she is, and what a cataclysmic abomination you are by comparison. I haven’t been telling *all* of Equestria what a disappointment you are just for you to kill her out of some petty envy. Now you must die!” said Celestia. She noticed that Pinkie couldn't watch this go on any longer, and was looking away. “Hold up,” Celestia said.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, lawdy!” Rainbow Dash was tricked into thinking that after having been told a hundred thousand times she was a failure, having murdered Luna, having been outed for it and imprisoned and tortured and led on a very slow walk up here and told numerous times she would die, that maybe they’d all change their minds and release her on her way.

“Shut up, you stupid nag! You’re still going to die!” said Celestia, cake-eater. A big Grinch-style grin wrought its way along her snout. “Let Pinkie do it.”

Pinkie jumped slightly. “What? Why me?” she asked.

“Because I need you to prove you’re on our side,” said Celestia, who was needing that from a lot of ponies these days. Final Exit scoffed at being robbed of her one job to do, but she gave the gun to Pinkie anyway.

“Please, Pinkie! Please, no!” gasped Rainbow Dash.

“I'm sorry,” said Pinkie as she raised the Luger. The Royal Orchestra was off in the corner of the room, and their cello and tuba and harp jammed out a few jolting sounds of suspense.

Would Pinkie Pie do it? Would she turn a gun on her friend? Would Onyx really be executed by the Equestrians? Would Daniel give up leadership of the Human Resistance? What of Nick Bronson and Fidel Castro? Would Ivan Matskevich ever stop drinking? Find out immediately on the next sentence of Haich Versus P: The Thirdly! No, no, one can hope, it looks like it, be patient, and don’t hold your breath.

“No! Please, no!” screamed Rainbow Dash.

“Do it,” ordered Celestia.

“No! Don't! Please!” wailed Rainbow Dash.

“I said, do it!” demanded Celestia with impatience.

“No! Please! No!”

“Do it now!”

“Please, no, no!”

"Do it *now!"*

"No no no nonono no no!"

"Do *it!"*

"Please, please, don't, please!"

"Do it *now!"*

Pinkie was having trouble focusing, mainly because of her attention-deficit hyperactive disorder. She closed her eyes. "Guardians, watch over me," she muttered to herself. Pinkie the opened her eyes because that made it easier to aim, and pointed the gun at Rainbow Dash.

Rainbow Dash flailed her arms. "Please, Pinkie, look at me! Don't do this! No, wait, I mean *don't* look at me, 'cause you have a gun!"

Pinkie shrugged her shoulders. "I have to," she whispered. She aimed up towards Steel Hooves and squeezed the trigger. The gun let out a bark and a bullet struck Steel Hooves in the shoulder. He let out a cry and fell back screaming. Before anyone could even react, Pinkie aimed her gun to the only other guard in the room and pulled the trigger twice. Two bullets struck him in the chest, and he collapsed to the floor, dead. Then she turned and aimed her weapon at Celestia.

"You bucking traitor," Celestia said. "I should have known. I should have had you garrotted!"

"I didn't want it to go down like this," said Pinkie. "I'd rather get down, party-style! But, it wouldn't have made a difference. The Guardians are coming. You would have died anyway." Pinkie squeezed the trigger a final time, and Celestia let out a squawk before a bullet dug its way into her skull, leaving a smoking crater. When Pinkie Pie rushed over to Rainbow Dash, Celestia struggled to get up again, grapping for the Black Box with her front hooves, but she dropped and went very still.

Rainbow Dash slumped over onto the ground and finally stopped crying after countless chapters of this behaviour. "Thank you," she gasped.

"Come on, we got to go!" Pinkie Pie said, helping her to her hooves.

"What? Why?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"Because they will want us dead for this! Trust me!"

"But where will we go?" asked Rainbow Dash.

"I built these balloons, Dashy, remember? Follow me!"

Onyx came to the realization that he was alone in that prison corridor, and he'd been there quite a long while with nothing happening. This made him angry, because all he could see was his own cell and the space beyond the barred door. He could not see the war. He could not hear the war. Because he was Onyx, that meant that the war was not happening. It could not be happening if he was not there to make it exist. *I am, therefore they are*, he thought to himself. *Everything in reality is limited as I see it.* And then he heard the gunshots. They were faint, and the zeppelin was hissing and thrumming, but he could still hear them, and he wondered what could have caused them. There was no mistaking they were gunshots, he knew, so it came as a great offense to him that some external force was defying the laws of the universe that belonged to him.

Onyx had been examining the bars of the his cell as he meditated on the actuality of nihilism. He found them to be of weak pony construct, and not nearly as good as anything he could make himself. They'd taken away his weapons and the last of his injections, so he sidled up to the bars and gripped them in preparation of pulling them open with his superior brute strength. Before he could accomplish this, and he was so sure that he would, he heard the clattering of hooves at the bottom of the stairs. "Guard! Guard, I order you to tell me what's going on out there!" He knew it was the guard, because Steel Hooves' blade arm was scraping against the floor.

The blade could be heard scraping in Onyx's direction, banging against the bars as Steel Hooves approached. His shoulder was pouring with blood. He entered the field of Onyx's view with a dour expression. "Where are those fool injections of yours that Pinkie Pie used to make for you?" he asked. "You must have smuggled some in. I'm wounded!"

"Free me from this cell, and I'll show you," said Onyx, knowing the weak and stupid pony would give what he wanted.

Steel Hooves gave him a long stare. "Is that really all you want, traitor?" He was wise to be suspicious.

"I did want to kill every last one of you fuckers for betraying me over fuck all, but that just seems too impractical and time-consuming. On the other hand, I did ask what's been going on without me," he said.

“Pinkie Pie happened. She was ordered to shoot Rainbow Dash, but turned the gun on us instead. She killed the other guard and even shot the Kaiser, just to help that betrayer escape.”

Onyx chuckled. “Only momentarily, should I depart from here. I expect she will come down for a bit of old-fashioned revenge. It will not go in her favour. For a former Queen, she is not a formidable pony. Let me out, and I shall claim her head.”

Steel Hooves hesitated for a moment longer, then unlocked Onyx’s cage. Onyx banged the gate back on its hinges and battered the stallion with the door. He then stepped out and gave him a swift kick to roll him onto his back, then stomped onto his bladed arm to weigh him down. “My blarm!” Steel Hooves said. “Buck you!”

“Come on, now, is there really any need for that language?”

“If you’re going to kill me, then just do it already, you cur! I am prepared to die with honour.”

“There is no honour in death, fool. And anyway, what gives you the impression I’m going to kill you? Unless, that is, you refuse to tell me how many ponies know of Celestia flipping out and branding me a traitor.”

“Uh, five. Well, four, now.”

“And do you know their names and where they live?” Onyx asked, cracking his knuckles. Steel Hooves thought about it and nodded in response. Onyx smiled beneath his mask. “Good. Now, what we are going to do is simple: You are going to give me their names and where I can find them, and I am going to go kill them, sparing your life, of course. Then, as the only living member left of this so-called 'royal family', I am going to take control of your people, your armies, so on so forth, and as a result of your co-operation, I will promote you. How does a general sound?”

Steel Hooves thought about that too, but it took him less time. “Sounds perfect.”

“Good.” Onyx took his foot off of Steel Hooves’ blade arm and stalked off down the prison corridor. He took his personal belongings from the chest where they kept the prisoner's items. “Time to get out of here,” Onyx said, heading up the stairs to the bridge. “You get writing down those names. I got a few witnesses to kill, right after I dispose a couple of corpses into Equestria. Then go get yourself patched up. You’re not injured enough to deserve my medicine. First, we announce the sad news to the rest of the fleet, and I present myself as your new leader. Your promotion will quickly follow.” Onyx took off his mask and gave a creepy grin to nobody but himself. “I always wanted an army of my own. Now no one will be able to stop me. No one!”

Chapter Forty-Eight.

Two weeks’ notice. Atomic energy. I want to ride in my beautiful balloon. Twenty minutes to Belarus.

“So how do we actually deploy this thing?” Ivan asked. The key members of the Human Resistance at the terminus were gathered in the conductor’s office where they were examining the nuclear device: Ivan, Daniel, Tyrone, Yuri and Chrissie were there.

Chrissie shrugged helplessly. “We were expecting your science division could help take care of things. I can’t get over losing contact with Cuba.”

Tyrone read aloud from a small instructional booklet on nuclear arms he’d found in the filing cabinet. “Do not pour Tang into your nuclear device. Do not insert anything smaller than your elbow into the nuclear device. Look both ways when crossing the street before carrying the nuclear device.”

“Does it say anything about dropping it? I could get one of my jets to fly over a pony base and dump it on them,” Ivan said. “Otherwise we might be up a nuclear waste suppository without a uranium rod. The closest we’ve got to scientists in Minsk are infrastructural engineers. There is one man we’ve had our eyes on, but he’s been notoriously tricky to get a hold of.”

Daniel was sceptical. “We should probably worry about finding the best place in Equestria to deploy it first.”

“Look who’s all gung-ho all of a sudden,” Ivan said. “Finding Equestria’s just a pipe dream. We’d have better luck just cracking this thing open and seeing how it works. Anybody got a can opener?”

Daniel looked at the device and wondered if Nick would have known anything about it. He was good with tools, but he was no nuclear physicist as far as he knew. The object had a grey, metallic casing in the shape of an American football that had grown fat on a decade’s diet of pork rinds and stuck fins onto one end of itself. There was a blank panel that looked as if it might be an LCD, and some buttons that looked risky to press. There were also a few bumper stickers written in Spanish plastered on it, one of which said, “¿Usted quiere cuando?”

Ivan had been spending his inspection unscrewing the top of the casing against the better judgment of the others in the room who were surprised he even had the right sort of screwdriver for it. “Hold onto your butts, ladies and germs,” he said.

“I don’t think you should do that,” Yuri said. He said it right before a loud explosion went off.

Or rather, a series of loud explosions. Fireworks banged and popped from the inside of the casing, blowing straight up into the plenum ceiling and wreaking it up a treat, burning and snapping it into pieces. Everybody in the room flung themselves in all directions, with Ivan ducking under the table, and Tyrone and Chrissie wasting little time in pushing the filing cabinets in front of themselves. Yuri actually tried to slip out the door, and Daniel was stuck between there and hiding behind one of the chairs. When the blinding, colourful lights abated, there still remained a spectacle for each of them to gawk at, because none of them expected, nor was used to the freakish, hodgepodge of assorted mutant features that was Discord.

“Rumours of my death have been greatly exaggerated!” he announced, the hideous draconequus flexing his arms like a professional weightlifter.

