HAICH VERSUS P

Haich Versus P 4

The stakes have never been more and consequences will never be the same.

The Finally

By Semeny Licket, Tom, and Daniel.

Commissioner	Daniel
Based on Characterization by	Tom
Author	Semeny Licket
Title Font and Graphics	Greg the Robot
Consultant and Music Mixer	Hawker Hurricane

Disclaimer

I was going to write here about all the inadvertent objectionable material that occurs when any such material is created. I was going to warn about the frequent obscenities, the high volume of graphic violence, the Flanderized superstitions of people living behind painted geographical lines, and all the morally questionable content that's bound to be attributed when you make the mistake of attributing a context of allegorizing when a story really is nothing but a collection of words depicting a series of events. I was going to run through the things I'd overlooked when I came to the realization that you would have spent the entire journey distracted with looking for these things never to find them, the way I have never found Wally in any of his eye-bleeding, Sisyphean picture books. After the careers of Tom Green, Seth MacFarlane, Matt Stone, Trey Parker, George R. R. Martin, and countless online nobodies, it's too late. Chalk it up to performance art, or satirical irony or refuge in audacity, and too much worse has already been excused.

The following literature is a parody. All My Little Pony intellectual properties are © Hasbro. All Call of Duty intellectual properties are © Infinity Ward and Activision. It goes on from there. All other intellectual properties not original to Haich Versus P are © their respective rights holders. All characters and places are fictionalized. If they resemble anyone you know, you should seriously consider changing your address of permanent residence.

The character of Jenny Everywhere is available for use by anyone, with only one condition: This paragraph must be included in any publication involving Jenny Everywhere, that others might use this property [meaning Jenny Everywhere] as they wish. All rights reversed.

Table of Contents

ACT I: EARTH 6

1. The Queen's Vagina 7
2. The Seas are Paved With Gold 23
3. When You're in Distress 35
4. Notch's First World Problems 59
5. Those Who Don't Work 78
6. The Shining, or Scientific Progress Goes "Boink" 95
7. The War Begins 113
8. The Kimpsons 125
9. Down the Barrel of a Gun 135
10. Pandemonium 147
11. Puff the Magic Dragon 168
12. Chaos Theory 182

ACT II: EQUESTRIA 194

13. Final Prologue 195
14. Good Morning, Manehattan 203
15. Temptation of the Shining Phoenix 211
16. How the Grinch Stole Hearth's Warming Day 222
17. Haich Versus P the Musical 231
18. What Echoes Will Carry 'Til the Sunshine 243
19. The Gryphons are Coming, the Gryphons are Coming 251
20. School's Out Forever 261
21. The Canterlot Crossing 270
22. Rocks Fall 277
23. Racing the Sun 288
24. Just Deserts and the Death of Death 300

In the beginning, there was nothing, and then, there was chaos.

The Road So Far

Carry on my wayward son.
There'll be peace when you are done.
Lay your weary head to rest.
Don't you cry no more.

In the year of our lord, two thousand and twelve, anno Domini, a race of evil beings we call the Equestrians came to our earth through a trans-dimensional portal of unknown principle. They brought with them plagues of war and chaos, and their armies overthrew the collective human race.

James Williams stood on the front line and stared at the menacing pony army. Amongst his legions were three thousand men, as well as his loyal companion, John Horridge. In a matter of minutes, most of those men were dead, including John. James crawled out of the final trench to come face-to-face with the leader of the Equestrian army, mutated into a humanlike form to combat the humans on their level. With one swift motion, Twilight Sparkle slit James's throat. With a twinkle in her eye, she raised the raw, quivering mass of his flesh to her lips and began to consume with glee.

Humans scarcely stand as but a small population of "survivors"; a feeble resistance born of hopeless hope and led by the Williams family, who carry about them the last understood remnants of wealth and nobility in a conquered world.

"But Dad, I'm just not a leader," Daniel said to Peter in the latter's office on the first day of training.

"Without [your brother], the time is now, son. Go out and kill those ponies to the extreme."

"I have one condition," Daniel said. "Me and my friends stay in the same squad."

A tornado was swallowing up the plane transporting human troops to the pony base in Berlin. The vehicle could be seen breaking apart in twain before the funnel cloud obscured it completely. Quiescence overtook the unlucky occupants as the Humvee free-fell a hundred and fifty feet before landing in a forest lagoon with a tremendous splash like a bomb had gone off.

Once I rose above the noise and confusion
Just to get a glimpse beyond the illusion.
I was soaring ever higher,
But I flew too high.

"Logan Walker was killed in action in Uganda; his body never recovered." 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.

"Well, they printed off the pictures of the plans they saw on the camera me and Tyrone gave them, but they missed the last one off. And it's simple: We borrow the equipment we need." Logan gave a wry grin. "We pledge our loyalty to one another here and now, but this may be our one shot to find out what's happened to Daniel. In all likelihood, his is a suicide mission."

It was Logan. His skin was pale and his head was on backwards. 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. "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."

Nick shook a hand uneasily and introduced himself. "Nick Bronson. Good evening, sir!" He stood up and saluted. A sprightly grin donned his friendly face. Over three years later, he found himself welding cover onto the back of an open van as they raced their way into New York to prevent an inevitable tragedy.

Becky Williams gave him a smile and a wink as he sat down, and found his hand beneath the table. Nick smiled back. "Are we going to talk about how you said you loved me?"

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.

A grenade thudded next to the outhouse, and after a second, it blew up, the force alone collapsing the outhouse down on the ground. Shrapnel dug into Irish's hip and elbow like a bird coming home to roost, but by some miracle, the reinforced, lacquered wood ate most of the metallic chunks. The outhouse itself landed on its door, trapping Irish inside. Irish was stuck within. He put his hands over his head as excrement oozed across his shins.

"Even in death you continue to keep up your annoying and terrible jokes!" said Rainbow Dash.

The crowd let out another cheer as Irish was pushed against the crucifix, and his arms were stretched out across it. 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. Irish took a deep breath as the guard lined up the hammer with the head of the nail, 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. 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.

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.

Tyrone performed a rap on a little stage, which was barely wide enough for his legs to stand pressed together on, positioned in the room's only corner. Afterwards, he pulled up a chair across the table from Daniel. “I can't find Irish. I think they left him behind.”

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!”

Ivan heard a heavy thud and sensed Tyrone had collapsed. 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.

"Private [Thomas] Taylor-Randall!"

"Here, have a drink on me!" Tom said.

In that instant, Tom did something he regretted before he’d even done it. As his finger pulled the trigger, he was not thinking of pulling the trigger. Daniel still wore a perturbed expression as his body rose up halfway only to fall back down on his side.

After going berserk during the fall of Moscow, Tom ended up in hospital. “Turns out Claire was never mine. I am so done with women, man. I can't stay here. I just need to get away from it all. I can't go on like this.” 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.

Though my eyes could see, I still was a blind man.
Though my mind could think, I still was a mad man.
I hear the voices when I’m dreamin’.
I can hear them say:

This time, Daniel answered Tom. “They drugged me,” he said. “They coerced me into working for them. They have a drug a million times harder than sodium thiopental. They can actually make us do things just by injecting us with a substance. Even now, I’m still under its effects. There is no known cure. Shooting me would be the best thing you can do.”

Peter pulled a chair up beside Daniel’s bed and let out a sigh as he sat down on it. “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.”

“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.

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 take your supplies, but we refuse to help. I didn't want to mention that as it's kind of dishonourable."

Daniel 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!"

Yuri 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’?”

“They killed my family!” Daniel shouted.

“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 quickly as he could hobble on his cane.

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.

Carry on! You will always remember.
Carry on! Nothing equals the splendour.
Now your life's no longer empty.
Surely Heaven waits for you.

"Shut up about magic! The gods gave it to us, and they took it from us! We must respect that," said Celestia. 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.

Flapping his wings faster and faster, Discord lifted off the ground, abducting Daniel with him. On the Equestrian flagship, several rings of brighter light swooped up a luminous column, lifting Onyx off his feet and pressing him flat against the ceiling. 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." 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. He held his arms aloft, gazing upwards even though Daniel could see nothing remarkable there.

The voice of Rainbow Dash spoke out over the zeppelin loudspeakers. "Attention, armies of Equestria and the human fodder. Not a single one of our leaders remain."

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.

Carry on, my wayward son.
There'll be peace when you are done.
Lay your weary head to rest.

"My child is dead, killed by that bastard, Onyx, all because you couldn't love or tolerate him or her," Rainbow Dash said.

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.

"That is why I am taking you all with me."

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. 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.

The hatch Pinkie Pie had been standing over gave way, dropping her and the nuke between her legs out from the belly of the ship. Harbinger became transfixed with the glowing mushroom cloud that was down under him. His body, along with Paragon's head, were disintegrated on impact with the searing, radioactive heat.

Don't you cry no more.

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. "It looks like we're in for a big ol' storm of chaos!"

ACT I: EARTH

MLGVMLP

1. The Queen's Vagina

It was after the apocalypse. No one was prepared for the pony holocaust. What you are about to read is true. No names have been changed, because that would be dishonest.

The next year brought confusing times, like eating two separate languages of alphabet cereal because neither box has enough for one bowl alone. It seemed the world over was overfilling their bowls with rationed milk, hoping these letters would spell out some clue, some sort of sign of what to do now that their leaders were gone, now that all military intelligence was up in arms, and now that, just like the very beginning of this wretched war, everything had been turned upside down once again. Too bad it still didn't look right-side up. Tony the Tiger was saying something was "GRZBT," Chip the Wolf was howling some lorem ipsum incantation to the elder gods, and Tricks the Rabbit was being informed in all uncertain terms that, "Kids are for Trix."

What had gotten our Earth into this sorry state was the chaotic destruction of the Equestrian fleet which not only irradiated the eastern bloc, forcing an evacuation from Minsk and cutting off Moscow, but saw with it the apparent loss of the enemy Equestrians' known leaders and the passing of the torch by the Human Resistance to Ivan Matskevich, leader of the Belarusian resistance. To the survivors of the pony holocaust and the longest six years in human existence of attempted genocide (which was saying something), their enemies remained the same carnivorous ponies as before, but they had no idea who their allies were. To their higher-ups, the military authorities which ruled humanity under the Williams family up until a year ago, they had no idea who their enemies were any longer. Worse yet, Moscow's Intel was off-limits and likely stolen for Equestrian meddling. Humanity was screwed. Again.

So it came to pass that these messages were left up to rumour and hearsay. People constantly speculated on when the next attack would come. Some guessed that the Neo Soviet military government had already surrendered and people were disappearing to become pony food. Scandalous busybodies told their neighbours their children had died in Equestrian concentration camps. Many elderly couples ignored the constant cautionary warnings and decided to move to isolated cabins located out in the wilderness. Who was there to trust in a world with such villains in it? What lies did one choose to listen to when a man who does many wrong things tells you one truth in between them all, but that truth, in this next case, becomes the exception to the rule?

Wolves are wild animals, and therefore dangerous, but despite their danger, they are impressive creatures with fascinating family structures and a startling knack for language. The Iron Wolves Corporation deserves no respect, but they demanded it, and people were in a mindset to listen, provided they were not listening to yet more warnings about the dire state of their lives. At least, not unless those warnings came with promises, so long as the only obligation on their part was more listening. It was a large world, after all, and one could not simply overcome the information barriers by standing in London and looking towards South Africa to know of the trouble down there.

If they could, they would see the situation come to a head. The capital city's largest courthouse lay in a busy street between converted apartment housing; its sidewalks speckled with stains of vomit like courthouses the world over. The interior was much nicer by post-event standards than most; there were very few shoeprints and spatula wounds in the woodwork. Otherwise, the scrappy human race had put together rather a nice shindig with a judge's pulpit made from the finest corrugated cardboard, a substitute stenographer in the form of an Etch-a-Sketch, and it was fine that none of the jury chairs matched in style. In the judge's chair sat an older woman with frizzy hair and dangly earrings, wearing a robe of many colours. In the jury box sat Charles Nelson Reilly, Brett Somers, Fannie Flagg, Richard Dawson, and Betty White, among others. The defence attorney was some stuffy man in thick glasses, a combover, and a moustache with one of those vertically-striped button-down shirt and slacks ensembles that are simply too mundane to merit description. That was the way the courtroom looked when Jacob Nkosi, a local, walked in.

Jacob's father, Olanrewaju, was the prosecuting attorney, which made the walk in all the more difficult, because the lawyer handed his son a rather heavy briefcase. "You ready to see your old man in action again?" his old man asked as he straightened his tie. He had a tone of voice like he was anxious or eager for court to begin. There are reasons why those two words get confused so easily.

"What have you got in this suitcase, bricks?" Jacob asked, answering his question with another question. He was a strong lad, but he had to hold the case in both hands.

His father turned over his shoulder as he walked down the aisle. "Don't look inside my briefcase," he said with a frown. He sat behind the prosecutor's desk where Jacob set down his briefcase with a thud. Jacob then continued to his station where the court bailiff belongs.

The judge banged her gavel which made a kind of hollow "doong-doong" sound. Everyone shut up their already hushed conversations as she spoke the customary opening. "In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups: The police who investigate the crime and the Crown Prosecutors who prosecute the offenders. These are there stories."[1] Everyone else in court responded by saying "doong-doong" aloud, and then sat down. The judge sat there a moment,

[1] Exhaustive research tracks this tradition down as being so ubiquitous as to be quoted verbatim on a formulaic television drama about sexual crimes and a random demographic researched for about ten minutes on the internet.

folded her hands, examined her gavel for a moment then tapped on her chin thoughtfully. “Alright, bring out the first contestant. The case of the Golden Path vee Ivan Matskevich shall begin!”

Led out of the backroom to sit down in the chair beside the prosecutor was Ivan Matskevich, leader of Belarus and the Human Resistance. He appeared dishevelled and cranky, like a man who’s walked a thousand miles in uncomfortable shoes after his uncomfortable vehicle broke down. His Human Resistance hat was hanging onto its base from a small patch of thread. Without all of his ACUs on, his military-issue clothes were tattered and frayed at every seam. His stubble had grown out after giving up on several poor shaves as if he’d gotten a job on a television drama. A Belarusian flag was sewn onto his shirt pocket. Just to be sure, the judge asked him to verify his identity, and a sly look played across his weary eyes as if to entertain a notion of answering falsely after having been summoned to this damn thing. “I am Ivan Matskevich, military leader from Minsk, Belarus, and leader of the Human Resistance.”

THE QUEEN’S VAGINA

Olan nudged Jacob with his elbow. “Watch your ol’ dad work, son. Objection!” He flung his pointer finger out and shouted this last word at the top of his lungs. Everyone jumped, and some people put their hands to their lips and murmured “oh, my” to each other, but none was more impressed than Jacob himself. Pride swelled up his chest like a game of Pop Goes Perfection. He could still count the years since Nelson Mandela came to power, before which his father could never have been a lawyer under the rules of apartheid, and since then, his family was able to move out of the shanty towns and put their life of servitude behind themselves.

“Apartheid” is a word which here refers to an officially-sanctioned practice of racial segregation, which is, I don’t have to tell you, utterly bollocks, another word which means—well, never you mind what it means. It’s a practice which is ridiculous because of numerous reasons, of which two ought to be enough: The first is that human beings are not actually separated into different races; there is only the human race, which makes things rather dull here on the planet Earth (barring invasions from our diminutive equines of the genocidal persuasion). Second, skin pigmentation is almost as ludicrous a determinant for social hierarchy as saying “but it’s what everyone else does” or “a sky wizard said so”. People would easily be able to circumvent this by painting themselves, such as the time I myself had to blend in to cotton candy overstock to escape with a jar of off-brand peach preserves, some spare leftover spiced lentils, and a tin of mixed olives.