“What is it? Do we kill it?” Chrissie asked. Ivan and Daniel had already drawn their weapons.

“What death? You were supposed to be dead?” Yuri asked.

Discord looked shocked, but not at the guns. He looked shocked at Yuri’s question. Then he looked insulted, still ignoring the threat of pain around him. “I know you people haven’t been following the plot around here, instead busy with your silly little sieges and your silly little guns, but some of us have been working very hard at putting an end to this simply horrid war. Not that that would interest you folks, I’m sure.” Ivan put a slug right into the back of Discord’s head. Discord let out an annoyed, “Ow?” and put his claws on his hips.

“Ivan, it’s okay! His name’s Discord. He’s eccentric, to say the least, but he helped us out in Moscow,” Yuri said.

“It’s true,” Tyrone told Daniel. “When Irish and I were in the Silverbacks, there was this guy, helping us fight the ponies.”

Chrissie, Daniel and Ivan lowered their weapons, although Ivan kept a tight hold on his own. “He’s bulletproof,” he complained.

“So’s that thick head of yours, I’m sure,” Discord snapped. “Irish. Irish. Oh, I know, that’s your friend with the Scottish accent, isn’t he? Wait, no, he’s from Ireland. If only there was some way of keeping track of that. I bumped into him recently.”

“Where’s the nuclear device, Discord?” Daniel asked. “Give it back!”

“Pfft, you don’t want that old thing.” Discord fluttered his wings and drifted to the floor where he proceeded to exit the office with the humans in tow. “If all goes according to my plan, we’ll have access to something far more versatile and potent than some silly old atomic mushroom cloud.” As he exited the office, the five humans surrounded him like a prisoner escort, although Discord behaved like a bigshot business executive ordering his cronies around. He ignored the refugees who gasped in fright at his inhuman, downright Equestrian appearance. Chrissie, Tyrone and Yuri tried to assure everyone that everything was under control, although their group needed more convincing.

“If you don’t tell us where the nuke is,” Daniel said, “we will be forced to execute you.”

“Daniel, relax, let me handle this.” Ivan stuck his arm out to hold Daniel at bay. “Discord, if you don’t tell us where the nuke is, we will be forced to execute you.”

Discord’s eyes twinkled as if he’d just remembered a very funny drollery, and his leer turned up his face like a wicked, upside-down scowl. “The nuke is rigged to detonate, and only I know where it’s hidden. I’ll deactivate it if you all agree to lend me your ears. Not literally, of course. I’m sure they weren’t designed to pop off like mine do!” He waggled his eyebrows at them, but the humans agreed they had little option but to listen. That didn’t stop them from ordering their subordinates to search the premises of the terminus.

“Do any of you know a rather disarming, standoffish fellow by the name of Onyx? Well, more dis-heading, really. He’s kind of a bag of twats, but whatever he is, he is most certainly inhuman. More inhuman than the ponies, in fact.”

“How long is this countdown?” Tyrone asked.

“Very well, since you’re impatient, I’ll cut to the chase. The Equestrians are on their way here in a fleet of blimps and are prepared to bomb you all to smithereens. Onyx, the leader of the attack on Moscow, is bound to be aboard, and with the help of one of your associates, we can hijack the vessels to turn the fleet against itself. If I can bring him to justice, I can rob Equestria of its most formidable weapon.”

Objections were had all around, particularly by Ivan who talked over everyone else. “What are you talking about? What do you mean, bring Onyx to justice?”

“I’m sorry, I thought you were all pressed for time.” Discord pointed at Tyrone accusingly.

“Please just tell us where the nuke is!” Chrissie said.

“Oh, you’re in no danger. It’s safe. I’m keeping it as collateral,” said Discord.

“If Onyx led the attack,” Daniel said, “he is responsible for my father’s murder. He should just be executed.”

Discord leaned away from Daniel as if to condescend to a piece of historical pottery, as if he comprehended the significance about him, but shared no empathy. “Is that how you do things here on Earth? Brute savagery? If you five join me as my band of Merry Men (and her), you’ll more than likely get your chance to end Onyx’s life.”

“You said blimps?” Ivan asked. “I need to get back to Belarus and mobilise our air force.”

“You have an air force?” Daniel shouted, and this time it was not him alone who was shouting. Yuri was upset as well.

“We have a chopper and a couple of Lockheed Martins,” Ivan said. “Not much else, but we needed to keep dragons off our back porch, too.”

“If we’re going to get a chopper up there to board, you’re going to need all the distractions you can get against their weaponry,” Discord said.

“Can’t you fly?” asked Yuri.

“Oh, yes, I’ll just carry each of you up one by one and beat my little wings. Very well, which of you weighs the least?”

“Why do we need to go through this nonsense? Just give us the nuke back and we’ll launch it at them!” Daniel said.

“I don’t do things that way,” said Discord. “Besides, this fleet is a pittance compared to Equestria’s capital city of Canterlot. I have an even better surprise in store for you.” By this time, their procession had arrived at Chrissie’s truck. Discord stood beside the back door, then tugged on the lever which locked it down. He shoved the door upwards in one motion, and two figures emerged from the back of the vehicle: Two figures who had been cooped up for a very long time, and were both fairly malnourished given their advanced years. “I had this delivered to me not long ago. I hope you like them.”

Pope John Paul II and Fidel Castro stood at the back edge of the truck and looked around like two cats that had been brought to the vet. It took a while of holding shocked and confused expressions before the ad hoc heads of the Human Resistance could express their annoyance. “You kidnapped Fidel Castro!” Chrissie said.

“You kidnapped some sort of wizard!” said Ivan, who received odd looks. “Well why’s he dressed like that?”

The pope, of course, was dressed in long, white papal robes and a mitre, which is a sort of tall, pointed hat. Fidel Castro was dressed in his typical green fatigues and that damn hat he refused to take off even in his sleep. These weren’t the most outlandish aspects of their outfits, however. Both were wearing big, padded boxing gloves. Thinking this was the first thing that Ivan and the others had noticed, Discord explained. “It’s not getting up into the airships that’s the really tricky part,” he began. “Provided we can dodge their weapons like an electric rodent on command, we can parachute down from above, I can fly one of you up in my oh-so romantic embrace, or if your associate on board is swift enough in the cerebrum, he can lower down a really long rope ladder for you to climb. The issue is getting those blimps to find this squalid little train station and come to us.”

Discord then whipped out what looked like a garage door opener, a device that resembles a television remote but typically has only one button to operate a garage door. The walls of the lorry’s semi-trailer unfolded into a wide platform, complete with blinding stage lights. “That’s why I’ve arranged a boxing match between these two icons of pop culture. The spectacle is sure to pique the envy of the Equestrians!”

“Chrissie, where did you find that truck?” Tyrone asked her.

“It was the only one at the docks that didn’t have the gas siphoned,” she said.

“Get those damn lights off!” Ivan shouted, but the match had already begun.

Fidel and the pope were prancing about the stage that had been the lorry carriage, brandishing their boxing gloves by twirling their fists in front of themselves. Discord had procured a megaphone and was shouting into it as crowds of refugees gathered around to view the spectacle. “In the taupe corner, we have the resplendent reverend, the father of fisticuffs, the pope of pugilism, the seller of sacrament, the one and only president of Christendom, his holiness, Pope! John Paul! The Second! And in the beige corner, a capital communist. A man with a bushy beard, a boner for America, and a jalopy of jilted journalists! The dictatorial dynamo and cancer aficionado, all the way here from the Cajun island of Cuba, Fidel! Alejandro! Castro! Ruz! Round one, fight!”

“Your Holiness, I thought you were dead,” Fidel said to John Paul. “It’s been a long time, but we’ve no need for religion once we’re Red. I’d’ve thought you’d be at home in your castle, while I’m keeping my regime afloat and dodging

assassins; it's such a hassle. So tell me this, please, why are you down on your knees when you could be saving lives like me, promoting socialist health care to fight disease?"

"I'm Pope John Paul, peace as two Beatles," said the pope to Fidel. "Just ask the Ladies in White and Juliet Diaz. Now I believe in repentance, but isn't it sad how your political prisons work on rubber bands? It took a trip to a labour camp for you to see that homosexuals are people like you or me. We're just protecting our patent on marriage. Now you're schilling out rights if the profits are above average."

"Why the hell are they doing this? Mr. Castro, please stop!" Chrissie said.

"They'd only forsake their sensibilities if they were under the effects of the pony obedience toxin," Tyrone said in a hushed voice. "They must not be in control over their own actions."

Daniel's face went hot. HE didn't wish to bring up what had been conveniently swept under the rug in case there were still doubts as to his allegiance. Still, he rounded on Discord. "Did you use that on them?" he asked. "That is despicable! Do not think we would not hesitate to shoot you!"

By this moment, Fidel and the pope had already come to blows, and it was irrelevant to say who had thrown the first punch. Despite their ages, the two wizened men were having a proper beat down to some loud music that seemed to come from all around. Cher's "Half-Breed" was playing at full volume when Jimmy Walsh approached Daniel at that time with an urgent message. "Sir, it's just been radioed in that a fleet of zeppelins of all things have been sighted over Moscow. They've turned in this direction, and all indications point to them being Equestrian in design."

"Can this day get any worse?" Yuri asked.

"Dammit, I'm mobilising the Belarusian air force," said Ivan. "Send your best pilots with me straight away. We probably don't have the firepower, so we'll be going with the mutant freak's plan of parachuting in. Ms. Marques, Chrissie, whatever your name is. Get these people as far out of here as possible, capisce?" Ivan paid no heed to any protests she might've had. He and Jimmy took off in the first available Humvee at breakneck speed.

Discord had leapt aboard the truck during his earlier spiel, and he now reached a claw down to Daniel. "Come with me, Danny Boy. You wanted the Equestrians to pay, didn't you? You could react like human beings always do and simply shoot those ships down with your anti-aircraft missiles or what have you, or you could dare the thunder, infiltrate them from within, and steal their fleet from them the way they stole the resistance from you." Daniel crossed his arms in refusal. There was no way he was going to grab that paw. Discord whipped his arm back anyhow. He leapt onto a horse that had been grazing on a stack of nearby hay, then withdrew a native American headdress from its saddlebag. From there, he sang along to the music blaring through the truck's speakers. Resistance soldiers tried to break apart the duel between Fidel and the pope, but wound up with a sock to the face. Others found the lorry cab locked, but the sight of three massive dirigibles hanging in the air far off in the distance evinced greater priorities in them.

My mother married up your earth pony.
My father's people were ashamed of me.
The dragons said I was equine by law.
The ponies always called me fire-breather.