“Hoo, we got objection sign!” the judge bellowed. The members of the jury stood up in their seats, hooting and hollering at this ungodly hour of the morning and clapping their hands to some lively soul music. “It’s about to get heated in here! This is gonna get dicier than if New Zealand’s national rugby team came here for the Olympics! Let me hear you bang your hands together, everybody! As the Dark Lord Sean Connery once said, a trial by twelve good men and true is a *sound* system!” She banged her gavel and the jury sat and everyone became quiet again. Olan hobbled his hunched shoulders over to a giant wheel situated vertically in the wall with the words “Sustained” and “Overruled” written on it, alternating sides of the great angular mechanism. He took a hearty pull and the wheel spun, beeping and booping until it finally came to rest on “Sustained”. The judge shouted, “My, my, my, I’m the best-looking judge in this here legal system! Prosecutor may approach the bench and draw a card!”

Olan rubbed his palms together as he walked over to the judge’s box (which wasn’t a bench). “Please not the ‘contempt of court’ card. Please not the ‘contempt of court’ card!” he muttered to himself. The judge fanned out a deck of cards, face side down. He twiddled his fingers then drew out a card and tried his best poker face. “Poker face” is a facial expression intended to convey no emotion whatsoever, so it’s a wonder it’s named after a card game popular with moody, alcoholic gambling addicts and not *Twilight* alumni Kirsten Stewart.

“Don’t tell me what it is, and put it back anywhere you like,” Judge Sassy told him. When he did, she shuffled and cut the deck, then shuffled it again. She flicked them, folded them, flopped them together, then pushed them together and banged on the stack with her gavel. A single card remained stuck to the end of her mallet. “Is *this* your card?”

The card read “Witness.” It was a “witness” card. Olan threw up his hands and said, “That is my card!” The audience cheered wildly and banged their hands together.

Once the hubbub had died down to a low simmer, the judge leaned over and asked Olan, “Now, will you play or pass the testimony?”

Olan nodded. “Prosecution’s gonna play!” When the judge repeated what he’d just said, he jogged back to his table. “I call in my first witness, a little old lady from Notlob who saw the whole thing: Mrs. Crossdresser!”

The judge threw her arms open wide. “Mrs. Crossdresser, come on down!” This was Jacob’s cue. As music spritzed through the room like a lawn sprinkler, he hurried down the aisle to escort the witness to the stand at her own pace.

Mrs. Crossdresser was quite elderly and wore a neck brace, and she approached the front of the court at the speed of Zeno’s fletcher. Along the way, her knobbly, nigh-gelatinous hand patted Jacob’s bum, which annoyed him. “Oh, my, you could bounce a Susan B. Anthony offa those throw pillows!” Giddy, she waggled her shoulders and waved her fists in front of her chest. Jacob was only too glad to get away from her and resume his post at the side of the room, but first he had to ask her to swear on the book of law. “Knickers,” she responded.

Olan cleared his throat and loosened his tie at the same time, as if the latter had been blocking some phlegm waiting to get out. “Mrs. Crossdresser, is your name Mrs. Crossdresser?”

Mrs. Crossdresser had a very high-pitched voice, like a frail, wilting flower. Her chin and lower jaw formed a kind of fist that flapped like a muppet whenever she spoke. “Yes. I married Mr Special-Snowflake 3. Transgender who invented crossdressing and loved it so much he named himself after it.”

“And you were witness to the events of the Russian-Belarusian border on or about the nights of twenty-five August two-thousand and seventeen to eighteen August two-thousand and seventeen?”

“That I was, that I was. You’re a very clever young man. Yes, I’ve come here to testify about that, even though I don’t remember all the words. You see, I just had blank surgery today.”

Too bad for Olan that the prosecuting attorney, whose name tag read, “Hi, my name is Toby”, slammed his table’s buzzer down first. A buzzer is a button that does exactly what it says on the tin. The whisper-thin man with the sleepy eyes wiggled his moustache and said, “Betty White!” Toby was skinny man with a comb over who had introduced himself by name. He had a moustache which he didn’t introduce, and as he spoke, he kept his feet very stiff together and swivelled his hips from side to side a lot while clutching his fingers with the fingers of his opposite hand. He had a very effete manner of speaking, but it was his condescending attitude that decremented his character.

Betty White is an elderly woman with snowy-white hair, a very round, potato-shaped skull, and a Stepford smile beneath her bright and gleaming eyes. “Ooh! Oh! Oh! Ooh! Um. Vagina?”

Judge Sassy wiggled her head from side to side. “Do I have vagina surgery? Survey says:”

Mrs. Crossdresser couldn’t disguise the impish smile on her droopy-jowl face. “No, no.”

There was a sad “aw” from the aw-dience, but Olan’s turn was next. “Charles Nelson Reilly!”

Charles Nelson Reilly stopped playing with his thick-lensed glances to respond. “Well, I’d just travelled from Thailand to Cambodia with my life partner, Peter Mayhew, and for the very first time in my life, I finally tried *real* monkey brains. So I’m gonna say brain surgery. Brain surgery?”

Mrs. Crossdresser let out a “hee-hee” of titillation and waggled a bone of a finger. “That’s the one!” The judge banged her gavel with a “doong-doong”, and the old crone’s testimony was allowed to continue. “I don’t get what happened at the end because I’m intensely stupid, but I think I recall seeing a bunch of blank, and then they exploded.”

“A bunch of blank that exploded!” Judge Sassy repeated, although this was one of Mrs. Crossdresser’s few utterances that were clearly audible for once. “Girl, you better not be saying anything filthy under there.” She snickered. The audience chortled like a popcorn machine.

This time, Olan buzzed in before Toby. “Fannie Flagg? Hm hm hm!” Toby swung his arm and snapped his fingers. Richard Dawson shrugged both arms to his sides then slapped them down on his lap.

Fannie shrugged. “Balloons?” The other jurors looked at her as if expecting more, but that was it.

Mrs. Crossdresser leaned over to the judge, who leaned over in turn, and the former whispered to the latter, “I’m pretty sure they were dirigibles. Aren’t those sorts of balloons?” she asked. “Dirigible” is a word which here means “zeppelin”.

Judge Sassy nodded and announced, “The judge will allow it!”

“It was very confusing,” said Mrs. Crossdresser, “Like the time I forgot my grown-up diapers.” She paused for a long moment as though having forgotten where she was and what she was saying. After a few wondering glances from everyone else, she resumed. “I

always had plenty of diapers living in blank. Ivan was our leader, always fetching blanks for us. We had a deal with Moscow to exchange military support in turn, and hid in Minsk with our doors shut as they were blanked."

After the jury had guessed the words "Minsk," "supplies," and "conquered" (with a few rude words in between), the audience did not need to be prompted to gasp in shock. The reaction may have been canned, but the implications that angered Ivan were not lost on them. He muttered to himself and spiked his water to stay himself. Judge Sassy banged her gavel. "Wasn't she great, ladies and gentlemen? Let's give Mrs. Crossdresser a big hand! Her testimony is now over, she may go in peace!" To uproarious applause, Jacob walked over to collect Mrs. Crossdresser from the witness box and out of the courtroom. He watched her walk straight out of the doors and into a wall which she attempted in vain to pass through.

Mondays were the easy days of the week, Jacob thought. Wednesdays were the paternity and adultery suits, and that meant chair throwing and wrestling. Protecting the law in South Africa City, South Africa may not have been as glamorous or as dangerous every day as fighting the Equestrian overlords, but he believed it to be just as worthy a cause to the survival of the human race. At least he still got to flash his gun around, even if he didn't shoot it off much. By the time he returned to the front of the courtroom, Toby the defence attorney had drawn a witness card (and thankfully not the race one), so Jacob had to escort Ivan all of five feet to the witness box. Ivan did not take kindly to the gesture, and whipped his elbow away. Jacob expected to get it back right in his stomach, but Ivan did not make that mistake. When Jacob silently offered to take his drink from him, Ivan tugged it back territorially. When Jacob asked him to swear on the book of law, Ivan said, "Bloody."

After Jacob took his position, nothing happened for a long, long time. Judge Sassy and the two lawyers shuffled their papers, and as Jacob passed by his father, he could see the old man trembling a touch as he looked through his notes. Most everyone else was passing the time playing pale shadows of games on their iDroidBerries, except for Ivan who was wondering why in the hell they weren't getting it all over with already. "Do you want me to testify now, or not?"

Judge Sassy came nipping on the heels of his words. "You just simmer down there, son! We'll get to your testimony when we're good and ready, so don't give us any baby sass backtalk." Ivan could only stare with such a look of consternation. "Consternation" is a word which here means the sort of look one gives when one is under the impression, mistaken or otherwise, that one is under a superior moral authority regarding someone else's behaviour. The judge ignored him and said, "Defence may commence."

"Don't I get a chance to defend myself after being accused first?" Ivan asked.

"Boy, if you weren't in trouble, you wouldn't be in a court room! Now don't you piss on my head and tell me it's a tsunami!" At Judge Sassy's words, the audience let out a roar of laughter and applause. This was another zinger for the commemorative book of Judge Sassy's trials, which would later devote an entire chapter to why this particular trial was such an outrageous headache for her, and why it was almost refreshing when the new, fireproof sets could be built.

Toby stood by the judge's bench towards the side of the witness booth. He raised his gaze from his desk and wiggled his moustache at the audience. He stood in the same spot for the majority of his questions, keeping his hands limply batting one another while bending from one side to the other as if for emphasis. "Ladies and gentlemen of the studio audience, does this really sound like the sort of man who would claim leadership over the human race? The same man who refused to return aid to those in desperate need? When Moscow was in a state of emergency, all he did was fill his own pockets. Does that sound like a man with any interest in leading us?"

"Excuse me," Ivan said, but he was shushed by the judge. He didn't seem happy about his own defence attorney's take on events, particularly when it wasn't quite what he had in mind. Particularly when it was virtually the opposite of the claims he sought to uphold. Being shushed is never pleasant, especially since more often than not, the person doing the shushing is the one who ought to shut up and listen, which explains why they're shushing someone in either case. It would certainly be up there on a top ten list of "most annoying noises made by the human race" of which there is no such list because there's no way anyone could ever possibly limit it to just ten.

Toby didn't ignore his client completely. He leaned over, oblivious of his own timid demeanour, and snapped at Ivan in a hushed voice. "Don't you interrupt me. I don't care what your problem is." He turned away to address everyone else in the room once again. "Now, I'm well aware none of you want to hear him speak, but he is the defendant, and he's the only one here who can tell us what happened after the fall of Moscow." Once more he turned to Ivan. "You will now tell the court what happened during this 'balloon attack', and be sure to use complete sentences. Otherwise I'll mark you wrong."

Ivan did not want to care about the strange way they did things down in South Africa after the pony holocaust. This sentiment was pretty much the decisive factor in why he stayed put in Belarus. His heavy sigh was enough to demonstrate that he couldn't care less if the story of the Equestrian Armada got out, and he began his testimony. "Shortly after the fall of Moscow, the ponies gave chase after the…" He trailed off here and gave a visible shudder of disgust at what he had to say next. "Blanks. With their zeppelin armada."

Toby's choice of Betty White guessed "humans" incorrectly (which is to say it was not the correct word, not that her manners were poor), and Judge Sassy could tell from the way Ivan shook his head that they were looking for a more specific word. Olan was the first to call on Richard Dawson who stood up and said, loudly and clearly, as if everyone before him had slurred their speech, "Refugees?" He swung his arms out at his sides and continued to speak over Ivan's confirmation. "Was that so hard? 'Refugees' was correct, wasn't it?"

"Sit down, Dick!" Betty begged him, and he did because she sounded pleading enough.

Being constantly interrupted is no way to tell a story, and enforcing their own interpretations of your words is no way for two parties to comprehend one another. Nonverbal communication is omnipresent, but it is still by no means the most important communication, because Ivan's frustration sat plainly on his face, and the court read it as just another blank for them to insert their own interpretation of his motivations. He could tell them why he preferred to stay in Belarus, but it would be like alerting them to the wetness of the ocean. He decided to answer all their questions like he was in a debriefing.

"We engaged the enemy with ground and aerial forces, and I, along with a small contingency of marines, managed to board. Rainbow Dash, a commander of the enemy Equestrians, formed a sonic boom—that is, a supersonic shockwave as she broke the sound barrier, which decimated the majority of the pony fleet in a single blast. A nuclear device delivered to us from Cuba was activated and fell upon the Russian-Belarusian border, irradiating the region."

"You've got to say the blanks," Judge Sassy insisted. "That way we can corroborate your story by making sure it's sensible enough to guess from prompting."

"We can edit in the 'blanks' later, right?" Toby suggested, as he, too, had lost his patience with his client. She gave the go ahead on this, so Toby told Ivan not to stutter.

"Why are you such a terrible defence attorney?" Ivan asked, his face looking pained.

Toby shrugged. "Court-appointed defender. You get what you paid for."

"That is a ridiculously capitalistic way of looking at things, but unlike you, I have a sense of professionalism. To continue with my testimony, the following Human Resistance members who were part of the airship siege teams are confirmed dead: Green Leader and Yuri Raslov. Human Resistance members confirmed missing, considered dead: Logan Walker and Daniel Williams. Equestrian officers confirmed dead: Nightmare Moon, Pinkie Pie, Prince Blueblood, Scootaloo; Rainbow Dash, conqueror of Berlin, Hainan and New York; and Onyx, the destroyer of Moscow. The ground forces of the Human Resistance presumed killed in the battle and the resulting nuclear fallout have been published in an incomplete albeit public report."

Toby plucked through his cue cards he'd taken from his shirt pocket then held up his hands in surrender. "Your honour, I have—I have no more questions at this time."

Judge Sassy turned her gaze on Olan, looking very bored as she balanced her cheek against her stubby fist. "Alright. Will the prosecution pass or play?"

Olan happily drummed his hands on his desk. "Play!" He leaned towards Jacob and whispered, "Watch your old man in action." He jogged over to the bench then rubbed his palms together. "Mr Matskevich, are you a liar?"

Asking someone if he's a liar is a lot like praying in that any answer you get is likely not to be any answer at all. It's not a question posited to whomever you're speaking; rather, it's a question for anyone listening, for the same purpose one starts a brushfire in a forest. Of all the fires in the world, an inflammatory idea has the potential of being the most destructive force on a planet dominated by a sentient species. It can stir paranoia by playing off the most basic animal instinct humans have for survival: Fear. Such questions comprise a phrase which here is referred to as a "leading question". It's a leash you tug to lead your dog away from home where it can find all sorts of distracting things to sniff at, none of which smell particularly good.

Even Ivan knew the query was foul, but either side was convinced the other was being dilatory. "Can he ask me that? He can't ask me that. I don't have to answer anything meant to incriminate me." There was loud booing and even hissing from the audience. Ivan was surprised at that—he wasn't aware anyone ever actually hissed. It was kind of strange to hear, because booing is more than enough.

Judge Sassy's voice lit up like a doubting balloon. "Are you kidding me? You're gonna just forfeit the case here and now? I can declare you guilty by inadmission. Don't test me, boy. Now answer the question."

Ivan sighed up the vapours from the last of the drink he'd brought with him. "I don't reveal military secrets."