In ancient times, Earth and Equestria were bound.
But when you're hunted, you don't hang around.
Ponies and dragons fled the galaxy,
Made up a new home where the humans can't be.

A cosmonaut somehow slipped through the veil.
The controversy turned our leaders pale.
Our lives since then have borne a mantle of war,
And I can't help but find it so bizarre!

The humans paid little attention to these ridiculous versus, and during the chorus, they scrambled left and right to gather up the vehicles, gather up the refugees and wounded, and hasten from the terminus. Those Equestrian zeppelins looked to be so far off in the distance, but their apparent size and airborne nature were deceptive, and they were hurtling on fast towards the terminus. As Discord dabbed his paws in war paint and slapped himself from top to bottom like a brainless, dancing ditz on Laugh-In, it looked as though Daniel's fears and call to arms were well called for, and not the remorseful thirst for vengeance he himself was willing to admit. By the time Discord had jumped off the horse and adorned a wig, pair of shades and a false moustache, all to smash a watermelon with a mallet, Ivan had long been gone and the zeppelins were in firing range.

The Equestrian fleet greeted the terminus with a long-range missile that struck the open lorry all lit up like a Christmas tree. There was a whistle followed by an explosion, and Fidel and the pope were blown right off of where they stood, clear over

the heads of those who ran from the blast. Having been entangled in their altercation, the pair landed together, not too far in front of Daniel, who'd scraped himself right on the asphalt. The absurdity of the situation had wrought itself into many painful, tragic shards that sliced through the moment. Daniel listened as Pope John Paul II let out a deep moan. "Fidel? I don't think I can keep fighting. I'm too old for physical combat. Parkinson's is a terrible, terrible disease."

Fidel coughed. "I was born in the twenties. Don't talk to me about old. You know what my doctor told me? He said that smoking is bad for you! Can you believe that? And drinking."

The Pope nodded at this last remark. "I think it's time we handed it over," he said. Then he shut his eyes.

"You are Daniel Williams, correct?" Fidel asked. Daniel was surprised to be noticed, but he nodded just the same. Fidel had lost one of his boxing gloves when he was thrown, and he reached into his jacket pocket to procure a disgusting-looking plastic bottle that looked terribly beat up and sweating. It was filled to the brim with something foggy, grey, and slightly yellowed, and the sides were marked with strange blotches and strands that reminded Daniel of a slice of bread that his great uncle had nailed to the stairs years upon years ago to observe the effects of mould. The bread had turned fuzzy and colourful, then grey in its last moments where it dried into a brittle rock. "I prepared this for you," Fidel said, laying on his back so he was staring at Daniel upside-down.

"We did." The Pope opened his eyes to say this, then shut them again.

Fidel sighed. *"We* prepared this for you. The mineral waters act as a preservative for a very special Cuban fungus that is a rare delicacy when preserved properly. You need to bring this to your top scientists. Oh, and I shouldn't have to tell you this, but don't drink it."

"I do not think I want to keep that, thanks," said Daniel. "Besides, what in the hell is it even for?"

"That depends on what you make of it," said Fidel. "It's poisonous, but painless, to humans. However, it corrupts the flesh after death. If you taint the ponies' food supply with it, it might be passed along to them. It's long past time our generation entrusted you with the power to be good or evil. And hey, if it doesn't work out, you can always make sure you're the one writing the history books." Daniel begrudgingly pocketed the sweating bottle, but when he looked to Fidel again, he was already gone.

Daniel stuck his cane in the ground to hoist himself up. He appeared shaken but unhurt, apart from the woodchips and tiny stones that had jabbed into his skin. Those stung. He wanted to ask if anyone was hurt, to take stock of the situation, but he was surrounded by chaos. Soldiers were shouting and firing in futility at the blimps with their puny weapons. Some had boarded a couple of Humvees, and were firing with their heavy MGs, and the vehicles proved fair mobility against the slow firing rate of the Equestrians above. The collective refugees were much relieved when Belarusian reinforcements arrived in the form of a couple anti-aircraft missiles. Someone was ordering the light munitions to focus on the pegasi that flew alongside the ships, and the anti-aircraft deployments were focusing on the smaller vessels up above. The blimps were accompanied by many decoy balloons, and it was difficult to tell which was which. The bombing runs of the pony zeppelins had forced the resistance out of the terminus by now, and the fighting forces did their best to try and lure oncoming dirigibles away from Belarus and the escapees.

Then Daniel felt a pair of strong, mismatched arms seize him about the middle. He whacked his cane behind himself and heard Discord let out a yelp of pain. "Pardon me if I have cold claws. I'm not used to lugging mortals about via manual labour, you know." Flapping his wings faster and faster, Discord lifted off the ground, abducting Daniel with him. "Ha ha! Fly, monkey, fly!"

Daniel demonstrated his objection by struggling and trying to whack Discord upside the head with his cane, but it can prove quite difficult to hit somebody standing right behind yourself, with a good risk of thwacking yourself in the process. "Put me down, damn you!" When he noticed how high they'd both risen off the ground, he clutched his cane in both hands and changed his tune. "Don't put me down! Don't put me down!" Suffice it to say, he feared for his life. He feared for his lunch. It wasn't this alien creature pressed up against him that bothered him; he was too busy watching the charred and dismal hues of the ground rushing by underneath him to care. As he lurched through the air like a roller coaster without a track or a car, he thought he felt his stomach and bladder shift inside of him, and worried they might end up in his feet. He wished he could faint, but instead he had to endure every life-threatening moment of his abduction. He heard the great, echoing booms of the airship cannons, and screamed as Discord flung himself sideways to dodge out of their trajectory.

Inside the flagship, Onyx seated himself upon Kaiser Celestia's throne and spoke into a long tube to transmit his voice to the entire Equestrian fleet. "My little ponies, this is Onyx speaking. I regret to inform you that the traitors Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash have slain your precious Kaiser, as well as the Prince and Queen. I will now allow a brief moment so you may cry." Onyx waited a good couple of seconds. "I bear glorious news. As the last remaining member of your royal pony princesses, I hereby accept the role of your new omnipotent leader, and your new god. You'll remember my coronation was a few days ago, so if anypony tells you I'm not the rightful heir to the throne, they're lying, and you should kill them. Also, if you

see Rainbow Dash or Pinkie Pie, you should probably kill them as well. Killing solves everything. Kill them mercilessly and with utmost pain." The bridge remained empty save for himself. He had no need for the guards that were now dead by his blades. He had no need for ponies to sneak around, butting their noses into the conditions surrounding his serendipitous coup.

It wasn't until they were only a few yards away that Discord's intent dawned on Daniel. Ignoring his protests, the draconequus stretched his body straight and careened towards the broad window of the vessel's bridge room, bending his head so his horns aimed forward. Daniel tried to shield his head with his arms and cane. The duo smashed through the panes with a jolt of resistance that broke their flight and sent them toppling across shards of exploding glass. Daniel couldn't imagine falling harder than this, and though it hurt, being sliced apart with glass and landing upon a hardwood floor at high velocity, it didn't compare to the losses he'd faced thus far, from Logan and his father, to Tom saying goodbye. For a second, he thought he was re-joining those who'd died. The notion left him when he spat out a couple pebbles of glass and pried himself off of the floor. Everything hurt, and he had to steady all his weight upon his cane. Then that thought came back.

Onyx stood before him, his coat flapping in the winds that swept inside the bridge room. "You are an enemy who has infiltrated my lair to challenge me. I accept this as your surrender." He did a double-take when he spotted Discord. "You! You're dead! I slayed you! I felt you pickpocket one of my vials like a common padfoot, but I decapitated you! It wouldn't have worked!"

Daniel grabbed his head. Everything hurt. "God, I feel as if I am in a Stephen Moffat episode of *Doctor Who*. Not that I watch that."

"Ha hah!" Discord slapped Daniel on the back. "You have your drugs, Onyx, and I have mine. In the end, we're all trying to circumvent out shortcomings, aren't we? For instance, I needed to give the dragons a good disguise while on Earth, so I concocted some Changeling hormones to do the trick." He leaned down to Daniel, cupping the back of his paw beside his muzzle, and whispered so loudly anyone in the room could have heard him. "Changelings change shape, you see." Normalizing his voice, he continued. "This even allowed them to reduce their size. Dragons can wreak a lot of havoc. Now, I'm not a big, bad, fire-breathing dragon, so all I have to do with my Changeling juice is disguise myself as a head."

Onyx revved up his chainsaw and tore up the thrones behind him in one vilified strike. "That's cheating! You cheated!"

Discord ignored this childish outburst and leaned towards Daniel as though he were only confiding in him. "And Onyx here has a habit of dying, but that's okay because he found a 'medication' for that. Turning back the nature of life and death? Now that's something even the greatest unicorn wizards of Equestria's history were never able to accomplish. Bullets walk right out of their wounds, organs refuel themselves, and even those who've been dead for three days can walk again."

Onyx stared at the pair of them from behind his mask, but his whole body seethed with his heavy breaths, growing more animated as he repeatedly clenched his fists. Daniel gave a small jump as he witnessed small tongues of flame ignite about Onyx's body, burning through his jacket without damaging his clothing, springing from his skin here and there, especially along his arms, his sides, and his head. He expelled his voice in a mighty, wordless bellow that fought against the winds ruffling through the broken window. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you to death!" He whipped out his chainsaws and worked frantically to rev them up.

"This is all your fault, you mutant! I don't have any weapons with me!" Daniel said to Discord.

Discord was unimpressed with Onyx's threat, and he stood there with his fists on his hips as he watched the hulked-out maniac rush toward him like a one-man stampede. What Daniel saw transpire next came as a grave shock, one he could not put into words. It struck him somewhere in between his spine and his gut, instilling a common tilt of fear and general unease that numbed his feet yet rooted him to the spot. The latter could also be said for Onyx, who had ceased his charge and was now ostensibly stupefied in a mysterious column of maddening yellowed light. The bright light nearly stunned Daniel just to gaze upon, who shielded his eyes with his cane arm. There was a horrifying and annoying sound that kept rising and falling in tone, like a chorus of distressed singers practicing the upper octaves by having it squeezed out of them by machine. Sighs and sobs punctuated the mechanical repetitions of this sound that seemed to generate from the ultra-bright column that pierced through the ceiling and the floor.

Several rings of brighter light swooped up the column, lifting Onyx off his feet and pressing him flat against the ceiling. The wailing of the light was choked with staccato rhythm as this happened. The rings slammed down into the floor, and slammed him down with them with a loud, shuddering bang that shook the bridge. He was lifted again, softly, then slammed fast to the floor a second time. This time, on impact, his body vanished out of view in the blink of an eye, leaving his chainsaws and other weapons on the floor.

Daniel hadn't a clue what was going on, but Discord was generous to oblige him. "Onyx is a being not of Earth, nor Equestria, as if his face and his propensity for spontaneous combustion wasn't any indication. He belongs to an intergalactic council of supreme beings, a continuum, if you will. I first had my suspicions when I did away with him in Moscow, then saw him not a few hours after, lopping off heads, fresh as a pugnacious daisy. I tested out one of those mysterious green vials he

uses that turns the tide of death hours after its application on the worst corpse I could find, all burnt and nailed up, and lo and behold, he began breathing and flaking and doing all those disgusting things you humans do. Well, a further examination and a few well-placed ham radio calls revealed this substance to contain magical ingredients beyond the sciences of man or mare. That sound right now is the council berating him for his transgressions. He abandoned their ways, subjecting himself to the same rules the humans and the Equestrians were given: No magic. He used those concoctions to bring himself back from the dead so often, it's a wonder why he didn't buy his coat in red, and each time, he comes back more a monster than before."

Daniel screwed up his face in a look of disgust. "Magic? You mean, like, fairies causing your heart to stop with a wink of the eyes?"

"Don't be preposterous," Discord said. "Magic isn't a gun. It's not wishing. It's the practiced exertion of will to shape one's environment with lateral thought. It was deemed too powerful because it doesn't work on Earth and humans don't have those abilities, although not for lack of trying on the part of your covert government agencies. What our Neanderthal quilt-face here has forgotten is that all magic comes with a price." Discord then gave Daniel a shake. "And now, listen! They're revoking his ability and reneging on their rule. Onyx has been found guilty of using magic to the aid of the humans."

Daniel couldn't hear anything when he listened save for that awful warbling sound and the tiny crackling of glass. He looked underfoot to see if he was stepping on any more shards, but the noise seemed to come from Onyx, and trickles of green were draining out from his jacket. "But he is our enemy!" Daniel said. "He was leading the ponies. He killed many good soldiers."

"That's not the way the council sees it. Apparently he's been branded a traitor by Kaiser Celestia herself. The Guardians see all and know all, Onyx! And now he's been imprisoned until the council can pass further judgment upon him. Oh, happy day!" Discord gave Daniel a firm hug, then shoved him aside as he moved to stand within the confines of the light. "On behalf of Equestria, I hereby accept the conditions of his transgression!" he shouted to the ceiling. The rings swam up the exterior of the light column once again and bashed against the ground, although Discord's body was not tossed about the way Onyx's had. He held his arms aloft, gazing upwards even though Daniel could see nothing remarkable there. He watched the cartoonish creature bathe himself in light as a sickening dread crept into Daniel's limbs and gave him goose bumps. He had the strong impression he was watching something very terrible occur before his very eyes, something which he ought to stop, but he couldn't. He didn't understand what was going on. It was beyond his reckoning.

And then the light snapped off. Discord let out a wicked cackle, clearly amused by something. He stared at Daniel with an oafish grin, then snapped his fingers. In a twinkle of light, a large, floppy sombrero adorned his head as if out of nowhere. With another twinkle of light, an umbrella blinked in out of thin air which made Daniel jolt in surprise. Discord unfolded the umbrella in the incorrect direction, then twirled it over his shoulder. "The only reason I care so much about rules is that I love to break them! That and trying to follow them all will drive you as crazy as a June bug in July. Bring on the mariachi bands! It looks like we're in for a big ol' storm of chaos!"

With another snap of his fingers, Discord vanished in a gleam of white light that left the air gasping in his place. Daniel could only stare, properly dumbstruck, at the empty space that presently visited him. Even though Discord had gone, his voice now spoke out over the fleet's loudspeaker system. "Attention, Equestria. Your self-proclaimed leader, Onyx, has just been sacked. You'll find him imprisoned on the flagship, which is where you might also find your Kaiser's corpse and the Human Resistance leader, Daniel Williams. Ta for now!" Naturally, Daniel did not find this outing promising. He wanted Onyx dead, not imprisoned. He wanted a weapon, not to be hunted down by pony soldiers on red alert. He had no choice but to duck into the nearest doorway and pray there were no enemies behind it as he fumbled blindly through the airship's interior.

Not far away, a Belarusian chopper dared the skies of munitions, helmed by Jimmy Walsh, with Tyrone, Yuri and Ivan firing their weapons out the sides to take down as many pegasi as possible. The pegasi were firing off rockets and small arms, and one of them got a lucky shot at the chopper—lucky save for the fact the humans all leaned out of the way and the projectile shot in through one doorway and out through the other, missing them all completely. Tyrone popped a few dozen bullets into the pony's body, and it started spiralling and diving to the ground far, far below. That was when the nearest airship turned its guns upon them and cocked its massive cannon. "Up, up!" Jimmy's passengers screamed, and raised the chopper just in time as a hot volley shot just beneath them.

"God damn that was a close one!" Tyrone said. "I wish we could just slide into these balloons with them blades!"

"Zeppelins have to be made of sturdy stuff," Jimmy said. "You'll notice your bullets aren't having much effect. We'd only end up taking ourselves down in the process. Getting underneath isn't going to be easy, but our only other option is to get on top and rappel down with one of those ropes."

"Is that what all the naval stuff is for?" Yuri asked, picking up a device not unlike a harpoon gun. "Think this'll break through one of those windows?"

“Try the guns on it, first,” said Ivan. “Bullets solve everything!” He and Tyrone concentrated their fire on the nearest bay window until it splintered and shattered given enough force. Although most of the Equestrian forces appeared to be flying alongside the blimps, the airships themselves were not unoccupied, and the duo had to hide back behind the walls of the helicopter as ponies ran to the window to attack. “Okay, well, easier said than done, right?” Ivan said.

Daniel wasn’t the only one hiding upon the flagship. Somewhere, Harbinger was still skulking around, holding onto the head of Paragon for dear life, not even risking transformation into dragon form for fear he might lost it and be unable to prove to the dragons of his victory over their greatest. Little did he realize yet the fate that had befallen his brother, or how Discord had sabotaged their den. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie also lingered in the back corridors of the flagship, thanks in no minute part to Pinkie Pie’s innate understanding of how the dirigibles had been designed. Upon hearing Discord’s announcement, their curiosity had been whetted, and they dared to return to the abandoned bridge on their way to escape the airship.

Pinkie Pie bounced along in her jolly way. “So that’s why I *wanted* to make the zeppelins out of lead, but that would’ve been too heavy, plus it causes birth defects, even though it’s still popular in the Indochina region where the Golden Path operates from! Come on, Rainbow Dash! Why are you so sluggish?”

“I still can’t believe you saved me,” said Rainbow Dash, throwing a big hug around the earth pony. “Thank you, thank you! But more than that, I can’t believe you just iced Celestia!”

Pinkie blushed and sheepishly scraped her back hoof against the floor. “Aw, you know I couldn’t kill *you,* Rainbow Dash! Now let’s hurry!”

Rainbow Dash gave a nod and the two of them quickly made for the door. Just before the two of them exited, the pegasus stopped. She was thinking about Onyx being down in the brig, and how easy it would be to exact her revenge at this time. “I can't not yet.”

“What do you mean, ‘not yet’? We don't know how long it will be until somepony else comes by! Our Kaiser was a popular mare. We need to leave, post haste!”

“No, he took my baby from me. I need to take his life. I just have to,” said Rainbow Dash.

“Who? You mean Onyx? You know the only way to kill him is to take his head, right?”

“No, but now I do.”

“So? What, you expect to just walk down there and cut off his head?” asked Pinkie Pie.

“He is locked up. It will be easy, eh.” Even Rainbow Dash couldn't make herself believe taking his life would be easy.

“No, it won’t. He is too crafty. Too quick. He will find a way to get the better of you.”

“Not if I wound him first. I could shoot him, then cut his head off. I can do it. I have to do it. Please, just go ahead. I'll catch up with you.” Rainbow Dash wasn't going to change her mind, she had to do this, and Pinkie knew that. She let out a sigh.

“But you don't even know where we are going.”

“Then tell me. Give me co-ordinates.”

Pinkie shook her head. “I can't risk it. If you get caught whilst leaving, or even followed, I…” She lowered her head. “I'm sorry, but you either come with me, or this is goodbye.”

Rainbow Dash gave a solemn nod and rested a hoof on Pinkie Pie's shoulder. “Then I guess this is goodbye. Thank you, Pinkie, for saving my life, for putting up with my manure, and for always being there when I needed you.”

Pinkie sniffled as her eyes teared up. “You’re welcome. Do me a favour. If you get out of here, find a place far from here, hide, and wait. Whatever may occur, I will find you.”

Rainbow Dash smiled. “Deal.”

Pinkie then took Rainbow Dash's hoof and placed the Luger in it. “Be safe,” she said before embracing her best friend, her sister, and her idol with one last hug.

“You too,” said Rainbow Dash.

Pinkie gave a salute. “My queen,” she said with a smile before turning and departing the bridge.

Rainbow Dash inhaled a deep breath and approached the stairwell to the brig where she found a dead guard’s body. The guard had a long dagger strapped to its leg that was big enough and long enough to sever a head. She stole it from the corpse and looked back through the doorway. “I'm coming for you, you bastard.”

Onyx was resting against the back wall of his cell, whistling. His mask was removed, and his dry and deformed lips pursed so he could get a good tune. When he heard the door to the dungeon open up, he stopped his whistling and smiled. He assumed it was the guards who had just taken Rainbow Dash to her death. He gave a loud chuckle and called out loud. "Was it good? Did the stupid bitch cry? I bet she did. I honestly don't know how you people let her lead you on. Come get your leader out of here now." It would seem that he overestimated his strength earlier, or the mysterious council alluded to by Discord and Pinkie Pie had taken further measures to prevent his escape.

Instead of a guard, Rainbow Dash appeared at his cell door and stared down at him with infuriated and grief-stricken eyes. Onyx looked to her and smiled. He could see the weapons she brandished, but he was not the bothered in the slightest. "Ah, I didn't realise you were the great Houdini," Onyx said with a mocking and joking tone.

"You keep joking, but soon I will be having my fun when I take your head," said Rainbow Dash.

Onyx gave a cynical chuckle. "How cute. You think you're actually going to get your revenge."

Rainbow Dash gave a nod. "Oh, I will. That much I can promise."

Onyx climbed to his feet and approached the barred door. "Don't make promises you can't keep," he said with a confident smile on his ugly, puzzle piece face.