Judge Sassy waved her gavel at Ivan. “You were asked a yes or no question, young man. You give a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. You’ve now got your first official reprimand from me.” This remark, which was answered with loud “oohs” from the audience, was what is known as a “threat” which is a promise to commit some detrimental act, usually violence, against someone. The phrase “yes or no answer” refers to the response given to a question which expects an answer of either “yes” or “no”. It’s a form of censorship and summary which neglects the full and complete answer. The report of humanity’s epic final war for survival would be rather shorter than four books if they just answered “yes” to the question of “Do the humans win?” You would never know how they survive, what they were fighting against, nor at what costs come their ultimate reward. You would never know the characters’ names, the significance of how this war changed the world and the human race. You would never know the entire series of questions which make up stories, and only know answers that end them.

Olan placed his hand on the edge of the witness booth. “What sort of military secrets?”

Ivan’s eyes bulged. “I can’t tell you that!”

“So you admit you’re a liar!” Olan turned to the audience to announce this denouement.

“Oh, snap!” said Judge Sassy to whistles and chuckles from the gallery. Ivan felt intense annoyance from being contrived into such a trap, so he had to channel this frustration into a gesture of leaning on his elbow and clutching his forehead. Sensing the awkward silence, Judge Sassy prompted another question from Olan. “Finally, we’re getting somewhere. Our defendant is a liar.”

Olan laid his hands on the witness bench. “Mr Matskevich, why did you leave the shelter of Minsk to begin with? Why risk endangering Belarus, if that was your aversion?”

“Because I was in Moscow during its fall to loot the bodies of soldiers who had been...blanked.” Ivan swept a drying gaze about the courtroom. “That was when I *rescued* the previous leader of the Human Resistance, Daniel Williams.”

“Eaten?” asked Betty White.

“Immolated!” guessed Charles Nelson Reilly.

“Slapped on the wrist and sent home without dessert?” said Fannie Flagg.

“Crucified!” shouted Richard Dawson. “It’s about time I got called on around here.”

The other members of the jury turned around to frown at Richard, but only Charles Nelson Reilly spoke on their behalf. “Come on, Dick, you got called on so exclusively back in the day that nobody even remembers who the heck the rest of us were.”

Richard sat and stretched his lips out straight while tapping a big cigar. “Shut up, Fuckface. I’m Richard Dawson. I look like a sleazy used car salesman; it’s why the bitches dig me. They dig my rugged greasy skin and toupee look. They hate you, Chuck, ‘cause you look like a fat fag, and I can get away with that by calling it a cigarette, which isn’t at all a denigration of the word ‘cigar’.”

Jacob had to speak up. “Uh, we’d just like to interrupt here to say that Seth McFarlane was a self-professed advocate of homosexual rights.”

Betty White leaned forward in her seat and shook her head. “They’ll probably get Sammy Davis Jr. to replace him anyway, and it won’t make any difference.”

Judge Sassy banged her gavel several times in a row, the last few just because it was fun. “I’m gonna have to move this trial along. After this one, we’re *finally* taking to trial a man who assaulted a mall employee with a can of mace. Unless anyone can validate Ivan Matskevich’s story, I may be forced to pronounce sentence.” Upon saying this, a timer clicked on above her head, ticking a countdown in indoor stadium lights.

“Your honour,” Olan began, “it is the opinion of the Golden Path that Ivan Matskevich is a false leader of uncorroborated title.”

“I can corroborate his story,” said a shrill, officious female voice that rang out clear as a glass bell through the entire courtroom in an English accent. Everyone present apart from her muttered and looked about in her direction, and as she was the only member of the audience standing and wearing a tiara and robes, she was easy to find. “I am Queen Elizabeth Vagina!” The response to this was delayed on the part of the jury and audience, as the remainder of the court was so surprised that it took them a few moments to turn on the “Gasp” sign. The gasp then turned into an awkward silence as eyes shifted towards one another, as though a gradual realization had come to light that nothing impeded this turn of events. The judge bid the queen to continue, but the latter responded in a rather plain-spoken tone. “That’s about it.” She must have changed her mind about this as soon as she said it, because she elaborated. Still, the court was so surprised by this high-profile guest star they forgot to fill her in on the rules of Fill in the Blank.

“After the fall of Moscow and before the terminus bombing, Daniel Williams agreed to forfeit leadership of the human resistance to Ivan Matskevich, pending certain conditions. Daniel would still be permitted to offer advice provided he underwent medical rehabilitation in the wake of his coma. In the event that Ivan is unable to perform his duties, his son, Joseph, shall take over.”

Upon the completion of the queen of England’s testimony, Judge Sassy banged her gavel for the hell of it. “The prosecution has the chance to steal. Will they pass or play?”

“We’ll play!” Olan rubbed his hands together then leaned aside as his son whispered to him.

“I don’t mean to interfere, but we’re really taking the queen’s word as testimony, Pop?”

“You bet, son. We just press on her statements like any other witness. We made those racists green with envy when I got this job. We don’t need to fear royalty.” Olan kept his gaze on the queen and now addressed her. “This terminus sounds like a busy place. How did your majesty come to hear of this accord?”

“London accepted the few survivors of Moscow, along with key figures of the Human Resistance. They confirmed that for the next year, Ivan would be in charge instead of Daniel.”

Olan nodded, and Jacob again leaned over to him for an aside. “Didn’t the witness just say something unusual there, Dad?”

“Hm? Oh, good ear there, son.” He pointed to the queen. “Could you please add those remarks to your testimony about conditions?”

The queen nodded. “Very well, but that’s in addition to the other conditions I’ve mentioned.”

“Hold it!” Olan shouted. “You said Ivan would only take over for a year, yes? But it’s been well over a year since the fall of Moscow! Wouldn’t Daniel be in charge once more?”

This time, Ivan responded. “If you remember my earlier testimony, Daniel Williams is presumed to have died in the wreckage. He never showed up to reclaim his duty.”

Olan nodded, but this time Jacob tugged on his sleeve. “Why is he only ‘presumed dead’?” Jacob asked. “Has his body gone missing?”

“Surely as a soldier you remember better than I do, son, that the ponies eat humans. I guess in this case, Ivan Matskevich really is the leader of the human resistance from here on out.”

“Objection!” It was clear the voice was meant to sound deep and booming, but Toby’s voice couldn’t visit that octave any more than a species can practically visit planets beyond a lightyear range. There was a round robin as everyone else tried to figure out who made such a weedy squawk before realizing its origin. The phrase “round robin” refers here not to a red bird that has stuffed itself on worms to bloating, but instead to a situation which visits each person in a group in turn, as the court’s speculative glances did here.

Judge Sassy considered herself a consummate professional, however, so it didn’t take her long to announce Objection Sign. The lights and confetti went off, and the audience broke into chorus, swaying from side to side and clapping because there was little else they could do. One member of the audience raised her hands up into the air, waggling them and her head full of curly hair like she was having an exciting epileptic fit or something. “Objection sign! Objection sign! Lord, God, almighty, it’s objection time!”

There was a touch of anxiety in Toby’s hunched walk to the spinning wheel situated in the wall, but after it beeped and booped from a stronger spin than he looked capable of pulling off, it landed on “sustained” which was just as well, because he could always have raised another two objections before getting buzzed. When the judge hit the deck of cards with her hammer, the stack shot Toby’s card out at him: The race card. The audience reacted as if a skateboarder had just fallen flat on his face after failing to understand the physical impracticality of grinding a railing, which is to say they all winced, but Toby outright smirked. The smirk was hard to see, but his moustache nudged to one side. “Your honour, you’ll have to strike everything the persecution has said from the record: South Africa is under apartheid, rendering Olanrewaju Nkosi’s lawyering null and void!”

The courtroom came to a kind of dead stop. Nobody even had the wherewithal to turn their expressions from good cheer into shocked outrage. The paradigm shift—a phrase here meaning “a sudden and dramatic change in perception, right down to how we even perceive things”—was too much to overcome. It was like staring down the bottom of a well and being told things would get better, even though you were being tossed food and the local swing choir was operating a rope and winch to pull you out. Like the presence of the swing choir, there remains an insurmountable dread that even should circumstances improve, your life overall will still remain lacking.

Even Jacob and Olan were struck dumb by this controversial claim. After having put their ugly past behind themselves thanks to Nelson Mandela, nobody in that courtroom was prepared for the word "apartheid" to come into play. Toby maintained all the same smug severity as the time he shouted at one of his science students to order him to keep his seat near the class bully who'd made fun of him for his dad being dead. "If it please the court, there is a contingency of Iron Wolves soldiers stationed inside of this courtroom and outside on the street, setting fire to the adjacent apartment complexes."

"That doesn't please the court at all!" said Jacob. Some people nodded in agreement, but it didn't take long for them to note their demographics did not include much of the audience, whose similarities in mode of dress were now apparent to the others.

There were many men bearing the uniforms of the Iron Wolves Corporation, consisting of red berets, brown combat boots, and dark suspenders worn over white wife-beater shirts. The term "wife-beater" here refers to a sleeveless undershirt being worn as the outermost layer, and carries an unfortunate association with domestic abuse, probably from a work of fiction regarding desirable public transport services. Even more unfortunate was the fact that it was just as diabolical as the Iron Wolves Corporation itself, which Cuban refugee Chrissie Marques reported as having suicide soldiers which sided with the Equestrians during the fall of her island nation a year ago. Intelligence reports on this alliance come into conflict with the Equestrians' tendency to eat humans, but the IWC is known to work for pay.

A corporation is what a group of people hide behind as a representative in legal matters such as contracts or legal transactions, usually so that individuals may not be held responsible for their actions within a group. How a particular corporation handles the benefits, only each case can say, but the one thing shared less evenly than the profits is the blame, particularly if you happen to be on the bottom of the hierarchy ("hierarchy" is a word which here means who's the boss and who gets bossed around by whom). You can think of a corporation as trying to invent a ghost—one person decides what the ghost should look like, another person builds a projector that will make the ghost's image appear, and another person hides behind a curtain with a microphone, moaning and making "boo" sounds. With a corporation, if any of the people involved get discovered working their mechanism, legally, only the ghost can be blamed, until they find a suitable scapegoat (not an actual goat) at the bottom of their hierarchy.

Toby, too, donned the uniform of the Iron Wolves Corporation by pulling a beret out from his back pocket and yanking a fake moustache off from over his real moustache. Needless to say, the effect didn't instil the prosecuting attorney with an aura of menace. Jacob's dread sank in him like a stone when he saw all the armed soldiers clearly outnumbering him, and an avalanche soon followed as they blasted the popcorn-style ceiling with their M4A4s and surrounded the queen. Specks of asbestos crumbled from above, raining the floor like a freak snow shower. "Quick, protect our celebrities!" shouted Judge Sassy. "They're our special snowflakes!" She banged a secret button behind her podium with her gavel, and the platform which carried the jurors zipped into an opening in the wall that shut after their rapid departure.

"Alright, Queenie, you're comin' with us!" one of the Iron Wolves' thugs snorted. There was fear in the grey-haired monarch's eyes, but bravado on her face. She reached for her handkerchief to dab a little more on, but those awful goons were not known for permitting the need of her ladies' things. Jacob dashed to the front of the judge's bench, his hand hovering over his weapon. Ivan leapt clear out of the witness box to land beside him with a swift, clomping motion that was quite jarring and awkward, but went un-ridiculed. One of the Iron Wolves firing his RG14 L85A1 pistol at the floor interrupted their exchange of glances.

While the queen was giving the rogues a stern talking to, Jacob turned to Judge Sassy. "Your honour, I've got to make contact with our military. We'll have to go under."

"Our lives are in your hands," she said, lowering her gavel onto one of the buttons hidden in her podium. Jacob mouthed an apology to his fearful father who could only watch in grim foreboding as his son and Ivan dropped through a trap door which opened beneath them.

Ivan did not take well to the surprise drop, and Jacob himself found the numbness in his legs and the whistling sensation from his keister through his trunk was unpleasant. The fall wasn't really as far as the newness of the experience felt to Ivan, and there was a vinyl mattress at the bottom to catch them. Jacob's knees buckled, but Ivan rolled right onto his back. He kicked his legs up into the air, but was quick to stand himself again, growling and cursing in annoyance. "You could have warned me!" he said. "What's the big idea, anyhow?"

Jacob now drew his gun and shook it at Ivan, who pulled his own weapon a second after. "I could very well ox you the same thing!" Jacob said. "How can you side with the Iron Wolves? They only tell people they're here to help, because that's their game. They *tell* people what to do. I think their declaration upstairs showed that."

Ivan screwed up his face in annoyance, like he'd just zested a lemon across it to cheat in a girning exhibition. "Excuse me? I don't work for them, ass-hat. Your bizarre judicial system *assigned* me a court defender. Why don't you put the gun away before you hurt yourself?" "Ass-hat" is a word which here I'd rather not go into.

Jacob took a moment of dramatic reflection before lowering his weapon. “Okay, usually when someone has the draw on you, you act a little more humble, but you’ve got a point.”

It took a while for Ivan to bitterly stow his own weapon, but after Jacob shot him a more severe glare, he obliged. “Of course I’ve got a point. I don’t get offended by innocuous words. So where in the heck are we, and what kind of name is ‘South Africa’ for a country?”

The pair of them looked about their immediate surroundings as their eyes adjusted to the low lighting. They found jagged, crystalline architecture of amorphous and concentric colour forming a more or less circular arena or antechamber with four hallways receding into the darkness. The polystyrene walls yawned high to the ceiling which had already been closed off to them, and the height of the drop was difficult to discern. In the dimness, the artificiality of the underground sets was mistakable, and the two men were almost in awe; even though Jacob had seen it all before, and Ivan was stone-hearted by nature.

Jacob explained. “After a guilty verdict, the defendant is sent to the Crystal Maze. In the case of divorce proceedings or small claims litigation, both clients get dumped down here. It’s a series of puzzles leading outside from underground. It’s the best escape route for me to contact the South African militia.”

The two men tried not to allow themselves to be mystified by the elaborate settings, and Jacob spun about to recollect which way to go. By the time they could narrow down the direction of the sound of approaching footsteps, they nearly collided with three more figures skulking around in the underground. Jacob recognized two of them: Abeni Stalin, a South African native and one of Jacob’s squad officers, was having a bad hair day, but that was the least of her concerns. Ajay Ghale had a clearly Southeast Asian appearance but the same determined look as on Jacob’s face, and Ivan noticed the look of recognition the pair shared. The third man was bald as a melon with mange and wearing a tacky faux-fur animal-print jacket, and his legs were so impossibly skinny as to diminish the presence of any features from knees to muscle. He wore tall brown boots which failed to match the rest of his attire. When both groups came to a half before one another, the bald man stuck his fists against where his hips should have been.

“Jacob, what’s going on above?” Abeni asked in a thick French accent. She liked to do accents, but her parents had been French, so this one she’d been using since she was a small child. “The Iron Wolves Corporation has the street barricaded. We were hoping to slip in this way.”

“Ajay, Abeni, this is Ivan Matskevich.” Jacob looked the three newcomers over then introduced them to Ivan. “Abeni is part of the African division of the Human Resistance, and Ajay is my friend visiting from China. We were in the middle of his trial when the IWC stood up and declared apartheid. They’ve taken the queen of England captive. We’re trying to sneak out.”

“Follow me,” said the bald man. “I’m the host down here. I know this place like the back of my hands. We’ll have to escape through the Ye Olde West Zone, meaning lots of corridors to run through and cool Stetson hats!”