"I don't." Rainbow Dash poked the barrel of the Luger through the iron bars of the cell and pulled the trigger. A loud bang went off, and the bullet struck Onyx just below the right breast. He stumbled back slightly and gasped. The wind was knocked out of him, and his smile slowly crept away. Rainbow Dash grinned, then let off another shot which struck him in the lower stomach. This one sent him crashing back into the wall which he slid down, leaving a trail of his own blood behind.

Rainbow Dash unbolted his cell door and stepped in. She dropped the Luger to the floor and held up the dagger. "There is no getting out of this one. You will die, and you will see nothing but your precious darkness, and this time, you won't be coming back!"

Onyx tried to chuckle but was interrupted by coughing up his own blood. "Either way, I still took your child from you." Even in death, he mocked her.

Rainbow Dash grew even more angry, and she raised the dagger. "I hope you rot in Hell!"

Onyx grinned. "I already told you. No Hell. Just darkness."

Rainbow Dash readied herself to deliver a quick and fatal blow. "Believe me, you're going to a hell: A special one just for you."

Onyx began to chuckle as she swung the blade down. The blade was inches from his neck when his hand snapped up and grabbed the blade. The blade came to a sudden stop, and blood came seeping through the gaps in Onyx's finger. Rainbow Dash gasped and looked to Onyx who was smiling. "Now, you didn't think it would be that easy, did you?"

Before Rainbow Dash could react, Onyx brought his leg up behind hers and tripped her. As Rainbow Dash fell back, her hoof released the blade. Onyx seized the handle and leapt onto Rainbow Dash's chest, putting his knees on both of her front limbs to pin her fully to the ground, rendering her helpless. Rainbow Dash began to thrash her head side to side, screaming. No! No you can't!" she cried.

"Oh, but I can," said Onyx with a huge grin.

"No! I had you! I had you!" Tears began to once again rush from her eyes.

Onyx gave a slow nod. "Yes, you did. Unfortunately for you, you talk way too much." He lined the tip of the blade up with Rainbow Dash's left eye, and put it so close that her eyelashes touched it. She carried on screaming and crying. "Shush. Don't worry; the darkness isn't so bad. Hey, maybe you will be left all alone with your thoughts, and you can think about how I murdered your baby. Your poor, innocent, and harmless baby. And how you had one chance to kill me...one! And you screwed that up. What a shame." Onyx's tone was dark and cynical and had a hint of mocking in it.

Rainbow Dash turned her wrist and fired the Luger off at him. A bullet caught him in the side of the head, and another in his shoulder. Onyx's body jolted, and his weight shifted off of her. She pulled her forelegs free and emptied the Luger into his stomach until he dropped the knife. He started to toppled sideways off of her, then, as if to be annoying even in death, he slumped across her, nearly crushing her under his stank weight. Rainbow Dash grunted, but managed to shove his dead weight off of her body and onto his back. She picked up the blade and let out a final scream before pushing the dagger down. He was alive long enough to feel his eyeball split in half, and feel the blade travel down and scratch at his brain. She screamed and screamed and screamed, until finally, his body went limp. She sat there, panting, for a good minute or so, then turned the knife in her grasp and set to the task of sawing his head right off of his shoulders.

Outside, the battle of glass cannons waged on. One bullet was the minimum necessary for a human or a pegasus to meet its demise, and the volatile fire power of the anti-aircraft weaponry versus the airship artillery meant one well-placed blast would eradicate a vast portion of either side's fighting force. It was a siege between small, manoeuvrable targets and overpowering durability. Up in the sky, Belarus had deployed its two outmoded fighter jets that were roughly on par with the allied capabilities of the second world war. Their screaming engines and staccato guns kept their pilots alert and perturbed as they duelled with pegasi and zeppelins alike. At one point, one pilot thought he was done for as his plane ran smack dab into a pony, which is quite a lot of weight to shift. The front propeller tore through the pony's body, slicing it and tossing it aside like a hibachi chef, sending its broken, bloodied body hurtling to the ground in many grisly pieces. An eye flung out, a rope of intestine dangled, and one hind leg twitched as they disappeared away from the floorless stage of the battle.

The turbulent noise could be heard inside the very airship that Jimmy's helicopter was exchanging gunfire with. Inside was Scootaloo, who had arrived from Cuba at the latest moment possible. Her journey had been a busy one, and she had whined every angstrom of the way, but she'd arrived in time with her captives which she'd exchanged to Discord. "Where's the leader of this vessel?" she demanded to know. "I have to give my report on Cuba! It's worthy of a promotion! Have you no sense of priorities?" She wandered into the bridge room as many ponies departed in the other direction, seeking out the corridor where the human resistance were trying to enter from. Like the flagship, this bridge was also empty, but instead of broken thrones, there was a coffin left upon the platform where the captain should have sat.

"Who in the hay brought a corpse to a dogfight?" Scootaloo asked. With as brazen a disregard for the departed as she had shown for her two closest friends in all of Equestria, she knocked open the casket. Lying there with her black wings tucked over her ebony body was a severe-looking alicorn mare whose eyes flung open almost as soon as the lid had been lifted. Scootaloo gave a start at this sight and scurried back as the alicorn arose from her coffin, her glittery, dark blue mane pouring out around her like a gossamer mist, and glared at the one disturbing her slumber.

"Who dares summon me, Nightmare Moon, from my regeneration?" the dusky alicorn asked. Though her pelt was pitch as a new moon's night, she shimmered in the sunlight that streamed through the great bay window at the fore of the bridge. Her hooves were clad in moody blue anklets, and her head was adorned with a matching war chanfron. Over her chest, she wore a decorative peytral baring the mark of a sharp, crescent moon surrounded by dots of stars. She bore resemblance to Celestia, save a more ferocious demeanour than noble, and her colouring was empty as a night sky. Apart from her aforementioned mane and tail, the other difference was her teeth, decidedly un-equine in their razor sharpness, with two needle-like incisors. In the sunlight that streamed through the great window, her body gleamed like a thousand tiny lens flares.

Scootaloo found the star-like sparkling difficult to focus on and held a foreleg up over her face. She didn't have trouble identifying who was speaking to her, however, even if she hadn't introduced herself. She even repeated the other mare's name like some terrible curse somepony had lobbed at her even though it ought not to be uttered. "Nightmare Moon!"

"That is *my* name!" Nightmare Moon said. "But I suppose that yours hardly matters. You shall do as I command and slay Princess Celestia for me. My sister shall pay for banishing me, and for the loss of my thestrals."

"She's Kaiser now, and she's already dead! Haven't you heard the last two pages?" Scootaloo asked.

"Thou art a fool and a liar! Besides which, that was not a request. I was telling you what was going to happen! Come forth, my thrall, and seize her!"

Before Scootaloo could react, she felt a pair of strong human arms grab her around her middle and hold her back. One of the hands grabbed her by the mane and yanked her head back, forcing her to watch as Nightmare Moon loomed in closer, running her tongue across her savage, carnivorous teeth. She let out a scream as those jaws crunched down upon her neck, sinking those fangs into her like two of the largest syringes medical science could device. The pain was worse than a pinch. It was as if two knives with surgical precision were tearing about the most taut portions keeping her head upon her shoulders. She could feel a disturbing, tickling suction at work, and her body shuddered with coldness.

When Jimmy turned the helicopter around so its guns could fire upon the ponies gathering by the corridor window, their numbers were cleaved in a short matter of time. Their do-or-die attitude, perhaps instilled in them by Onyx, did nothing for their survival rate, and Jimmy once more turned the chopper parallel to the broken viewing window, which was roughly the size of the chopper's door. Yuri grabbed the harpoon gun and fired it into the enemy vessel, splitting it clean through the lacquered wooden wall inside. He then tied the cable connected to the harpoon to the interior of the helicopter using a cow hitch knot. "Move, move!" he yelled.

"Okay, okay!" Ivan locked himself around the cable with his gun and rappelled himself down into the pony airship. Tyrone followed close behind, dropping to his knees and pointing his weapon in the opposite direction from Ivan as soon as he was able. Yuri had been about to take his turn next when something went awry, a word which has nothing to do with specialty breads, but has to do with an unfortunate development that is out of the norm. If you don't appreciate non-white breads, you might think it a fitting term, but I can assure you this situation had very little to do with making a sandwich, although I could

not blame you if at this point you chose to close this book, this browser tab, or to shut your electronic reader and go and make yourself some peanut butter and jelly, because while the glass may appear half-full following the deaths of so many Equestrians, the outcome yet remains as murky as if that glass had been filled with the vile, brown alcohol of scotch whiskey.

What happened next was that the helicopter was struck right in its tail by an enemy mortar, a term which does not here refer to a small concave bowl in which materials are ground up with a pestle, but instead refers to a shell fired by a cannon. Also in this case, the word shell does not refer to the hard outer carapace of a turtle or similar aquatic reptile, but to an explosive projectile that may be fired by such a weapon. The tail of the chopped split off into broken shards, and the vehicle itself lurched into an off-balance tailspin. Its whirring blades dipped and cut right through the cable, ripping it asunder. Yuri had to cling to the edge of the door to keep from being thrown out. Jimmy tried to correct, but it was too late. "Grab a parachute, now! No time to tip your waitresses; we gotta jump!" Jimmy strapped himself in, but Yuri barely got one arm through a strap of the parachute before he was thrown out of the bucking chopper. He tried to swipe his other arm for the bottom of the window he'd broken earlier, but his chest gasped in simpering terror as it plainly missed to grab anything.

Now the wind spoke to him with its flutters and ruffles, invisible as if there was nothing to tell him something went wrong. Everything was frigid in the upper atmosphere, and when his organs began lurching up inside of him as if to rush to the top of his head and warn his brain to wake up, he thought at first he'd wet himself. When he had snapped to, he finished strapping into the parachute, his frantic mind-set rendering the task as easy as dressing for school. Depending on how accurately you remember your school days, your mileage on that analogy may vary.

Either they'd noticed him slipping the rucksack on, or the pegasi were just feeling particularly malicious, because several of them wearing spandex suits and masks broke formation to dive down at Yuri and Jimmy. Yuri yanked his gun, the strap of which was around his shoulder and pinned beneath his parachute strap, so he could only hold it awkwardly at his side. He fired in desperation at the first approaching pegasus, which let out a yelp, kicked its legs, and swerved away to die. As Yuri struggled to wrench his gun's strap free for easier motility, another spandex-clad pegasus swooped in close. This time, it took a bullet to the side of the head from none other than Jimmy Walsh, who gave Yuri a salute.