Ivan would rather have had some answers, but the rest of the group was already taking off down a rocky corridor, leading him to walk and talk, a method of communication that is unrivalled when you wish to avoid dispensing clear information. He fixated on the odd man out: Ajay, who was walking along, tugging on the shoulder strap of his AR-15. “China, huh?” It wasn’t much of a query to make, so he just injected all his venomous moxie into his tone of voice. When Ajay only scowled, Ivan added, “Isn’t the AR-15 prone to primer jams?”

Ajay felt like the back of his neck was being sneezed on, so he turned about, tempering his glare. “No, it’s prone to idiots not being able to load ammunition properly. I swear guns exist just to separate the stupid from the superior. And no, I’m not Chinese. I’m Indo-Chinese, so watch your own triggers instead of mine. I’m Ajay Ghale of the Golden Path.” He turned back around from walking backwards to walk forwards.

By this time, they had happened upon the Ye Olde West Zone, an area located beneath the courtroom which consisted of bright studio lights mimicking the look of high noon on a clear blue day. Prop cow skulls (and nary the larger skeletal structure to be seen) and non-tumbling tumbleweeds littered a wrinkled, sand-hued carpet with picturesque arrangement beneath an azure matte painting of wispy clouds. Stressed wooden storefronts framed what should have been a street if pavement had been invented at the time the simulacrum intended to emulate. Barrels and horse troughs[2] stood at the edge of the woody sidewalk platforms, which sported support beams holding up ornamental balconies. Above that were several signs advertising false proprieties featuring weak puns and in-jokes that it would behove all to omit here.

Ivan competed with Ajay’s former scowl at this taunting introduction. “What does this Golden Path care about persecuting me, anyway? What’s good for the Human Resistance is good for humanity.”

[2] Although controversial to feature during this time, the purpose of the trough was not well-known in this region.

"One of our higher ups, Chen Zedong, was very taken with Daniel within the brief hours before his death that he knew him," Ajay explained. "With Moscow wiped out and the Williams family missing or dead, China is the world's last remaining superpower."

"And you expect the leader of the Human Resistance to just hand the reins of authority over to you." Ivan's smirk vamoosed with the ringing of a gunshot. Jacob and Ajay boldly took the rear guard from whence the bullet had come, and Ivan joined the Host in bunching between them and Abeni because he had no weapons, a fact of which he was quick to remind them. "You confiscated my guns, genius! When we all get killed without my superior gun kata[3] skills, don't blame me!"

Jacob kept a staunch lookout for the moving corridor shadows of the three IWC soldiers he counted following them. The path leading to the crystalline caverns was poorly lit, but he could discern their presence just the same. Grumbling, Ajay shared with Ivan a spare Ruger Mark II, citing something about the equitable redistribution of firearms. Abeni kept their six on watch in case this was only a diversion, and the group sought some inadequate cover behind the nearest pillars and barrels. The situation became real for them when they got their first glimpse of two enemy soldiers, decked out in their berets and suspenders, hiding behind the decorative archway fencing leading into town with the inscription "Okeydokey Corral" on its signage. A drum solo of fatal proportions rolled into use as gunfire was exchanged on both sides, and the Host unhelpfully blew on his harmonica the entire damn time either faction were trying to kill each other. A stray bullet stung across Abeni's shoulder just like in the movies, and though it only grazed enough to tear through the edge of her armour, the velocity still stung. She clutched her shoulder with her other hand and kept right on shooting. Both sides were in a bout of attrition to wear away at one another's cover. The genuine wood proved more durable than polystyrene which was expensive to manufacture in a post-apocalyptic economy.

"Don't worry, team! You've got them on the ropes!" The Host cheered in between blasts of noise on his infernal instrument.

"Yeah? How do you figure?" Jacob fired with purpose at the lower structure of the fence posts to topple the structure faster than chewing his way through the middle.

"They've only got the rest of the Crystal Maze to hide in. We've got these nifty puzzles!"

"Do they *lead* anywhere?" Ivan asked, but only he was incredulous; the other four were already fitting themselves into the three nearest sets of swinging saloon doors. When he spotted the three IWC soldiers using a wheeled wagon for cover in their approach, Ivan too was convinced, and he chose the farthest door to hide himself. The three enemy soldiers adopted a natural recourse of splitting up into each room.

Abeni and the Host landed themselves in what appeared to be a blacksmith's forge. There was a comically oversized safe against the left wall and a deep fireplace standing against the wall opposite the door with an anvil strewn with many pokers. "Ah, this is our skill-based puzzle," the Host was saying. "You see, ultimately you end up tossing horseshoes."

Abeni picked up one of the long, metal prongs and compared its notched end to another. "It would be handy having a horseshoe to throw. It doesn't look as if there's any place to hide, and guns can be so old hat. Wait, are you allowed to show horseshoes on television?" She turned around, expecting an answer, but found the Host being held with a gun to his temple by a grizzled member of the IWC. This thug had stubble down one precise half of his face because he'd overslept and was running late to the war.

"Drop the gun, or the stick insect gets it," said the thug. A threat, as you may very well remember from earlier this chapter or from using one on other people, is a promise of violence, either literal or metaphorical. The guerrilla did not need to *say* he was going to shoot his hostage if Abeni did not acquiesce to his request. The presence of the gun and the universal knowledge of a gun's intended purpose was enough to convey the dangling spectre of death.

Abeni turned her weapon to the floor. "I could just shoot the hostage. That's the badass macho thing we're trained to do in these sorts of situations."

"Wait! Wait. Let's think of this as a mental puzzle, shall we?" The Host's head was shiny with sweat as he tried to stay his squirming. The gorilla-like arms of the half-shaved guerrilla helped with that. "Just say 'shit' a whole bunch. They never bleep it out! And make sure to scream a whole lot. As we all know, too many cooks soil the broth."

Abeni dropped her gun. The guerrilla let out a snort. "Now kick it over here. With your foot," he commanded. Abeni obliged, first turning the heavy gun with her foot, then swiping at it. Instead of moving forward, the gun skidded sideways over toward the corner of the room. The guerrilla scowled. "I said over here, you dumb fuck! Can't you do anything right? You kick like a pansy!"

"I'm sorry! I'm just not any good at kicking!" Abeni clasped her right hand to her breast in shock. Her left hand grabbed one of the hot metal pokers and lobbed it like a javelin straight into the thug's forehead. The pointed bit stabbed just partway through his cranium, and the wobbling pried the cracked front of his skull open a bit further. "I'm a whole lot better at throwing."

[3] Gun Fu.

This didn't kill the guerrilla straight away, which was no boon as, take my word for it, having your skull shattered and a hot prong jabbing into your brains is no picnic![4] His body tensed up but was only able for a moment to choke the Host, who managed to slip away. Thinking the blow was lethal, he dawdled, and when Abeni yelled at him to get away, it was too late. The dying guerrilla pulled the poker out of his forehead, which television used to say you should never, ever, ever do with a penetrating wound. Blood and brains poured down his face in chunky rivulets like the worst runny nose in history, and though something unspeakable about his countenance was considerably off, still he lived. Throwing a tantrum over being killed, he whipped the metal rod hard into the Host's neck with a sickening crunch. He grabbed the Host's shoulder with one meaty hand and shanked the man right through his spine. By that time, Abeni had leapt over the anvil, fetched her gun, and put several bullets into the commando for good measure.

For the Host, it was too late, and he fell to the ground in a heap then straightened himself out. Given the warzone siege above ground, there would be little recourse of medical help. "Bludgeoned with a javelin! Damn. This can't happen to me now. I don't even know what a Tudor pole *is*."

Over to the side, the guerrilla crashed to the ground with less grace as the hole in the front of his head fountained disgusting fluids, and the abrupt pressure change sent his brain suctioning out the front of his head like the still-beating organs of a vivisected frog. His last act was to reach into his pants pocket for a bottle of acetaminophen tablets which he attempted to cram straight into his brain-hole. Abeni ignored him, though grabbed his gun. "What are you saying?" she asked the Host. "Maybe we can get you to a hospital in time."

"I have everything I need in the Crystal Maze, but I fear it may be too late for me. Regeneration: It's the only cure for baldness." He gazed weakly up into Abeni's eyes and shook his head. "I don't have any other final words, if that's what you were waiting for."

Abeni shrugged. "Nah. I was just waiting for you to apologize for the Rocky Horror Show." Knowing her allies were in trouble, she didn't stick around after shutting the Host's eyes with her thumbs.

Ajay grunted in pain as he slid down a wall inside the room. Blood was gushing from his left arm from a fresh bullet wound. He surmised this must have been a ricochet, because the bullet was lodged just inside. He picked up a long, thick splinter of wood from the crappy prop floor and dug the bullet out. On closer inspection, he deemed the wound to be superficial.

He took a look around and found he was alone in a room with a mechanical bull and a target situated on the wall. When the goon followed inside, that was all he found as well, although he did boggle at the fact the mechanical bull was on and bobbing around like a desperate teenager trying to get high on making himself seasick. As the door swung shut in front of Ajay's hiding spot, he fired his gun, but it missed the goon by mere inches, and at such close range to boot. We all have days like that; just check out all the typos in this series to date. Ajay's adrenaline carried him smoothly into his next motion: Whipping the soldier upside the head with his gun. The goon stumbled back around, and when Ajay struck him in the spine with the butt of his rifle, he was sent sprawling atop the rollicking machine. Ajay kicked the control level into its highest gear, and the assailant was sent into a blur of nauseating motion. His gun fell out of his hand, and a technicolour yawn spewed from his mouth in a bellow of disgusting emesis. We all have days like that. Ajay swept around to snatch up the fallen weapon, then ducked back out of the room before locking it shut from the outside.

Ivan once more found himself in Jacob's company. This room was deceptive in its spaciousness, looking full without being too cluttered, but objects of dimensions smaller enough as to be likened to an optical illusion. By all the best in the BBC's (South Africa division) entertainment research, this puzzle room resembled the interior of a nineteenth-century saloon, complete with a well-stocked bar surrounded by stools with a mirror reflecting a Rubenesque woman, a player piano (but without the piano player), a wooden pair of round tables, and among other miscellanea was wax facsimile of Monty Markham.

"This is one of the mystery puzzles," Jacob said. "Players have to mix drinks, play the piano, and crawl under the tables to solve it. The solution changes every time. It looks so easy when you're watching the players go through it, but I can't quite see it from the inside."

"Who cares? We just need to kill that IWC guerrilla, right?" Ivan kicked a table over in turn for cover, and Jacob followed suit at the same time; the furniture legs kept them in place from rolling around too much. "Is that booze real? We can start pouring it on the floor and block 'em off with a wall of fire, or better yet, lob some Molotovs at them with these dishrags."

"It's supposed to just be food colouring. I'm pretty sure the rest are just props. Rationing—"Jacob didn't get to finish. The door was kicked open with a loud slam that sent the two of them scurrying behind the bar counter. Luck was against them, because the IWC goon that entered like an extra helping of spam in a regular-sized tin opted to use the tables they'd just knocked over for cover against them.

[4] Citation needed.

"I sure could use your gun right about now! It's faster!" Ivan fired over the countertop with his puny pistol. Jacob was trying to help with his own automatic weapon while simultaneously checking the shelves, but he wasn't getting anywhere by dividing his attention, which just goes to show that true multitasking is a myth. Jacob paused behind the bar then tossed his weapon to Ivan, who was stunned for the moment. When the warbling in his ears sounded like bullets again, Ivan gave his all to lead their common enemy behind the table again.

"What do you know? Some of these *are* booze!" Jacob announced as he rifled through the bottles of brown and amber liquid. He suspected correctly that he'd happened upon the Host's private on-set stash.

"That's pretty good work!" Ivan shouted, not wanting to be heard by the unsuccessful guerrilla, but wanting to be heard over the cacophony of gunfire. "Taking stock of your surroundings in the heat of battle. That's how we do it up in Belarus."

"I know." Jacob unscrewed a bottle of Kentucky red-eye bourbon, gave the ripe alcohol a whiff, and then crammed a dirty dishrag used to mop up the counters into it. "I trained up in Belarus." He made sure Ivan was giving him the look he was expecting then said, "I felt my skills would be better put to use defending my homeland."

"And now you're putting me on trial in kangaroo court and biting the hand that fed you. Lovely."

Jacob ducked just as he remembered his surroundings. "Moscow fell! We don't know what to think anymore. For what it's worth, I believe you're not working for these bigots."

"Unfortunately, capitalism will ensure that the heroes are remembered as villains," Ivan said. "Just light that cocktail up and let's bust out of here."

"You got a light?" Jacob asked. "I don't smoke."

"'Don't smoke'!" Ivan sputtered. "Listen here, smoking is part of the Belarusian training programme, like the glamorous Hollywood starlets! Give it here." Ivan snatched the make-shift Molotov (just add fire) from Jacob's hand and lit it up with his disposable Commu-mart lighter which was fire-extinguisher red. It took a few tries before the gin-soaked rag took to flame, and Ivan tossed it blindly over the counter. There was an unspectacular "thunk" as the bottle collided with the back of the table, then nothing. "Well, shit."

What ensued next was an awkward silence as both sides eyed the bottle rolling to a stop over a slit in the floor. The lifer made a lunge for it with his arm outstretched, but Ivan shot the bottle square on, breaking it into a burst of flame. The term "lifer" here refers to someone who has spent their life working in a single field, usually in reference to the military. In this case, the lifer's life was spent as he roasted alive like chestnuts over an open fire, only with more screaming. He danced and flailed like one of those flammable tube-shaped windsocks that fans blow through to simulate dancing and have rapidly gone out of style. He was taking rather a while to expire, so Ivan handed Jacob back his automatic rifle and the two edged out of the room like the last two men unpaired at a barn dance.

The four regrouped on the street of the Olde West Zone at more or less the same time. Abeni shared her bad news. "I'm afraid that host guy didn't make it. His wounds were too grievous, and we don't have a medic with us."

"It's no wonder Africa's been losing this war with that attitude," said Ivan. "The only use for a medic is to keep patching up the weak. Now which way do we go to get out of this lunatic asylum?"

"Sam Childers and Dingo Raver have been doing the best they can," Jacob said. "As for the exit, it's this way." Begrudging his current circumstances, he led the group to the opposite wall from whence they'd arrived, where a rather un-photogenic hole in the wall led through a corridor of more unrealistic hinterlands. There was a narrow pathway gouged in between two steep, false rock formations and a sign reading "Injun Country" with a rubber hatchet embedded in it. At the opposite end of the path was a large plastic cow, and beside them was a facsimile of a covered wagon.

"What's the deal here?" asked Ivan. "We don't have to solve any ridiculous puzzles, do we?"

Ajay shook his head. "Abeni and I unhitched the cow and pushed the wagon out of the way on our way in. Don't most people enter through the trap door, though?"

Jacob pointed at two metal tracks running along the feet of the rocks. "We don't film it that way. The wagon's designed to roll along these tracks, and it's blocked by a prop cow on the other side that's meant to have dysentery."

Jogging through the area proved a thoughtless task, and Ivan was led through a stairwell upwards into a nondescript building they didn't bother to explore. Jacob unlocked the first exit they came across. Outside, they spotted a stone quarry across the street from the courthouse, and it was here they took up cover behind mounds of gravel. All Jacob could see from the mountainous stone

quarry was a row of compact apartment housing several stories wide, like an enormous filing cabinet. Somebody had lit all the manila folders on fire, so to speak, and the plumes of thick, dark smoke drifting from the tiny little windows and narrow doorways had coalesced into one ominous cloud that made the skies of Africa look black, like a hydra standing on its heads. But this malicious beast with an obsession for the Dewey decimal system was no fiction; it was a metaphor for a terrible evil which sought to undo the happiest years of Jacob's life.