A third flying pony came up behind Jimmy which Yuri pointed out to him. Jimmy tried to turn himself around, which is difficult to do in a freefall, but at the end he reached under his other arm with his gun and in two shots disrupted the pegasus's flight. It took another two bullets just to shake her. He watched the pony fall and got a good look at the helicopter hurtling down below much faster than they were. He wished they'd had enough time for the ground forces to lure the Equestrians toward the Baltic Sea, but he had no idea where they were at that moment. In the meantime, Yuri felt himself leaning backwards. The airships were looking quite far away by now, and he could remember seeing at least another pony in his view before he toppled backwards. He tucked his legs and somersaulted in the air on purpose, like spinning in an office chair, and managed to stop himself when he was upright to send another five-burst at the nearest pegasus he saw. He and his target shot at the same time, and Yuri grunted as a few bullets grazed and nicked him. His body went spinning again, and his arms and legs went flailing about as he was momentarily stunned.

Jimmy tried to yell out Yuri's name. Yuri looked as though he'd collapsed onto his face. After a pained second, he shook himself awake and tried to gauge his surroundings. He found Jimmy pointing at his own rucksack to indicate the pull cord. Yuri took a couple more precious seconds to find his. He watched Jimmy nod, then tug on his drawstring like a wind-up doll. A parachute designed after the New Mexico state flag shot out of his pack like it'd got caught on thin air. It unfolded from the shape of a dried-up mushroom to a big, puffy dome. Yuri yanked his cord. His parachute, designed like the "Rules for Draw and Stud Poker" card in a deck of playing cards, dropped out under him and billowed out between his thighs. In his haste, he'd adorned his parachute upside-down. His entire body flipped as the chute fell upwards from under him. It unfolded just the same, but the prospect of landing on his head was not endearing to him, particularly when he remembered hearing that most skydivers could still break their legs if they came in too fast.

They had other problems in the meantime. Another pair of pegasi were closing in fast. Jimmy tried to shoot them down, but his aim proved poor. He had to admit he panicked when he heard a couple of bullets zip right past him in return. Yuri bent and contorted his body like a circus performer or somebody who'd been conned into paying for yoga lessons. He aimed his trusty weapon with both hands and fired repeatedly until both pegasi were dead. They dropped like plums from a tree, and that looked to be the last of them.

Yuri could hear a flapping sound. He looked up between his heels and saw that several gaping holes had torn in his parachute from where it'd been shot. The chute ripped further, hesitated as if to speak a prayer with its fabric mouth, then split in twain, sending Yuri hurtling toward his doom all over again. Jimmy screamed to him and tried to direct his own chute, but it was too late. Yuri had already drifted too far to reach, and was gaining speed. In a matter of moments, he hit terminal velocity, and his body expired, just like that, giving a shake before falling like a limp ragdoll.

Though Pinkie Pie tried to sneak through the corridors, hiding behind plants and inside bales of hay, the sneaking suspicion that the guards could care less about her presence dawned upon her. Onyx had sounded the alarm against her, but the

Equestrians were harder pressed for their own survival against the humans than worrying about one prisoner. She even felt a little insulted, balancing on her back hooves with her front hooves on her hips. She paused to think about what her own endgame was going to be now, but thinking wasn't her strong suit. Celestia was dead by her own hoof. Discord had announced Onyx's capture, which she didn't know how to take other than with a grain of salt. The easiest course of action seemed to be to continue her fight against the humans, so she rolled herself along the floor past a hallway, then scooted herself low by her back hooves until she came across one of the docking ports on the side of the airship.

Little did she realize at the time that Scootaloo was in the next zeppelin over, having unlocked her ship's docking port. For a pegasus, she was never much of a flier, and she could barely see the ground for a patch of cloud cover that swept past her in that moment. "Alright, Scootaloo, it's just a hop, skip, and a jump," she said to motivate herself. She leapt through the doorway from the ship she was on and beat her wings hard and fast to reach the other vessel's door. She faced less difficulty than expected, and banged on the outside of the door with her hoof.

A porthole window opened up nearby, and Pinkie Pie gazed through to see who was at the door. "Ooh, ooh! Is it Nightmare Night already? Are you trick or treating? I don't have any candy on me!" Pinkie Pie said, not knowing just how on the nose she was. "Nightmare Night" was an Equestrian equivalent of Halloween, a holiday where parents allowed their children to wander the streets at night, extorting sugary confectionery from strangers.

"I am looking for Kaiser Celestia," Scootaloo said in a rather matter-of-fact tone. "Where is she?"

Pinkie Pie appeared nervous. "Um. You know what's got a horn and feathers, and is white and red all over? Celestia after she's been shot and killed. Did you not hear the paging?"

"I only just got here," Scootaloo said. She had only arrived before the vessels were to be launched, but she knew Onyx had branded Pinkie Pie a traitor. "Let me in." Pinkie Pie was willing to take that risk. She grabbed a nearby potted plant that ponies liked to snack on, and pulled down the lever that opened the embarkment with a thunk. Scootaloo swooped in and folded her wings before staring at the plant Pinkie was holding above her head. "What's that for?" she asked.

"What? Oh, this is Fernicus. He's my friend!" Pinkie Pie gave the leafy fronds a few strokes and chewed on them a bit.

Scootaloo grimaced, but changed the subject. "Where is the device Discord entrusted me?" she asked. "It was exchanged to me for the prisoners I brought him, and then stowed on board the flagship."

"Oh! You mean the nucular device?" Pinkie asked. "It's down in the hold between all the cannon operators! I'll show you! Just walk this way!" Pinkie Pie did not walk, rather she bounced down the corridor in a merry old fashion. Scootaloo thought to herself that if she could walk that way, she'd eat more cakes.

Tyrone and Ivan hadn't time to witness more than the helicopter being blown away, and though the sight shocked and demotivated them, they were being pursued by more ponies. They headed in opposite directions, frantically gunning down any enemies that rounded the corners as there was no cover to hide behind. Tyrone noticed that Ivan had run the other way, and he shouted to him, "You could've warned me you were headed the other direction!"

"Not my fault you wanna go the wrong way!" Ivan shouted back. Tyrone rolled his eyes and doubled back to follow Ivan. They headed blindly up a level and into another corridor, where something seemed wrong about the way they were going. The hallway ahead expanded outwards like a highway, farther than they thought the airship's exterior boundaries reached. Where they were felt cramped and claustrophobic by comparison, and although they tried to tell themselves it was only an optical illusion, the effect was done particularly well. A platoon waited at the opposite end, tromping into view like a marching band, and while Tyrone and Ivan were quick to fire before their enemies had even spotted them, they knocked against one another in their desperate bid for cover. Tyrone fled behind the corner as one unicorn mare plugged him right in the chest. He flung back to the ground with a heavy thud and groaned, barely hearing as Ivan blasted his attacker right in the chest several times. Tyrone choked out as he lay there, feeling himself for blood, but not finding where the bullet had hit him. "Get up, lazy bones. It got you in the armour," Ivan said. He grabbed Tyrone by the wrist and yanked him to his feet.

It took Tyrone a couple of seconds to catch his breath. "Still knocks the wind outta you!" he said amidst several gasps. Clutching an arm over his chest, he stumbled to his feet. He didn't much care for the way Ivan gripped and rushed him along once he'd steadied himself, and he probably should have let go when they reached the staircase upwards at the end of the corridor. The stairs dipped inwards to a smooth, diagonal plane with a loud "shunk", throwing the pair onto their backs on the stiff hardwood floors. "What the hell?" Tyrone asked, although a staircase that transforms into a slide is scarcely Hell. "They booby trapped this place like a damn Indiana Jones movie?"

Both men had to pick themselves up, still groaning, and were relieved that no more ponies had shown up in the meantime. Getting their balance on the steep, polished slope proved difficult even with the rubber soles of their heavy-duty boots—perhaps somepony had recently waxed the floors; they looked great. They pushed their weight forward as hard as they can without outright crawling, but as they nearly reached the top, the airship was shaken by a terrific explosion, and both men

fell to their elbows and knees where they slid, uncomfortably, back down again. Ivan whipped out his portable radio and tuned to the frequency for his jet fighters. “You boys better not be shooting to bring down the blimp that looks like a whale or the blimp that looks like a cake, you copy? Aim for the weapons if you must, but we’re aboard here, remember?”

As the pair hiked up the slope once more, Tyrone asked, “So what exactly was the plan here?”

“We commandeer the vessel and turn it on the whale blimp,” Ivan said.

“But Daniel was last spotted being abducted to the whale blimp,” Tyrone said.

“Then he better have a good damn plan to get back off.”

Daniel had no such plan. He was hiding out in one of the first barracks he’d come across, waiting for a troop of ponies to pass as he searched for a weapon or anything he could use. The interior was quite strange, and he questioned the feasibility of furniture that was pinned to the ceiling by some manner, complete with dinnerware adhered to the table. The entire ship keeled hard to starboard, and he had to press nearly all his weight onto his cane to keep upright. He checked a few trunks in haste, but found them all locked. By the third, he decided to shove his cane underneath the latch and pry it apart. He was impressed that the cane did not break, and the trunk’s lock snapped off with a tinny clank. Inside, however, were mostly clothing and worn accessories fitting an Equestrian, but moving them aside revealed a few Unishot weapons. Hesitantly, he picked one up and examined it. He’d seen them used in battle, and their principle wasn’t too different from a pistol, but they looked to have only one shot each using a unicorn’s horn, and he was nervous about a misfire. He managed to hook all three to his belt, but the devices still appeared too simple for his comfort. He had to hold himself up on his cane with his other arm, but it took him a while to muster the courage to peek out the room and into the hall. Getting his revenge didn’t feel so simple anymore. It wasn’t like fighting these hooved bastards could get him his fingers back.

Daniel waited for a platoon of ponies to pass him by before setting out into the corridors. He wasn’t afraid to admit to himself that he had no idea what he could do or where he was going, but those thoughts depressed him all the same. Perhaps he could find a way off the ship. Perhaps he could stow away until it landed, if it wasn’t blown out of the sky. Perhaps he could find what drove this vessel and put a wrench in the works, so to speak. He was losing his sense of himself. He was losing sight of who he was and what he was doing here. He couldn’t even feel the danger anymore. He needed the resistance. He needed Delta Squad, now more than ever.

The sound of hurried steps reminded him of his present situation. He took to running, feeling himself sailing across the floor even with the necessity of his cane. Then he sailed right over the open air where the floor came to an abrupt end. The plummet was only short enough to tickle his spine, and there was a rattling as whatever he plunged into rolled around him and smothered him like so many stiff particles. So many directions were pushing upon him at once, pushing him away from all sides so that he was jammed in where he was with nowhere to go but to sink further and further, until the technicolour spheres had him submerged. Daniel spent the next moment trying to ascertain just what in the hell had happened to him. He felt as if he was floating, weightless, yet being crushed at the same time. He tried pushing against the plastic orbs smothering him, but he couldn’t discern which direction he was going in. He breached the top at last with a clatter and realized to his confusion that he’d run right smack into a ball pit that just about filled the corridor. He waded to the other side with expected difficulty and took a few tries to clamber out onto solid wood again.

When he rounded the corner, Daniel got two shocks. The first was a figure the size of a human dashing around another corridor up ahead. He didn’t get much time to dwell on that when he saw the floor was made of clouds sweeping over the lands of eastern Europe far, far below like a herd of lazy, gelatinous sheep. On second glance, he saw the scene was protected by a pane of glass, the durability of which he questioned, but even so, his body expected the alarming sensation of being sucked out below. The distance was certainly too far the jump, but if the man—or rather, person—ahead had made it across, surely it could hold his weight. He gave the glass floor a good tap with his cane just to check, and tested his weight upon it, but found it held him. He crept across the disturbing, smooth surface the remainder of the way, each step taking an agonizing minute for him to traverse.

Halfway across the glass floor, Daniel was granted a third shock. He turned himself as fast as he dared at the sound of an Equestrian voice. “I’m telling you, I felt a strange sort of fizzle in my horn earlier.” A buttermilk unicorn mare with the cutie mark of a mechanical gear was walking with a periwinkle pegasus stallion who had the cutie mark of a camera framed by a star.

“Horse apples! Isn’t that the leader of the Human Resistance? William Daniels or whoever?” The pegasus asked.

The unicorn asked, “Does it matter? We’ve got to find Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie before either of them escape.” Panicking just a bit, Daniel raised the Unishot and fired at the pair of ponies behind him. If he’d taken the time to aim, they might have shot first, but he also might not have missed right between them. The floor wasn’t slippery, but his legs tangled anyhow, and Daniel fell onto the glass with a frightful thunk and slid a couple of feet with a loud smear. He slid the spent Unishot away and fumbled to un-holster the second as the two ponies fired their own .22 short revolvers at him too high. For being a pony weapon, Daniel adapted quickly, and he lined up the pegasus in his sights. He rolled out of the way instead, just in

time for the two ponies to shoot at them. He didn't even have time to silently thank the glass for being bulletproof. As the bullets ricocheted into the wall, he fired the unicorn horn from the Unishot, striking the pegasus square in the neck.

"Snoop Scoop!" the unicorn cried. She gasped, gaped at Daniel, then receded behind the corner of the hallway, only able to watch as her companion collapsed to the ground. His body twitched only a couple of small times before going paralytic. Two streams of tears egressed from his wide, sad eyes as he lay there on his side, no longer able to move or feel anything but every painful sensation, even the ones that were minute and nobody notices are there all the time, like a high-pitched ringing when everything goes silent. Those amplified and grew "deafening" as his body was driven to shock for any feeling whatsoever. There was no certain indication of when Snoop Scoop kicked the bucket other than his eyes ceasing their crying.

Nobody nor nopony was keeping an eye on him anyway. The enraged unicorn kept peeking out to shoot at Daniel, and Daniel was crawling backwards across the glass, and soon the wood, as he discarded the second Unishot and drew out the last. He waited for the unicorn to emerge again, and fired. He thought he'd fired too late. She was already ducking behind the corner again, but the Unishot struck the wall around where she hid. Daniel cursed to himself and crawled faster than a hare in a turtle race around the next corner.

As he pushed himself to his feet, he thought he felt something strike him in the heel, but he felt no pain as he raced through the halls of the zeppelin. He saw many doors ahead, but realized he couldn't just pick the first one or he'd surely be caught. He came to a screeching halt in front of another hallway before realizing that somepony had painted a false corridor on a wall right at the bend. "Oh, damn!" He zipped around the next corner, wondering why there were so many of these, and slammed through the first doorway after all, where there was a stairwell leading down. Looking back over his shoulder, he stamped his feet upon the steps loudly without descending, then doubled back through the door on his toes to make as little sound as possible before finding another door to duck inside further along. He found himself inside of a barracks where he had to take it on faith his pursuer would be tricked into heading downstairs, but to play it safe, his racing heart urged him to build a barricade around the door with the bunk beds.

Somewhere behind Pinkie Pie and Scootaloo was Harbinger, but his journey through the flagship was fraught with violence. Soldiers intending to hunt Pinkie got quite the surprise when one of the other ensemble of criminals cavorting through their corridors turned up instead. Harbinger felt no need to hide, instead revelling in the sport of slaying all who stood between him and his destination, regardless of whether they opposed him or not. A few bullets grazed or lodged into him, but as a dragon within, he felt no pain. He wielded Paragon's head in its sack as a bludgeon while his claws were otherwise occupied, and though he would have preferred to devour them whole, he still was pressed for time and space, and so could not rely on his clumsy draconic form. As he cut swathes through pony after pony using his draconic claws, he at one time or another even stole their guns from them to shoot their allies down. He finally picked up a satchel he could stuck Paragon's head in and throw over one shoulder from a combat medic named Stimpack.

Harbinger's unstoppable killing machine routine carried him all the way to the docking port which Pinkie Pie had opened for Scootaloo. The ship which Nightmare Moon had seized had drifted farther away, but it was a start as far as he was concerned. He reasoned that the ponies should at least expect him to be unable to leave the ship. After all, they were so stupid and underestimated his strength so often. He leapt—the distance was great—and hit upon the balloon of the other zeppelin. Its surface was pliant and offered little purchase; his scrambling hands caught hold of a tether rope billowing from the side, and he double-checked to see his satchel was sealed and secure. He could now see one of the two fighter planes as it zoomed in between the pair of dirigibles, turning itself perpendicular to the ground as it fired upon one of the lesser ships. He watched it for a moment, and spotted the second plane luring two other Equestrian vessels into firing upon one another. *Hah, idiots,* Harbinger thought, and he began to climb, thinking this would give him a better view of the battlefield.

"Are we there yet?" Scootaloo asked Pinkie Pie as the pair travelled through a spinning cylinder painted like a candy cane.

"We're sure close, but if you're getting bored, I stuck some carnival prizes here and there for fun! Look at this; it's a Stetson! I placed them all around the ships in case of Stetson emergencies!" Pinkie Pie reached around the top of the spinning, horizontal column and pulled out an accessory which virtually amounted to a cowboy hat. She stuck it on her head and grinned at Scootaloo for approval which did not come.

Pretty soon the pair happened upon a room labelled as the armoury. Inside the bowels of the ship, many Equestrian soldiers were seated around the walls, operating the various cannons and guns that defended the zeppelin. None of them so much as cared that Pinkie Pie had shown up, as they were far too busy fighting off the humans below and their fighter jets. In the very middle of the room however, suspended above an obvious launching hatch, was the nuclear device that Discord had stolen and exchanged with Scootaloo for her two prisoners. "And this is the lever you pull when you want to set your enemies up the bomb!" Pinkie Pie said.

"Good," said Scootaloo, who drew out her Unishot. "Stand over the hatch. I'm going to drop you along with the nuke and be done with these meddlesome humans once and for all."

Pinkie Pie let out a well-practiced gasp. “But, but Scootaloo, how come? You don’t believe Onyx, do you?”

Scootaloo shook her head. “No. Nightmare Moon ordered me to slay Celestia so she can commandeer the fleet as the new ruler of Equestria. The old regime will be disposed of, including you.”

“But Scootaloo, I’m your friend!” Pinkie said. “Remember the good times we had? Remember the party I threw where you met Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle? Remember the story I told you about how I got *my* cutie mark? Remember the Cute-ceañera I threw for the three of you when the growth hormone aged you all to adults? Say, where are Apple Bloom and Sweetie Belle, anyhay?”

“They’re dead. I killed them both.”

“Oh. Guess I’d better get on the hatch, then.”

That was when the voice came over the intercom: The voice of Rainbow Dash, who was alone on the bridge of the flagship, clutching the wounds that under stress had reopened. “Attention, armies of Equestria and the human fodder. This is Captain Rainbow speaking of the flagship, Friendship. As we pass through the twilight of this war, we must no longer flutter shy of the night that envelops us. Survival beyond this point is a rarity, and death has claimed every member of the royal family. Not a single one of our leaders remain, and just as you have rebuked me now for my fealty to you all, so I rebuke you in turn. I have nopony to be loyal to anymore. My child is dead, killed by that bastard, Onyx, all because you couldn’t love or tolerate him or her. That is why I am taking you all with me. The end is something none of us can change any longer, any more than you can steer the rain. Those clouds are the future that cannot be attained. You have no chance of survival, so make your time now.”

Rainbow Dash flicked away the mouth of the speaking tube and hunched over on what remained of Celestia’s throne, one foreleg clutching over the bleeding wound of her pelvis where Onyx had aborted her child. This was something far, far worse than your run-of-the-mill hernia. By the time the guards had broken through the locked doors, Rainbow Dash was already standing by the broken window at the fore of the ship. She took the time to punt Onyx’s severed head out of the ship so it could tumble to earth, far below. “Sayonara, suckers!” she said, giving them a sarcastic salute before hopping outside. Whatever she’d done to the steering wheel before she’d left had sent the zeppelin into a dramatic turning that put the guards off their balance.

As Rainbow Dash passed by Harbinger in her great swoop upwards, the latter was growing impatient with his climb. He’d wrapped the rope around one arm to deter falling, since it would be a futile trip to fly back up if he revealed himself. Still driven by bloodlust, he lashed out with his free arm and raked his draconic claws through the balloon’s fabric. The first layer of durable velour, or whatever it was, was shredded like drapes in a room full of cats. He slashed at the spongier layer underneath, cutting it apart until a foul air blustered out at him. Harbinger let out a choked cry of surprise as his human shape was thrown aside. The rope uncoiled from his arm as he fell backwards. He tried to grab for it again and felt it in his hand when he did not expect it. His other arm foolishly protected his satchel, and he lost his grip on the rope altogether. He caught it again towards the very end as the blimp started careening sideways.

Rainbow Dash kept climbing. Flying, she felt free, and it was a feeling she hadn’t touched in a long time. She’d spent far too much time sitting on a throne as a member of the fighting royal family, but now that she had nopony to answer to, she pulled on a pair of Wonderbolt goggles she’d taken with her. “Buck yeah.”

Higher and higher she went, but she hadn’t escaped the notice of one of the Belarusian fighter planes. “Hey, uh, you got a peggy on your six,” one said to the other. The other Roger-ed that and engaged to pursue with little luck. Rainbow Dash was too swift for his guns, always swerving his out of the way from his forward guns. The other plane joined in after a vertical U-turn, neglecting the larger threat of the planes attacking the rebel camp. Rainbow Dash zoomed right up out of his sight before he could open fire. “Dang it, Green Leader, why’re we having trouble shooting the tiny blue thing in the sky?”