Adding to the list of sights was a long crowd of people lined up outside of the courthouse. One row of people must have been the commandos of the Iron Wolves, with Toby at their head and the Queen of England handcuffed behind them. The other line must have been the residents of the apartments and the members of the court; Jacob recognized his father and felt his neck start to boil. He had a dreadful feeling that gunning the invaders down from his hiding spot among the high piles of uncomfortable stones would do no good. Beside him, Abeni asked, "Why don't we just go down there and blast them all?"

Jacob scowled because that was what he wanted to do, but he had a good reason to stay put. "Because there are too many of them," he said. "And because we need to hear what they're up to."

"Why?" Ajay asked. "It is just going to be a trap, like leaving a lion in a wildebeest stampede." He grunted in pain against the gravel he was laying on. Some had gotten into his wound, so he decided to scrape it out using the barrel of his gun.

"It's always a trap, or a backstab, or a double-cross. We need to know what sort. We need them to give something away to the method of their murderousness."

Abeni rolled her eyes. "So you just expect me to go down there and hope they don't shoot me?"

Jacob threw her a sullen look. "Neither of us go down there." He held up a Walkman-sized device: a hearing aid which allowed him to listen in on the conversation a few yards below and ahead. It worked quite well.

"Conflagurations, people!" Toby was saying. "I don't care about your personal problems. I don't want to hear, 'But my home's on fire; my piano or my sink or my children are in there.' As a representative of the apartheid committee, I need you all to sign these cards to determine whether you're white or black so that you can be treated accordingly."

"You gotta be kidding me! That's ridiculous!" one of the hostages complained, a woman with thicc rolls. Toby was going to ignore her, but then she said, "I can't belieb you just said that! What're you gonna do if we don't comply? Take us to court? Oh wait, but you set it on fire. Way to burn down the only building with air conditioning on the block." The day had suffered stifling heat to begin with.

"For your information, no, we don't have air conditioning," Toby said, leaning his head over to try and block the view of the air conditioner in the front window from the woman's line of sight. He viewed in close and tried to appear menacing, and the way he made his eyes bulge out was weird enough to achieve this effect. "You can just sit right down and keep quiet, or I'll report you to the head of the IWC." Somehow he mustered the attitude to intimidate the woman to whom he spoke, although her confusion at this entire situation and the presence of so many armed men had a majority of the impact. She darted her gaze from side to side and shrank back away into line as others mumbled to one another.

Jacob pointed his listening device across the street and picked up the idle conversations, but the same-y questions only served to fill his ears with the noise of rhubarbs, peas and carrots. Everyone talking at once made it difficult to comprehend what was going on. "Yeah, they're just taking over, trying to impose their own sense of order. I thought Toby might be in charge, but now I think he's just some sort of bureaucrat. Wait, I think he's said a name."

"Who?" Ivan asked. "Our best intel showed the IWC were working for the Equestrians in Cuba."

Jacob held up a hand to shush Ivan, but shook his head. "No. It's—"

"Too late." The words beckoned the four humans to turn around and meet the shrill, female voice behind them. They each got a start that almost sent them careening down the mound of gravel. To be in the midst of an unplanned rescue mission and to meet the object of their worst nightmares striking up a witty conversation with them like a schoolyard date was unceremonious to say the least. Standing behind them with her weapon drawn was a pale pony of death. The rancid Equestrians were back. She was a white unicorn with flowing purple hair in her mane and tail and three blue diamond shapes imprinted on her upper thigh. She had prominent false eyelashes batting over her azure eyes, and with one hoof she was somehow holding a Unishot gun—a deadly weapon the ponies were known to wield, with ammunition made from the horns of unicorns.

"That's impossible," Ajay said. "I mean, there were doubts at first, but the Golden Path concluded…" He looked to his comrades to see they were awaiting an explanation. "Rarity was one of the six generals of the Equestrian army, but it was reported she was killed in the Battle of Hainan."

Rarity gave her head a twist to flick her luxurious, glittery mane, and jerked her hoof holding the Unishot. “Yes, darlings, the same battle which featured the first use of rampaging, fire-breathing dragon, and yet by the very next battle, that Intel somehow hadn’t gotten through. Now come down from there nicely. Who do you think designed the Iron Wolves Corporation’s lovely uniforms?”

“Um, excuse me, you trotting trollop, but there are four of us and only—gee, let me count here—one of you,” Ivan said.

“My, my. I guess you haven’t been keeping up with the fashions. Pasting my face on my most devoted fashionistas really boosts my longevity.” During this declaration, several more ponies (about eight) stepped out from behind various mounds of gravel and dirt. Some were unicorns and mares, and some were also stallions and earth ponies and pegasi. If they weren’t white, they had white makeup matting their facial fur like PETA[5] trying to make a statement. If they didn’t have a horn, they had a false one attached to their foreheads. Many of them were scarred with old burns, and at least a couple looked irreparably wounded; one had a foreleg missing, and another had lost her eye but painted a false eye over the shut lids. The worst feature of these had to be the Unishots each of them were carrying and had drawn on the four humans.

If you’ve ever had your deceased father’s watch confiscated by a teacher, then you may understand the question of why someone cares so much about taking something so important away. Abeni, Ajay, Ivan and Jacob had no such questions. They knew being disarmed would render them vulnerable, and that the ponies would devour them all alive as soon as take them prisoner. Ivan exchanged scolding, sour glances with the other three, and they slowly set their weapons down on the gravel.

“Come down from there, dears. You’ll get your fatigues all dirty,” Rarity said. “Oh, and before I forget.” She then fired her Unishot off. The whirling unicorn horn struck Abeni right in the left breast, the drill-like projectile burrowing a good few inches through her armour and flesh. She lost her footing on the gravel mound and slid down on her back several feet as small stones went tumbling down ahead of her.

Ajay, Ivan and Jacob all seized up, fearful of being the next target should they rush to Abeni’s side. In the last fleeting instants as the toxins worked through her convulsing body, her last words were, “Never surrender.” The quaking of her nerves rendered her voice akin to a snake’s rattle.

“’Never surrender’,” Rarity said as she reloaded her Unishot from her designer saddlebag. “I love that. She’s a fighter. That means even paralyzed and numbed to any pleasurable sensation, she’ll withstand a whole lot more pain before she expires like so much opened tuna. To think we only came to this quarry in search of African diamonds, and here we found the leader of the human resistance.”

“Guys,” Ajay whispered as they ignored Rarity’s monologue. “Grab your guns. We’re going over the top.” He didn’t give Ivan and Jacob time to argue, not that they had any. They knew the ponies would fire at them the instant even one of them moved, so there was little choice than to pick their weapons back up and turn an about face. Jacob felt the gravel shudder behind his foot from the impact of a Unishot horn. He did not need to look back to know the plethora of Rarities were chasing after them.

On the other side of the mound, Ajay’s desperate plan snapped into action, because on the other side of the road, the IWC were still holding the civilians and court staff hostage. “Surrender!” Ajay shouted, stowing his gun. “We surrender! Everybody get down!” He yelled in such a desperate voice, and the smoke was getting so thick and the fire so hot, that the unarmed civilians were already whipped into frenzy like an emo shark with a cat o’ nine tails.

The ex-residents of the street and the judicial officials ran amok away from the blaze chewing at the buildings. Ajay and company tried to shout and wave them away from the quarry. The IWC made their threats, but must have deemed it wasteful to open fire on the constituents of their annexed territory. “Ladies and gentlemen, you get back here!” Toby was yelling. “You haven’t all been added to the roster yet!” He grabbed for the queen’s arm to keep her at his side, but she easily tugged out of his grasp with a scolding look. A much stronger commando of the IWC seized her from behind instead, but the monarch didn’t relinquish her scathing look for her captors. Funnily enough, nobody was inclined to obey the ex-defence attorney’s commands, especially once they got an eyeful of those shining white ponies traipsing over the rocky bulges like pimples on a chin puppet.

This week was beginning to turn into one long case of the Mondays. Monday, as you don’t know, is the second day of the week, which is why weekends consist of Saturday and Sunday, not Sunday and Monday. There is an inaccurate old wives’ tale that the working day begins on Monday, and so this transition from living life to a life of indentured wage slavery is unpleasant, but in actuality many people are called in to do menial, unnecessary work on the weekends even after working all week long at a thankless, futile job. The first shot fired came from the ponies, naturally, but Jacob and the others were skidding down the gravel so errantly that aiming was futile. The horn shattered upon the road with a loud bang like the sort of illegal fireworks sold in retail, and the IWC only tensed and readied their weapons at the disturbance. Recognizing that the IWC hadn’t called their bluff, Jacob and Ajay ran in one direction down the street whilst Ivan ran in the other. Starting from the middle of their line-up, the guerrillas swept their

[5] The Scientology of animal rights activism.

flamethrowers out at the fleeing trio, letting them feel the heat at their backs. The rushing ponies tried to skedaddle backwards against the clouds of fire blowing across the street at them, but only found the slippery, steep incline of gravel behind them.

"Whoa, whoa!" Toby ducked behind a brawny commando and placed his trembling arms against the man's back. "Don't provoke the ponies! Protect me!" The soldier's sinewy arms riveted back and forth as if he were on a rowing machine while he swivelled his torso from side to side on his hips, spraying his blaze across the street. His body seized up and went very, very still when he stood, and by the time Toby stopped simpering long enough to look, he realized the man had been struck in the gut with a Unishot horn. He'd been paralyzed right on his feet and died where he stood.

Now realizing they were under attack, the IWC diverted their offensive from the unarmed civilians and the three fleeing armed men towards the Equestrians. Bullets strung across the road like the cords of a bodice, threading confusion here and there. Some of the ponies had switched to bullets when they depleted their limited Unishot ammo, and some of the guerrillas had switched to their guns because the flamethrowers, while awesome and destructive, lacked for something in the accurate killing department. As usual, the humans proved the fodder, although a few of the Equestrians were overtaken. A pegasus stallion caught flame: His false horn burned to cinders, and his wings melted away in a matter of seconds.

As is always the case in war, some of the civilians did not survive unscathed (or at all). At considerable risk to his own mobility, Ajay seized Judge Sassy who'd been shot in the leg and was rambling on about how this would make a spectacular chapter for her memoirs. Concern is one of those things that is rarely if ever helpful, and even a seasoned soldier such as Jacob was unhelpful in yelling for Ajay to hurry up. The two held the judge on her one good leg between them and helped her hop for her life to the point where Jacob, driven by his concern to save lives, broke ahead of Ajay with his arm around Sassy. "Help me, help me, help me!" she kept nagging him.

At the opposite end of the broken line, Ivan turned back around and found the queen among her captors. He stood, as if in the eye of the battle's storm, and aimed down the nozzle of the pistol Jacob had lent him. With a shrill crack, the thug holding onto the queen like a knotted controller cable dropped dead to the ground. The queen herself winced at the specks of blood that shot upon her skin, but she was quick to stoop for the gun. Toby was quicker, though he didn't look fitting wielding that heavy artillery. "Come with me if you want to live!"

"A life imprisoned is no life at all," the queen retorted, but she knew better than to elbow Toby in the throat when he was pointing an assault rifle at her face. He then aimed the gun at the ponies like he was mistaking a weapon for a shield, and skirted sideways along the burning building fronts.

"There's a back way out of one of these places, right?" he asked.

"One would not know. We do not hail from this global arena which your forces seek to annex," the queen answered. "One does suppose we would roast alive before seeing the other side."

To call any street idyllic in a post-event world would be ludicrous when "tense malaise" was the best emotional state one could hope for, especially since nobody majored in psych now that the universities were shut down. Even so, the dramatic transition to warzone slowed down time for all who raced to live from one heartbeat to the next. Fonts of fire gushed through the air, setting many ablaze. Fleeing civilians leapt over the wounded in their panic, although a few endangered themselves to help their comrades. All the while, the conflagration of buildings washed a wall of heat over the people below, and one section of apartment roofing sagged as the structure below crumbled like parmesan. Ajay must have been no more than five steps behind Jacob when an explosion flung pieces of cement debris through the air. A cloud of dust like dragon's breath engulfed that portion of the street like a beige fog, and Jacob turned at the noise to witness Ajay's silhouette obscured by enormous segments of dislodged wall. Judge Sassy let out a stunned "Oh damn!"

Ajay sputtered and coughed as he emerged from the asbestos haze, sounding like he'd had a terrible cold for the past couple of weeks. His eyes stung from particles that had swerved into them like so many tiny planetary meteorites, but he could still make out the vision of twenty armoured trucks weaving around frantic civilians and steering behind Jacob, framing him like a used car salesman at the last vehicle depot on Earth. He didn't even notice Jacob saying something to him about how close he'd come to meeting the reaper—he didn't need to be reminded. Ajay gulped down the unsettling suspicion that the IWC had summoned reinforcements, but he'd spent a long enough time in South Africa to trust Jacob's triumphant determination. A paramedic soon arrived, and Jacob was soon rid of Judge Sassy who nagged her new aid. "Help me, help me, help me."

A robust, sand-hued Humvee screeched to a halt beside Jacob, spewing a cloud of dirt. Atop the vehicle was a shielded artillery gun that had been retrofitted into a hose, and on the back of the vehicle were a pair of massive water tanks. Emerging from the vehicle's top door was a sun-worn man clad in an assortment of faux leathers, dangling ornamentation humanely collected from dead animals, and an air of determination to rival Jacob's. This was a man who ingested his fear as if the hardtack and swill of it were haute cuisine. The band of his black bull-hide hat glinted with rings of metal and was adorned with various exotic feathers gifted by one of every species of bird he'd saved that month. He had a neatly-trimmed handlebar moustache with the ambidextrous property of resembling an extra-wide smile when he was happy and an extra-fierce grimace in situations like this which called for it.

“Ambidextrous” is a word which means “able to use both right and left hands as well as each other,” but is here used as a coined “idiom”, a word which here excuses its use as a word with a similar abstract concept even if the definition is technically different.

The man’s chiselled face was framed in bushy, dark sideburns. Around his neck was a neckerchief, a kind of handkerchief worn around the neck, which he used to keep sand and grit around of his face. Perspiration made his sleeveless shirt cling to his masculine torso physique. He wore a pleather duster with the sleeves rolled up to his shoulders. His left wrist bore pink, yellow, and red wristbands, and his right wrist beheld a shark-tooth bracelet. Just below his strong, stubbly cleft chin, the jawbone of a bear whose cubs he rescued from poachers hung around his neck. Hidden within the Humvee was a bedecked pair of Naugahyde trousers the hyenas couldn’t chew through, and a pair of imitation snakeskin boots for espionage purposes. This man was Dingo Raver.

Miniature fires scattered across the street like an extra-phlegmy sneeze. As bullets whizzed back and forth between the ponies, the IWC, and members of the South African Defence, Dingo gritted his stern demeanour and took charge of the hose attached to the Humvee. “Help has arrived! We’re volunteers. It’s time to make this fire depart,” Dingo said. He knew the situation was hopeless, a word which here means “without hope”. The inferno was dead set on leaving these apartment buildings scorched husks. Amidst the battle and chaos, Dingo spritzed a jet of high-pressure water through the building windows, but it was little use.

“That’s little use!” Jacob shouted. “The fire’s too great! Those homes are done for. We gotta evacuate people out of here!” He and Ajay took cover beside some allied vehicles, but firing into the crowd proved difficult. There were still civilians clumsily scampering this way and that like legless hamsters that had just eaten their young.

Dingo frowned. He could see the sense in Jacob’s words. He could see the hopelessness of the situation. He could see a guerrilla spouting off a flamethrower in his direction. “You forgot to watch out for the bros before hose! Get it!?” In the wake of his erudite bon mot, Dingo let loose a torrent of water, blasting the flamer down with a fearsome column. The pyromaniac was socked in the gut with the force of a hundred double-fisted punches,[6] and his body went careening like a ragdoll into a line of his villainous cohorts.

Toby managed to open the exterior door of an apartment while holding a gun and clutching an arm around the queen, but juggling the task meant that Ivan had caught up to him. Toby was a tall but wormy man who did well to hide behind his meat shield hostage, so Ivan thought better of trying to snipe him at the risk of the royal. Instead, once he was close enough, it was easier just to pistol-whip Ivan in the face. Toby may have been carrying a gun, but he wasn’t a soldier. Ivan recognized a necktie-wearing prick who spent his career listening to the sound of his own voice when he saw one. Plus, it felt good to punch. It didn’t matter the man was his own attorney who hadn’t done a very good job of defending him. Slugging someone with his fist, gun in hand, all that machismo coursing through his muscle, just felt like the right thing to do. The queen threw her hands over her face and shook them when she peeked at this display of violence, letting out a gasp as though she had felt the impact of that attack herself. The wind of Ivan’s arm swept across her face for sure. Toby may have been a milquetoast by Ivan’s standards, but all the punch cost him was the queen in his arm and a crack in his jawbone. His glasses clung to his face like a window washer hanging from a platform with a snapped cable. His eyes bulged at the man who had hit him with the look of all those childhood years being pestered and called a pansy coming back to him. He held his gun at his side in one limp arm like he thought it wasn’t too late to surrender. Ivan had twisted his wrist a little, and held his gun at his side as well.

“I have the inkling to get killed by a coward today,” Ivan sneered. “If you really want to throw down with me, then be a big man about it! On the count of three, draw!”

Toby raised his gun at the word and blasted Ivan several times over in the chest. His entire body shook and his glasses fell off his face as the gun jolted in his hands. Ivan shut his eyes like a kid scared of the log flume ride he was on, and his body threw itself back onto the ground as if he were hopping into bed. The queen gasped in shock and started running. Toby blinked and reached out to the blurry double-image of her escaping, but he could not pursue. He needed those glasses the way a nearly-blind person needs to see. In this world, there are people with vulnerabilities, and there are people who do bad things, and Toby made the mistake of being both. Having a vulnerability does not make one a bad person, but it behoves them not to be bad if they have a vulnerability, but it’s a shameful fact of life that people who should know suffering will not always recognize they are better than to inflict it upon others. Karma bit Toby in the ass in a big way on this one, and he didn’t see it coming until the horn was drilling right between his eyes. His skull shattered right in front, and his skin tore along the lines of those fragments. His eyes crossed at the toxic Unishot projectile that ground to a halt on the upper half of his face just as he was stooping for his spectacles, and his arms and legs sprawled out underneath himself as he collapsed.

Much of the confusion was perpetuated by the IWC, so little notice was taken when Rarity’s platoon decided to let the SAD wipe their fellow humans out. A few stragglers from either two enemy fronts remained, but as the buildings crumbled from the stress of the fires, the SAD realized they’d gathered all the residents who’d survived and could commence extraction. In Jacob’s frantic search for his father, he encountered the queen behind the burning city block. “Have you seen Ivan?” he asked.

[6] Thorough measurement has not been put forth to comparing the force of a punch to the pressure of a firehose.

The queen shook her head, but she told him of Ivan's sacrifice, and how she would not have escaped if not for his bravery. This did nothing to allay Jacob's fears over his own father's well-being, but before his search could continue, Dingo and Ajay pulled up in a Humvee with several other various vehicles behind them. Jacob looked like he was ready to take off, so Ajay shouted to him. "Jacob! Jacob, it's your father!"

Jacob stopped in his tracks. His heart sank.

"We found him. He's alive and well."

Jacob let out such a heavy sigh that he didn't know where his breath came from. His spirits had dipped so low at the thought of losing his parent that he wasn't sure the relief made up for it. He made sure the queen boarded Dingo's vehicle first, then joined the car carrying his father and Judge Sassy. Confirming the presence of any survivors was a swift task, and then the SAD set to evacuating the nearby streets to put the sorry neighbourhood in South Africa behind them. When the refugees were gathered together, Jacob sought out Dingo's Humvee where he was surprised to see Ajay pulling up behind him in a separate vehicle. Even more surprising was that the Queen of England was with him.

"I'm taking Ivan Matskevich's body to the Human Resistance," Ajay said. "It's time I reported back to my superiors at the Golden Path."

"Her Highness is accompanying you?" Jacob asked. Ajay deferred to the queen with a glance, and she turned Jacob a look without changing her expression as if to indicate whether he had a problem with it did not matter. He understood. Jacob frowned, but he felt such a sense of duty that he could understand Ajay's decision. "What's the Golden Path's interest in the Human Resistance? What's to become of us now with our leader dead?"

"In the past, nobody wanted to work with the Human Resistance. The Belarusians and the Cubans wouldn't collaborate with them, but the Golden Path keeps an eye out for all the humans resisting Equestrian tyranny the world over. The verdict decided Ivan's leadership was valid, even if it wasn't to the letter, but Moscow fell. The Golden Path will be there to pick up the pieces." Ajay paused to stare at his friend a moment. "Come with us, Jacob Nkosi. The bleakest hour is when the human race must strike. We are closer than we've ever been to eradicating this alien menace. Join us, and we'll see it through to the end."

Jacob was surprised by Ajay's confidence. Nobody thought this war would end anymore. Everyone was so convinced it would keep going, on and on, until maybe the human race was wiped out. He looked to the car his dad and Judge Sassy travelled in. His dad looked back at him with wide, worried eyes, and said nothing. Jacob looked back up at Ajay.

"No, thank you. I have people here I need to watch over. The South African Defence to lead. A city to rebuild. I will miss you, friend." Jacob shook Ajay's hand, but he was thinking of people he would miss a whole lot more. He was thinking of Abeni, the finest soldier he had ever known. Because of Ivan, he was thinking how important after all it might be that the human race had a leader. He was thinking that stay or go, neither would leave him from the fight, because there were the people here he had to protect.

2. The Seas are Paved With Gold

Far from where the trial had taken place, on the opposite side of the war, conspiracy was forming behind the showy false cities of North Korea. Inside a donut-shaped building marked "GnP Corp", Seo Hee-seok was carrying a tray of bowls of watered-down tea into a tall room resembling an empty museum gallery. It was bare and white, and he would have called it "grandiose" instead of unfurnished. There were multiple Grecian columns of varying heights standing here and there a few feet away from the room in an oblong semicircle. The columns were surrounded by narrow spiral staircases built into their structure, and atop each one was a stone throne. Several of the thrones were occupied by ponies.

Looking most important and elaborate in the central throne was a baby-blue unicorn mare with a light cyan mane and tail with wavy tips. Her cruel violet eyes were dabbed with false eyelashes, and her cutie mark depicted a star-bobbed wand and a crescent of glittery light. "Ah, it looks as if North Korea has granted us no shortage of servants. Isn't it simply delightful? We devour countless humans, conquer and raze their lands in over half a decade of siege, and still they're willing to serve us. How does it feel, you hairless ape?"

Seo responded with his best-practiced look of bewilderment. "Ponies? Eating people? Why, it's the very first that I've heard of it," he said. "It sounds like something out of a novel. I even wonder whether it's a conspiracy. I certainly won't be altering my lifestyle just to appease a few critics."

"The world could use more humans like you," the unicorn mare said with a sardonic smile. "Humans of deep insensitivity and a mindboggling capacity for implausible deniability over the painfully apparent. The Great and Powerful™ Trixie approves. Now if only she could approve of her fellow conspirators. Tell Trixie, do you have *any* plans of eradicating these humans, or do you find life always turns out exactly as you expect it?" Trixie gazed at the occupants of the other pillars with no bounds to her own disappointment

while she waved Seo out with a hoof.

On the lower next pillar over, a young stallion sat on a throne while an older mare stood by, stroking him adoringly. The male had plain brown fur with a tangelo and orange mane and tail. He wore a propeller beanie cap along with a microphone headset. His cutie mark was a blue and red rectangle bisected by the solid white lineation of a video game controller. His hooves were covered in cheese dust, and his face was covered in a morose expression. "We go this three-sixty no-scope and punish those Iron Wolves for going AWOL[7] on us!" His name was Button Mash.

The female was his mother, Milano Mash, and she wore a war-weary smile. Her pelt was pale yellow, and she had light brown hair tied in red bands towards the ends. She threw her forelegs around his forward back and leaned her cheek to his nearer shoulder. "Honey, we should end this war as soon as possible and make all the humans extinct once and for all." She brushed a lock of Button's bangs aside and gave him a swift peck on the cheek. "You look so much like your father, sweetie."

Button blushed and tried not to react. The other ponies present rolled their eyes and ignored them, to an extent. Trixie said, "The Iron Wolves *are* irrelevant, but *how* do we intend to end this war? That *was* the question, you know." She looked around the room again and looked shocked at the defensive scowl Milano shot her.

On another pillar stood an earth stallion with a muted tan coat and dark brown hair in his mane and tail which both stuck out here and there in a youthful mess. His cutie mark appeared like a golden hourglass, a timekeeping device in which sand runs from one half of the glass into the other through a narrow neck. Around *his* neck was a white collar not attached to a shirt, but it was attached to a cool mint green bowtie. His voice had a fingernail of rasp to it with an accent that sounded uncannily like Earth English, and if he'd had ten times the energy, he could have come across as quite boisterous. "What I really should do is pick up Pinkie Pie's work from where she left off. Our armies were particularly reliant on her chemical concoctions, but she most misfortunately took those secrets with her to her grave."

"Cool," said Button Mash. "So why don't we just dig up her grave and find them?"

Milano chuckled and rubbed at her son's shoulders. "Dear, Doctor Hooves means she never told anypony how she did it."

Doctor Hooves frowned, but he already looked quite cantankerous to begin with. "That and she died at the epicentre of an atomic nuclear blast. A colossal neutron flow like that can't just be reversed, so the entire west Russian countryside is awash in devastating radiation."

On the next-highest pillar from Doctor Hooves' was a grey pegasus mare named Derpy Hooves who had a long, straight blonde mane and bubbles for a cutie mark that resembled the markings on an Appaloosa horse. She had a tetchy frown on her face, and one of her eyes proved incapable of looking in the same direction as the other. She spoke in an accent that's perhaps best described as hailing from the American Midwest. She balanced herself on two crutches she wore with her forelimbs and stumbled with her misaligned back legs which pointed their knees at one another. "I'm just as eager for victory as anypony," she said, "so stuff your snide remarks, Trixie. You think I should be cast aside just because I have a lazy eye? You think because I'm slow in the mind that my existence is a mockery to you normies? You think my voice sounds funny just 'cause I'm from Minneighsota? It's Pinkie Pie's fault my body reacted to her drugs this way, but I won't let that stop me from stopping the humans." She then pointed an accusatory crutch in Trixie's direction. "The question is what are *you* planning to stop the humans if you're so Great and Powerful™?"

Trixie let out a whinny-like scoff (an odd verbal tic by pony standards) and skirted her gaze into an expert air of pomposity. "Trixie has important errands to run in Equestria that will be crucial to success."

At this declaration, the other pony generals burst into rounds of disbelief and squabbling, with a few choice (albeit temperate) phrases thrown about here and there. They half-remembered things which had been pestering their solitary minds, made all the more civil by a desperate situation. Humanity had lost its greatest fortress at a cost, namely numerous leaders of the Equestrian cause and the loss of their fleet at its maiden voyage. Still, power vacuums were not new territory. Of the smorgasbord of protests, some statements lapsed from hot ire at Trixie's noncommittal errand into stolid rebuttals of poignancy.

"How are you supposed to get back? That monster's got the last black box causeway home," Derpy said.

"Not to mention he appears to show the only signs of magic on Earth," said Milano.

---

[7] Away While On Location, implying they're not away from the location they're on.

After everypony had said what they had in mind to say, or somepony else had said it for them, they looked about awkwardly for more ammunition before waiting to see if Trixie had any rejoinders. She was looking as though she hadn't been listening, and so Doctor spoke up. "We don't know for certain Discord has the last box, but he is the only entity who would have access. Being cut off from the home world has put a serious damper on producing new troops. We're relying more on betrayers of the human race, so rallying the IWC would behove us." He looked to Button, who appeared ashamed at the same realization.

At the simultaneous hour of these very transpirations, an obstreperous phrase which here means "meanwhilst", Ajay found himself lost in time as he took his first steps aboard the mighty Belarusian gunship. The steel corridors breathed around him like a bronze behemoth, making him imagine that he had sheets of jagged metal in his lungs, and that the sharp edges were banging against one another. He started to suffocate, or imagine that he was anyway, until he felt a cold, bony hand bite down onto his shoulder.

The queen's voice was also bony, although it wasn't precisely cold. "Hey there, you gonna help me with the casket or not?" she asked. Ajay gave a jump then righted his bravado. The queen noticed he'd been stroking a round metal flask that he had strapped under his coat. "You ever gonna sip from that thing? You've been stroking it the entire way here. Not that I blame you. I used to have a family myself."

Ajay's pupils sought escape from his eyes as he stowed his flask away. With a perfunctory apology, he seized the back end of the locker because the queen had the front, but they hit heavy foot traffic in the adjacent hallway. Many shipping containers, barrels and boxes, though neatly stacked, narrowed the corridor which was filled with able-bodied soldiers moving these new shipments out of the way. Some used trolleys, and some carried them. The queen set down her end of the locker and suggested they conscript one of the soldiers to carry their load for them. Ajay's initial concern was that it might get misplaced, but he was eager to be rid of this burden soon. None of the passing servicemen complied with their requests, citing that they had orders to move their new supplies to the cargo post-haste. The queen then sought to borrow one of the long trolleys, but the final one in sight got pulled away at the last moment by a muscular blond man wearing shades who was telling his compatriot how he'd had sex with a mermaid.

"This is getting us nowhere," the queen griped. "Let's just leave this casket at the med bay."

Ajay frowned, but complied. He couldn't quite refuse the queen of England, even if he didn't personally acknowledge her monarchical reign, but either way he felt guilty for having this older woman helping him with his heavy lifting. He could see that despite her huffing and puffing she was handling herself just fine, but he still couldn't shake that notion. Plus it was a two-person job. They took a few steps before a splashing, rattling sound made Ajay stop in his tracks. "Hold up. Do you hear sloshing?"

The queen rolled her eyes as Ajay turned about with the pair still holding the trunk aloft. He pried it open. "Ugh. All the bags of ice are melting." Ivan's cold body was almost floating in a pool of icy cold water, plastic bags of semi-melted ice (some of which had leaked), and over a dozen or so pine tree air fresheners. "We'd better hurry." Then he went to shut the lid quickly.

The phrase "one fell swoop" here refers to a sudden misfortunate happenstance, where "fell" uses an archaic definition meaning "ruthless". A voice asked, "What are you two doing?" As Ajay shut the trunk, the water sloshed around inside, shifting the weight so that the locker slipped from his hand. The lid flew open as the trunk fell, and Ivan's body bounced right out, landing on his face in a puddle, then rolling onto his back. A man's voice said, "Dad?" and Ajay turned his head to face the speaker. Standing beside a diminutive man was a younger, dark-skinned man dressed in military fatigues. The first thing Ajay noticed about his appearance was the shocked expression of his frowning lips as the man gazed upon the body he identified as his father.