“I thought we weren’t doing nicknames on account of there’s only two of us,” Green Leader replied. The two returned to the battle at hand, forfeiting the speedy, ascending mare. They split off, performing trick manoeuvres to spiral their fire upon heavy targets, suppressing pegasi mooks with ballistic fire, and doing what were known as Adlerian loops before the pony holocaust. These pilots were ace. They were the best of the best, and even though there weren’t many pilots left after the ponies had bombed most factories and air fields, they were still the top of their would-be class. One blimp tried to crush a plane by colliding with another blimp, but the pilot zipped out from between them just in time, and they scraped and bounced off one another, their own girth slowing the procedure down. One of the remaining anti-aircraft missiles managed to take them both out at once, and the resulting explosion brought with it many a flaming pony careening to the earth like shooting stars.

One plane could be viewed through the bridge window on Nightmare Moon’s vessel, screaming straight towards it before veering down and blasting the main forward cannon into smithereens. Her zeppelin rocked and groaned inside like a stomach on the verge of throwing up. Nightmare Moon herself was seated on the captain’s chair like a throne, boredly leaning against one foreleg and swirling a wine glass of apple cider balanced on her other hoof. When Tyrone and Ivan unwittingly stumbled into the bridge room and drew their guns on her, she brightened considerably. “A-ha! At last you have come, accursed humans, swarming like parasprites across generations. What is a man? A miserable little pile of meat. But no matter—“

Then Ivan unloaded another cartridge from his assault riffle into her. Her glass smashed where she dropped it as her body heaved and jolted every which way before sliding out of her chair and sprawling upon the wood. “I don’t think so, Black Snooty,” he said. Then she picked herself up off the ground, hooves standing first, with the rest of her swaying upwards into view like a yo-yo on a string, with her head following upright last.

“Fool! You think that is enough to stop me? Ha ha ha ha!”

Tyrone looked over his shoulder and saw the other humanoid figure standing in the room with them. He didn’t recognize them, but a certain kind of unidentified dread gnawed away at his gut, jerking on his instinct and drawing him in to take a big, steaming look. The figure was standing at the helm, manoeuvring the steering wheel, but with his shoes pointed Tyrone’s way. If his torso was facing Tyrone, then his face should have been looking at him, but his face was just a mass of tangled, dirty hair. Upon closer inspection, Tyrone saw that the neck had very large stitches, and he realized that the body and head had been severed, with the latter piece being reattached on backwards. The figure had to bend its arms backwards to reach the steering wheel. When he turned himself around to look at Tyrone, the latter let out a “Aw, no.”

It was Logan. His skin was pale and his head was on backwards. *It was Logan.* There were two puncture wounds on the base of his neck spaced about as far apart as canine teeth would be in a pony’s mouth. How the *hell* could it be Logan? Irish said he was dead! Logan let go of the steering wheel and turned to face Tyrone. Ivan raised his gun at him. “Pony slaves are already dead to us,” he said. “Stand down or die.” Tyrone, panicked, raised his arm to shoo Ivan’s gun away.

“He is my thrall,” Nightmare Moon said with no deficit of pride. “His body was looted alongside Onyx’s from Africa, and he has received my vampiric gifts. He was going to be a snack, but I required nourishment to manifest myself after Rainbow Dash’s misdeeds. I think I like my grotesque little pet. After I kill the pair of you, I’ll make you just like him, and you’ll spread my blessing like a virus amongst your race.” Ivan and Tyrone turned back around. Tyrone was fuming as he cocked his gun extra hard at the vampony. “Please,” she said. “Your weapons are useless against me, and you can’t very well fight in the dark like I can.” With that announcement, Logan stepped away with an apology and pulled down a vast shutter from the ceiling which covered the window, casting the unlit room into darkness with a loud clang.

Light did not even seep in through the adjacent corridors, of which only one door was even still open. Ivan and Tyrone fired off their guns in a panic, but in the fleeting flashes of muzzle flare, they could just make out after a couple of seconds that Nightmare Moon was no longer in her seat. They shot wildly for a split second until Tyrone heard Ivan yell out in pain, and he feared the worst. He couldn’t see one inch in front of his nose; how in the heck were they going to fight this mare? If he’d shot him, he’d never forgive himself. “Ivan! Ivan, speak to me!”

“She kicked me in the damn face! Oh god, she cut me good! I think I’m unconscious!” Ivan swung wildly with his weapon, but only found air to bludgeon. “Dammit, she knocked my scope light away somewhere. Did you hear it?”

Tyrone tried to back himself into a wall, but tripped over something, or somebody. He tried to wait where he was, crouching, even though Nightmare Moon had threatened them with night vision, but his eyes wouldn’t adjust to the dark. He fumbled around for his own scope light on his inventory as he spoke, but he thought he could sense motion somewhere right in front of him. The presence worried him; he hadn’t a damn clue who it was. “Logan, you there? Get the hell down, or help us!”

“I can’t,” Logan said. His voice sounded somewhere far away. “I want to, but I just can’t. It’s like you-know-who. If I resist, my blood burns like a match in whiskey!” He neglected to mention he was lying on the ground near the edge, forgotten about by his odious mistress, but trying to crawl his way along the wall to one of the exits.

There was a loud “clonk” sound from the opposite end of the room. “Hey, I think I hit her!” Ivan said. “Go me!”

“No, no, you didn’t,” said Tyrone. “She’s over here.” Before Ivan could ask how he knew, he heard a heavy thud and sensed Tyrone had collapsed. He also heard a slow scuffling on the floor at the other side of the bridge. Tyrone had been struck right in the gut by something long and pointed, and when it happened, he could sense Nightmare Moon lurking in the dark like a monster from under the bed, standing a horn’s length away from him with her head bowed. Her horn had been sticking into the front of his body and jabbing around in there where it didn’t belong, pushing apart bits of him he never liked to think about. Now he was bleeding out on the floor, losing all sense of himself and where he was. He tried to reach for his scope light, feeling sure it had fallen somewhere nearby when he was felled. His fingers brushed against something, but when he felt for it again, it was gone.

“God dammit!” Ivan ran to where he thought the window had been. Knowing that wicked mare would be right on his heels, he turned and fired a spread of bullets across the room. In the brief glimpse of light his gun provided, he could see Nightmare Moon’s snarling, fanged face somewhere in the room towards the right, but she was gone faster than a blink. He turned back to the shutters to feel around for them, and his hands recognized a metallic surface with fine creases in each wide panel. “Dammit, how do you open this stupid, stupid thing?”

A light clicked on, shining on the shutter handle, off to Ivan's left somewhere. He looked behind himself to find Logan reaching behind himself to aim his scope light. Ivan dove for the handle as Nightmare Moon rounded on her thrall. "Shut that light off, damn you!" she hissed, skulking low to the ground at him. Logan obeyed, bathing the room once more in impenetrable un-sight. Then Tyrone clicked his light on. Ivan fought to raise the shutter by both hands. When he noticed the light, he reached for his gun just in time to watch Nightmare Moon stamping on Tyrone's face. He blasted her in the haunch with a spray of bullets, and she grunted and cursed in pain as the light went off again. There was a glassy crunch as she smashed the scope light to pieces, but by that time, Ivan had gotten the shutter to budge. Light once more streamed into the bridge room and showing both Logan and Tyrone laying on the ground by the walls. Tyrone was clutching his face in pain. His nose had been broken. When Ivan turned around, he got a wide-awake, bright daylight scare as Nightmare Moon lunged upon him, snapping her jaws like a rabid hound as she sought to sink her fangs into Ivan's flesh.

Rainbow Dash had no idea how high she'd flown. She was far, far above the battle, so high up that nobody and nopony else even concerned themselves with her. She tweaked her Wonderbolt goggles, then went rocketing downwards at top speed, gravity tugging her along and her wings streamlining her bullet ride to Heck. She streaked through the lower stratosphere, picking up more and more speed as she careened through several hundred meters of sky. A contrail of atmospheric particles accrued at the tips of her front hooves, forming a pale funnel about herself. It had been far too long since she'd felt this kind of speed, the kind of speed that taxed her entire being, that made every cell inside of her scream in foolish delight. It was what the French called "la petite mort". She could feel the air itself like a willowy blanket, tickling her skin. She felt sick, a sensation she'd never had before when attempting this feat. She thought she wasn't going to make it. She pushed that worry aside; such feelings were of no use to her any longer. Her gut felt like it might tear apart in two, just like her heart, but that didn't matter. She was a rock, falling to earth, and she was going to make a big boom about it, too.

Next, there was a high-pitched whistling in her ears. Her teeth felt to be rattling around between her jaws. She felt herself strike the point of no return, tearing through some imaginary fold in the sky, tearing it to shreds like a run-through banner at a high school football match. The blimps were here now, fighting with the planes, and she blitzed into the midst of them all with a cacophonous explosion that wreaked the sound barrier in a circular array of colours. Every hue of the rainbow fanned out in a tremendous, slicing outburst, the g-forces of which split open the blimps and knocked the planes right out of the sky. Even the pegasi were thrown aside, their wings becoming crooked as they fluttered about in disarray. One of the blimps even burst into flames from the particle friction that obliterated it.

Rainbow Dash heaved. Her gut was ice and fire, but despite the pain, she never felt more relaxed in her life, so she shut her eyes. Daniel was thrown against the mattresses he'd surrounded himself with in barricading the doors of the flagship's barracks. The hatch Pinkie Pie had been standing open gave way, dropping her and the nuke between her legs out from the belly of the ship. She waved her Stetson hat around on her hoof and shouted, "Thanks, Obama!" as she fell. On Nightmare Moon's ship, Ivan found the strength to throw her back as their vessel nearly plummeted sideways through the air. He walloped the evil alicorn in the face with his gun, and then both he and Tyrone emptied everything they had from their weapons right at her head until her neck was naught but a bloody stump.

Harbinger was knocked loose from the blimp and sank through the air, thinking what a stupid thing that was to do. He was going to transform, but he became transfixed with the glowing mushroom cloud that was down under him. "Now, what in the hell is that?" he thought, a second before he fell right into the atomic blaze. His body, along with Paragon's head, were disintegrated on impact with the searing, radioactive heat.

The fleet was destroyed. Flames and ponies rained down over the edge of Moscow. Now, I told you those three stories so I could tell you the next one. The moral thus far: Don't listen to ponies or you'll end up like Kony.

To be concluded.

Why do I have to behave myself?
I never care the things you say.
Why do we have to be patient enough?
Always seekin' to make a chance.

- Pierrot Molinier