In one fell swoop, Ajay had made rather a poor first impression. "This isn't what it looks like," he said, but the authorities had him escorted to the brig so fast it made his head spin. The cell was exactly what it looked like: A confining little cubicle with a locked door that bore a slot for sliding food through. They'd confiscated his weapons and other belongings which included his flask. He moved his hands from his hips into a shrug, and then slapped them against his thighs in frustration.

THE SEAS ARE PAVED WITH GOLD

The narrator of the black and white film had a gruff, barking sort of a voice that lilted upwards with moralistic indignation. There was a bit of oil in there too, in the sense of the last remaining slick in your vehicle before it needed changing. There was the gusto and the pizazz of someone who wanted you to believe anything, who earnestly wanted to believe in those unfortunate truths himself, and the lack of fluency in his words only served the homespun integrity of the piece.

The story opened with a man kissing his wife that morning and leaving his two and a half kids to fly a bomber plane. He

jerked the steering wheel cheerily until his low-flying plane, which looked like a bean with fins, crashed into a radio tower in a spastic fit of lightning. "Uh oh," said the narrator. "It looks as if Steve forgot his safety belt! War's all fun and games until someone loses an eye, or a groin, but let's not forget the reason we've been fighting this war in the first place."

With this statement, the scenery changed to ruins of human settlements. In olden times, we might have considered ruins to be remnants of ancient civilizations, such as Pompeii, or Puma Punku, or Atlantis in New Orleans. The detritus of human homes dating as far back as six years ago would find the same fate in future history. These were the ruins of tomorrow. A Chuck E. Cheese in Toledo no longer had the electricity for its arcade machines, and the animatronics wallowed away in rusted squalor. An IKEA in Norfolk broke apart into easily manageable cubes. The Tokyo Tower in Paris had bent over sideways halfway down from the top. Distorted footage of Moscow at a great distance off-centred the silhouette of a deformed and revolting tower rising from where the old Human Resistance headquarters had once stood. "This is the slave world of the pony holocaust. We all remember the event, even if we don't like to talk about it."

Archive footage had been pieced together (poorly) of numerous world leaders as the dialogue became apparent. Barack Obama was mouthing some words as he failed to dip a cookie in a glass of milk that was too narrow. Rob Ford, a bloated man with a yellow hat and a jagged moustache, was bum-rushing a middle-aged woman. Vladimir Putin was working at a car wash wearing nothing but suds and a pair of short jeans shorts with the pockets showing under the legs. Fidel Castro was running a comb through his beard. The previous queen of England, Elizabeth II, was downing a six pack of Beefeater gin at a cricket match. This video was choppy, speckled with static, and rife with blocky pixels and corrupted data. "We don't know for certain when the Equestrian chariots first descended upon our world, sweeping across South America to test their weapons of mass destruction, and then betraying the U.S. and Canadian governments after their doomed negotiations with the pony predators. The first confirmed victim of murder by these Equestrian savages was Bonnie Blue Butler of The South, U.S.A.

"Before we knew it, pony pandemonium was everywhere. Some nations, like Japan and North Korea, confused these alien conquerors for a bizarre form of culture. The first thing I do when I hear the word 'culture' is reach for my gun! But having deposed our world leaders and consumed our armies, there was only one obstacle left: Our way of life." At an atheist cathedral, an altar of beakers and an electron microscope were set ablaze, and stained glass windows of Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr were broken, revealing behind them the garish and inaccurate depiction of Twilight Sparkle, the now-deceased unicorn leader of the Equestrian armies.

"People didn't want to think about the event. They didn't want to think about the genocides in America. 'No foreign entanglements!' they cried. It was difficult to convince a snooty waiter in Nice, or a rat catcher in Beijing, or a bread vendor in Petrograd to go to war over a fire trap in Detroit." After a few quick shots of buildings being bombed by pegasi, some rare but often-used footage of Equestrian plantations on U.S. soil were shown. Chain gangs of malnourished humans, their ribs showing through the holes of their tattered clothes, marched in between rows of sharp-leaved vegetation. A wrinkled-looking mare with an army helmet, a pair of pilot shades, and a corncob pipe was supervising their whipping with a cat-o-nine-tails. Her mane was all done up in a tight, white bun, and she had a pie for a cutie mark. Plantations such as these stretched far across the American southeast, and the camera could have pulled back to get a more encompassing view, but this footage cut out shortly after a jet was seen exploding off not too far away.

"And yet the ponies' global network spread like a net over an escaped sideshow exhibit. They exploited their fantastical popularity in East Asian countries like both Koreas. It was in this way their stranglehold continued westward across Asia, and yet, at the same time, Europe was pummelled. During this period, Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, was lost while on a fishing trip at the old train yard, and the Human Resistance was formed under the command of General Peter Williams and his family.

"Other regions formed their own factions, once the oppressive capitalist regimes of the west collapsed. Only then were they free to fight the threats against the human race. The Human Resistance centred itself in Moscow, while the Belarusians kept to themselves. In the Americas, rebel factions donned leather jackets and Mohawks and took to motorcycles to oppose their pony overlords. India and China formed an allegiance known as the Golden Path. Other countries fled to their remote regions, such as Canada to the Yukon, or out west to the prairies. Apart from the greats, only a few isolated island nations such as Cuba remained, awaiting the day that they, too, would face their inevitable destruction.

"But how is it that every victory only brings the ponies back stronger than ever? They spread their messages of fear and capitalism, and their numbers never seem to cease. They breed like the AIDS virus which they invented, they're lethal at three weeks, and they're always plotting and scheming! We must see again in the eyes of youth the gleam of the beast of prey." The film showed a sterile-looking room filled with a large table and a wailing din of infant ponies, the likes of which few humans had ever seen. Pegasi, unicorn, and earth ponies writhed atop one another in a dishevelled pile, and Pinkie Pie, a piggish-looking pony with a frizzy, cloud-shaped mane, was injecting some of them with a needle. Some of the foals were more active than other screaming and crying young, and one of the pegasi took flight on its underdeveloped wings and attacked the camera, calling an end to the footage.

"What do ya think of that shit, huh? I produced that, with the directorial help of my friend, Basil!" Dirk Smidgeon was a diminutive, pot-bellied man who was top heavy not only in stature but demeanour. He turned to his side as if to introduce someone who was not there, then addressed the group again. He had a proud grin on his flushed, yellow face and a pair of thick spectacles with frames wider than his head that magnified his eyes. He was bald on top, but with wild, scraggly dark hair from one side around back to the other that showed signs of greying. Though at a glance he was the shortest man aboard the gunship, he was just as obviously the most vivacious, bouncing and gesturing quite a lot when he spoke, and his charisma sucked in his audience without fail. Even when they were spacing out, they couldn't ignore him; it was as if they could only space out into attention towards him. He was engrossing.

His audience consisted of a dozen or so soldiers, but at the front of the crowd sat Joseph Matskevich, who was still distraught about discovering his father's recent death. Working while shaken up didn't shake off the frown that did little to mar his pretty face, especially with the extra frown that was his thin moustache. His wild hair was kept to a conservative trim, and he wore the uniform of Belarusian military. He slouched forward in his seat, balancing his wrists on his knees to keep his legs from bouncing on his heels. "So you want to show our troops films?" he asked, sounding incredulous.

Dirk spaced out for a moment with a long "uh" before nodding with vigour. "Yeah." After a second brief pause, he added, "That's the way they did it in the old days. I mean, this is why we have the war reporters and so on: So future generations can remember why we're fightin', and never forget the horrors of war. We need to be thinking about morale a hundred years down the line."

Joseph nodded slowly. "Okay, but I was aiming to win this war before then."

"I don't see how you're going to accomplish that any sooner if you keep locking your allies up." Ajay sat with both arms and one leg crossed, understandably miffed about the earlier misunderstanding.

Dirk gave him a stare through his thick glasses as though waiting for him to say more. "What do ya want? You were dumpin' dead bodies in the halls of the Red October. Don'tcha think that looks a bit suspicious? Uh, no offense there, Joseph. Besides, you got your stuff back." He pushed his glasses back onto his nose.

Joseph hung his head again, lower this time, and tried to disguise his mournful sigh as a laugh. Mostly he just shook his head. "It's okay, honestly. I'll just focus on my work. To be honest, I was never all that close to my father. I'm surprised he nominated me for his successor." He fiddled with his hands a bit as though he were talking to them, and shrugged as easily as if he was denying an invitation to a Vegan picnic.

Ajay had wanted to respond, but waited for the awkward silence in the wake of Joseph's exposition to subside. He took another glance around the meeting room with his arm on the back of his metal folding chair. If you've never sat on a metal folding chair, consider yourself lucky. They are so uncomfortable one cannot suffice to sit still, but any motion you move in will be just as uncomfortable. With a lump in his throat, he said what he wanted to say: "Actually, I'm still missing a few of my effects."

Dirk nodded. "You'll get it all back. The guys in security just wanted to make a few closer inspections with some of your items."

Now Ajay was reeling with anxiety. He rocked in his seat a little and became annoyed and sweaty. He could either pursue this train of thought, or change it. "Why don't I see any other members of the Golden Path here? I'm assuming they're the ones who told you who I was and to let me go."

"Uh, no," said Dirk matter-of-factly. "That was my fiancée, actually."

A couple of other soldiers looked almost half as shocked as Ajay when the queen stood up, strode over to Dirk with a smile, took his hand, then said, "That's *me."* She leaned down and the two rubbed noses and smooched like they were performing goldfish impressions. Even Joseph was stirred from his melancholy to watch in respectful bewilderment.

"Oh, hey, I got another for ya, honey bunch," Dirk said. The two of them giggled as they took hold of each other's hands. "Why didn't the pony commandant come to the war that day? Because she was a little hoarse! Ya get it?" He nodded excitedly and the pair of them shared a few quick peals of laughter. The room's audience all displayed looks that asked what the heck was going on here, and then Dirk waved his hand as if the gesture would settle his mood.

"Getting back on topic," he said, "we're meeting with our new allies, the Golden Path, next. We'll be sailing for the port of Marmagoa to pick them up, though we'll radio for confirmation once we get closer. This here's Ajay Ghale, a representative of that

faction."

Ajay looked around before giving a little wave. He could see Joseph nodding in agreement with Dirk's announcement. Dirk asked him if he'd like to say a few words, but Ajay shook his head. "I've been on assignment. I can't divulge what their plans could be. I thought they'd be here by now, actually." He shifted in his metal chair, and then squinted his eyes. "You said 'Red October'. Isn't this meant to be an airship?"

Dirk started to answer, but Joseph cut him off. He managed to look up from his boots as he spoke. "It's unfinished. The Equestrian armada severely decimated Belorussian forces. In fact, any survivors who didn't follow the refugees to protect them are here on board. The eastern bloc is just as deserted now as the Middle East after the pegasi sandstorms. We took great pains to protect our top scientific minds, taking them to the last safe place on Earth. At the very least, the Red October is just about as sea-worthy as its submarine namesake. It was named after a Russian nuclear first strike vessel." Joseph exchanged looks with Dirk, who returned with a perplexed expression.

"The Red October sank," Dirk said. This prompted a few shared glances among the soldiers who had either not read up on their history or who chose to overlook the matter until it'd been brought up, like the fact they'd been given crappy presents for the last several Christmases. Dirk addressed Ajay with a sigh and a side of frown, the lines of his face budging up against one another. "But yeah, this gunship is meant to fly. It's got four propellers, but they're working sorta like turbines right now, so we're at least clipping through the water at a tremendous pace. It's actually built for water landings, since this craft's immense. It's meant to be the size of a battleship, so planes can take off. The one thing we have never been able to rely on in this war is the air force. The pegasi have been unstoppable. That's why Belarus commissioned this baby."

Ajay was beginning to feel more and more like he was the odd man out here, and he felt the simmer of everyone nodding around him. He kept his mouth shut, and the feeling found a momentary reprieve when Joseph stood up from his chair. Everyone expected him to say something in the wake of Queen Elizabeth III's validation of his newfound authority, but he instead departed from the room with his head half-hung and his hands worrying his hat.

Dirk stopped him for a moment. "Where're you going? You want me to cover the briefing?" He looked over his shoulder at empty air. "We're not lettin' you do it."

Joseph glanced over his own shoulder without meaning to and waved Dirk off. "Yeah, sure, whatever," he mumbled, and dove out of the room. Everyone gazed at him in awkward silence before turning their attention back to Dirk who was prepared to go all business over everyone's asses, but Ajay sprang from his seat to follow Joseph. Nobody really did anything but look, but the mid-meeting exeunt charged the audience's synergy with unrest.

Even Nikita Dragovich spoke out of turn, and he was known as a staunch advocate of the Russian military. Then again, this was the Belorussian military now. He was a balding, severe-looking older man with a woman's name, who appeared both of sour disposition and cruel authority. His head was shaped like an ugly, angry turnip that would've been much improved had it been stuffed back into the dirt. His wrinkled forehead was his most predominant feature, as though the sagging skin of his face was an afterthought migrating to his chin for the winter. His eyes were shoved close together as if his narrow-minded view was the result of a physical formation. "I don't think we need propaganda videos. If people have to be convinced, then they're damaged goods to begin with. Besides, the numbers program I was commissioned to design to combat the pony obedience toxin can easily be re-purposed for this sort of thing." At this, Dirk expressed a disappointed look.

One of the other soldiers, a large, beefy man named Slavko Blazkowicz, donned confusion for his facial apparel and said, "You mean like brainwashing?" He had sparkling marigold painted nails and a semi-combed widow's peak of glistening black hair. His face was speckled with dark freckles.

"I ought to. People's brains are filthy. More like hypnosis, though. It's not an easy process to hypnotize anything. Not even a cat or a brick."

Outside in the hallway, Joseph had rounded the first corner and eluded Ajay who did not know which way to turn. His weight slumped against the wall with one hand as though the vessel had keeled sideways and swung gravity onto its side. His other hand stretched his thumb and middle finger across his brow, and he exhaled a dry sob like a cat with a hairball.

Ajay caught up with him too soon and found him in this distraught manner. "Disgusting. Are you crying? You westerners are far too sentimental. Listen to me, Joseph. Joseph. Joseph, are you listening to me? I get that you are upset about the death of your father, but crying is collateral damage. You want to grieve; you avenge him against the murderers of your ancestors."

Joseph's face reached heretofore unbeknown new levels of frown. His eyes looked bleary, but he was no longer in a sobbing mood. Now he was vulnerable. "I wasn't crying over my father."

Ajay shook his head like he was speaking in mime. "Typical westerner. No respect for his ancestors. The proper way to grieve is to give yourself over to your country in service so they can relieve your burden for you. Humanity's survival can't be put on hold just because you think you're having your first feeling. Your emotional hymen breaking isn't more important than everyone else's lives."

"You do know where Belarus is, right? It's right on the European border of Russia."

"That's still to the west of where I am from, Kyrat. My parents are from India and China."

"You do know the Earth is a sphere, right? Go west long enough and I'm sure—"

Dirk interrupted their tête à tête, though he hesitated after rounding the corner to catch the tail end of their culminating bickering. "We got a situation," he said, blurting the words out with enough force to deflate their little argument. Joseph and Ajay set their antagonism aside like ort at a buffet for anorexics and followed him at once back into the meeting room they'd just left. They outpaced the short man with ease, but the doorway was wide enough so they didn't have to brush shoulders if they entered sideways.

Inside, the crowd of soldiers was forming a circular berth around a blond man wearing his sunshades indoors. Ajay recognized him from when he'd arrived. He was sweaty and pale, but showing a taut, manly smile. He was trying to keep his hands on his hips and his arms away from clutching his stomach. Some of the soldiers were amused at their own disgust, others raised glib eyebrows as though sceptical about the whole affair, and the queen had her hand spread across her chest as if she'd never seen such a distasteful spectacle in all her life. "What's going on here, Duke?" Joseph demanded to know.

Ajay furrowed his face in confusion. Dirk held his hands out in disbelief and said, *"Look* what you *did* on the *floor!"* Ajay did not want his attention drawn that way. There was a splatter of chunky puke staining the metal there. The stench hit him as soon as he saw it, and he willed himself not to gag. Several people sidled towards the exit to evacuate the room before Dirk swung a stubby finger in Nikita's direction. "You, smart guy. Take him to the infirmary."

Nikita froze and tilted his head back. "I am not a doctor. I am an engineer."

Dirk leaned toward him without missing a beat. "Did I ask you what your job was? Go and do it!" He was not angry; rather he was annoyed at this unprofessional rebuff.

"It's okay," Duke said. "I never get sick because I'm a portrait of manliness. I've reached such peak physical condition from repping my delts that now my body's exercising my insides for me. I'm huge! That means I have huge guts!"

Dirk stared at Duke hard, his eyes wide and his teeth biting his lower lip. "Right," he said, protracting the syllable. Nikita escorted Duke from the room and everyone tried their best to forget the turn of events. There was a collective groan after Dirk clapped his hands together and said, "Alright, people, sit tight, 'cause I gotta go fetch something I know you're gonna love. Right after someone gets this mess cleaned up."

The soldiers in the room turned to one another in their seats to start gossiping, and a few gawked conspicuous glances over to Ajay, but nobody got a word out because Dirk's activity arrived right on schedule. A courier who volunteered for the job more for the walking than the lifting carried in a cumbersome but not altogether too-filled mailbag. Nobody thought to warn him about what Duke did on the floor, so his shoe slipped in the sick. Envelopes flew everywhere like confetti littering the streets with pollution at a parade as the courier fell onto his ass. Everyone laughed, except for the courier, because he was in pain, both physically and emotionally. Slavko pointed at him and said, "Hah! He's not laughing because he's embarrassed! Laugh harder, everyone!"

Dirk did not laugh harder. Dirk was annoyed that his delivery was a kerfuffle. "If you kids are finished, I'd like to get a move on before we reach China. Everyone's gonna take a letter and read it aloud." Letters were passed out amongst the men. Ajay gripped the seat of his chair and grew more infuriated. Joseph frowned at receiving an envelope that had landed in the throw-up. He wasn't sure whether he wanted it to dry off before he touched it further, or if he wanted to get it over with so he could throw it out. This is what is known as a "dilemma", where he could not decide which course of action to take, though considering his estranged relationship with his father, he should have been used to it by now. He was still hesitating when Dirk asked, "So who wants to go first?" At that point, Joseph still wasn't going to raise his hand.

He was granted more time to think when a woman with a slightly off-American accent raised her voice at Slavko. "Hey, could you watch where you're splashing your tea?" Slavko held his mug still in his lumpy fist and sat like the operating system you prefer to use freezing up.[8]

Another woman with a Grecian accent snapped, "It's not proper tea. It's sweet tea." The previous woman frowned but said nothing. Slavko resumed sipping noisily at his steaming hot tea like a *man.*

This gave Joseph time to think, because thinking takes time. Much like the writing process, one has to convert the time they're given into thinking. If his own soldiers were not cooperating or volunteering, then it was his job, it was his *duty* to lead the way, to be the first to do what they all had to do, and show them the very same that they had to do. He opened the precarious envelope without touching any of the puke as if he was in the zone. Some of the emesis soaked through the envelope, but he managed to cope. "This letter's dated some three years ago from a little girl named Jane, I think? Seems like they couldn't find who to address it to. The handwriting's really poor, and it reads as follows: 'Dear Human Resistance. What doze the word 'resistance' mean? Can you send this to my daddy? I'm sure he's a marine by now, just like me.'" Joseph paused but muscled through the correspondence. "'He's totally not just a drunk in a ditch somewhere, and he definitely loves me more than to just send a postcard to me every birthday.' Um, then the handwriting gets really bad. It says, 'When I grow up, I totally want to be a performance artist so I can so anything I want without repercussion.' I think *these* stains might be tears. It looks like unintelligible screaming. Asterisk. 'Curled up in foetal position'? 'It's not a foetal position! It's a tactical body reduction!' Okay, well, it kinda lost me at the end there, but there's also a nice child's drawing with it."

Joseph unfolded the second sheet within that had somehow been spared getting too messy. This was done in harsh crayons with crumbs of coloured wax smashed hard onto the paper. The image was of a stretch of road with some water in the background and a couple of pine trees off to the right. A van and a moped were heading left, with a man wearing sunshades proudly riding the moped with his arms held over his head. In one hand he had a knife that said "dank" on it. In his other hand he was firing a gun at the air but had forgotten to draw in bullets. There were pegasi flying above him, holding bazookas. There was a sign with letters hastily fit in so they curled down the edge that read, "Save New York". A caption at the bottom of the sheet started in crayon and finished in dark pencil read: "This is me if I fought the ponies I would be a total badass." Joseph explained and read this text out loud, then folded the letter up and set it on the chair beside him.

The queen clapped politely. Dirk said, "Okay, that was pretty good! You know, the kids out there, they believe in us, so we oughta believe in the kids who believe in us. Who wants to go next?"

The woman who'd complained about Slavko's carelessness spoke up, sounding as chipper as though she'd forgotten all about the incident. She had a pleased, round face with a cutesy sort of maturity to her look. Joseph found her nationality hard to place, not knowing whether she was from Alaska or Asia. She had short, dark hair, was wearing a wide, tasselled scarf like a neckerchief around her neck, and had a pair of aviator's goggles on her head. She waved a hand and said, "What about if we introduce ourselves as well? I'm Jenny Everywhere, everywhere I go." She let out a soft laugh at the mild joke regarding her unorthodox surname. "I'm new with the Belorussian resistance, having worked with the Red Hammer Platoon. My letter's short and discusses a little girl's recreation of a pony attack." She swallowed her can-do attitude for the time being because the oncoming subject matter was rather grim. She started to describe the image etched out in coloured pencils, then held it up to show everyone around her. "This is of the ponies attacking the island of Hainan in China. Very good-looking flames on the straw huts. There's what appears to be a native dude wearing a sombrero and eating a taco over here." She studied the image again with a slight snicker, clearly finding it very strange, and then quirked a brow as she glanced at the soldiers in her row again in case any of them found a detail out of place about it. She passed around the picture with its envelope, and when Joseph saw her do this, he passed on his own stained letter as well.

The woman who nagged about the sweet tea earlier now mumbled something aloud at the precise volume where you can hear clearly what the person has said but still get away with claiming you can't understand them because they're mumbling. "I bet the kid in my letter can at least draw."

Having heard her acerbic comment, Dirk made the classic mistake that naive educators tend to make in such situations: They reward the rudeness with attention and call upon that person. "Alessandra? You wanna tell us a little about who you are and read your letter?"

Alessandra looked at him with a dead-eyed stare and said, automatically, "No." Even she realized how uncomfortable that next silent was, and she corrected herself no matter how blunt it sounded. "I mean, yes," she said on a cough. She had rather a deep voice and one some might think was masculine for a woman, not that there was anything wrong with it being so. "The name's Artemis, actually," she said, and she reached behind herself to tug on the metal bow she was wearing as if that explained something. It was a

[8] Zing!

rather fearsome and sleek weapon, unlike the wooden string bows of medieval England. This was made of some kind of light and durable metal, with some manner of very thin cable, and likely produced by machine so it could guide the most aerodynamic precision. The arrows in the quiver on her back did not look like feathered goose shafts other than a vague resemblance in their shape, and instead were some impractically-expensive looking metal with tips as sharp as Ginsu blades. Their shafts were hollow to carry them on the wind, and their "feathers" were some synthetic material specifically measured for an exact level of wind resistance. She had a lot of upper-body musculature, and her hair was dyed to be slightly off from its natural dark brown colour, while having a rather long outcropping in the middle that flopped over to one side and sprang up in the middle like a Mohawk over regular, short hair.

Dirk didn't miss a beat. "It says Alessandra Galanos on the roster." He pointed to a clipboard nobody noticed he'd had before.

Alessandra averted her gaze as if she was looking down on a child who wasn't there. "It's just like a nickname or something, yo."

"Okay. Artemis it is then." Dirk thumbed sluggishly through the papers on his clipboard before looking up again. "You ever been to a Wendy's, Artemis?"

"No?"

"Hm. Me neither. So, you got a nickname and you haven't had food from Hamburg, Germany. Why don't you read us a letter?"

Realizing she'd been made a clown of, Artemis sighed, rolled her eyes, and then just did as she was asked. "Okay." She opened the envelop and gasped as white powder crumbled over her fingers, onto her knees, and down to the floor. "Oh, oh wait. It's just Parmesan cheese. It's okay," she said. She unfolded the paper on its broad, uneven creases and went, "Huh?"

She showed off a collage of images cut out from a computer printout and stuck with superfluous paste over unidentifiable fluorescent outlines done in oil pastel. The images were from some kind of computer program that allowed one to illustrate stories using stamps of common objects, but recognizing this was beyond the room's occupants. One particular figure was of a kneeling boy in a white shirt wielding two poorly-drawn daggers that appeared to shoot red lines connecting to fires. The text was an illiterate mess, perhaps like something you've read recently. There was a cut-out of an ordinary pony from Earth drawn by the computer that had been carefully desecrated so as not to obscure what it was, though it was the subject of the boy's pyromania. Other children-sized humans were joyously beheading another pony (the joy was not depicted in an apparent fashion, instead with blotched lines in magic marker) whose head had been delicately ripped from its shoulders.

"Oh boy," said Slavko, whose turn was next. "I can't wait to see what this kindergarten-trained maestro drew for me." He stuck on a pair of reading glassed which slid down his greasy, squat nose and had a string of yarn attached behind his head and drooping before his ears. He chewed on his upper lip with his bottom teeth as he pried open the envelope and unfolded the contents tucked within. Inside was a glorious oil painting upon hewn canvas in Tyrian murex and embroidered gold trimming. Every structure and figure shown was depicted in stark, organic realism, even the enemy ponies storming the town's hotel, who did not look quite "real" even in person. The acts of violence, however, bloomed from romanticist blood and smoke into impressionist pointillism and a creeping Dadaism that dripped up the top of the frame and echoed the images of the sign that stood in stark stability to contrast the grim chaos that ripped the buildings asunder. "Welcome to the Monsoon Motel," the sign read. The central figure was a human heroically defending his deceased comrades from a squadron of suffering ponies while being sniped in the back by a pony hiding in the motel's dumbwaiter.

Slavko scrutinized the painting but gained nothing apart from awe. He frowned and showed the painting to the others, many of whom gasped in amazement. "It's not even in Russian or English," he said. "I can't read this five-page dissertation included, except this is clearly a signature at the end, and I'm pretty sure this says 'age five'." Most everyone gushed to pretend they weren't reminded of their age. The false humility of believing they were foolish not to achieve as much by then in their own lives helped.

Ajay did not gush. "Buddha wept. Spare me this westerner pride! What's next, home economics?" He was bitter about something. The others could sense it somehow. Joseph procured a crumpled hat from his pocket and choked it with both hands.

Dirk tightened his lips in a pitying gaze, but held his ground. "It's to boost morale, Mr Ghale. I realize it's natural for two factions to be defensive when their philosophies are different, but just because some of us are a little more monetary doesn't mean we don't still care about the important things, like our children."

Ajay felt all the heat get sucked away from his face with a breath. "These days prove what our children can do for their

elders," he said with what remained in his lungs. "May I be excused? I have more observations to make before my report to the Golden Path."

Jenny noticed that the queen hadn't gushed, either. There was a tense look upon her face behind her gaunt fingers which Jenny couldn't identify. She muscled through the fear of celebrity and pulled into a seat beside the troubled monarch. "Is everything A-Okay, your majesty?" she asked. The older woman looked taken aback as though she had not noticed Jenny's approach and only now saw her once the latter spoke up. She drew her hand away from her lips and mustered a smile. Both women were treading through their dreads, but Jenny could feel that the queen's weighed much heavier. "It's the children, right? I heard the Russian refugees were evacuated to the U.K. and France."

Jenny took hold of the painting Slavko had opened. "This makes it seem like they're doing quite well for themselves," she said, showing the image to the queen. "It's hard to grow up in wartime. Well, it's hard to grow up at all. We want to treat children like we birthed them into a very different world from the way things turn out. Take the dumbwaiter in this picture for instance. I read a footnote in an art history book detailing the life of a famous artist who vowed to work only by inspiration and never by commission. He believed commercialism was counterintuitive to art." She handed the painting over to the next soldier waiting to stare at it, and then resumed a more private conversation with the monarch. "Unfortunately he went bankrupt—his daughter perished from leukaemia—and he moved into architecture to make ends meet. The houses he built started out for ordinary suburbia—the kind of homes urbanites often mistake for bourgeoisie middle class when really they couldn't be farther off—but he would put such nuanced detail into them. They showed one of his dumbwaiters in that, too, though it certainly didn't have a pony coming out of it."

"I despise dumbwaiters." The queen interrupted after removing her hand from her mouth again. "How many different worlds have you seen? Begging your pardon, but you did say you were Jenny Everywhere."

Jenny's nose wrinkled as she drew back in shock, and her eyes shifted in Ajay's direction. "Begging *your* pardon, um, ma'am, but my background is deemed classified by the Belorussian Resistance."

"We are both outsiders," the queen said. "You are the strange but genuine young lady who cannot account for her background. I am a substitute monarch who has lost her family and whose diminished authority serves only the transitional bureaucracy of the new world order. The words don't sound the same, but the melody is familiar, is it not?" The queen stared down her prim nose at Jenny, who smiled in response.

The behemoth that was the Red October airship was a tyrant for manoeuvrability, oppressing itself by its own immensity and lumbering atop the oceans like a bloated whale too late to beach itself. What was designed as an air fortress displaced an immense measure of sea, and though its size meant it had been built for water landings, its wary occupants felt more as if they were inhabiting a colossal submarine, and should they dare to peek out the portholes or open a door to the outside, they'd find themselves trapped under miles of ocean on all sides. They weren't really *that* deep of course. They could scarce see the difference between riding in humanity's only battleship and hiding out in underground shelters like the scattered remnants of humanity both lucky and cowardly enough to wait out the war. Among the sergeants, tempers were flaring because the privates' morale rose at the prospect of making landfall in China. Over the next couple of days, the sergeants fumed, even as they plotted out their rote rules with express regulation on shore leave conduct and curfews.

Dirk hogged all the best mood aboard the ship, and if his confidence in the Red October ever waned, he did not show even a hair of it. He continued his exercises of propaganda, emphasizing the heroics of the decimated Moscow and the need for solidarity with the other few remaining factions of the global Human Resistance. His other films and lectures weren't met with too much enthusiasm from the soldiers, but still he gave them round the clock, brimming with enthusiasm the likes of which Joseph couldn't imagine keeping up with. Activities such as more letter reading and designing unique squad patches merited a touch more gusto from the servicemen, though Ajay still scoffed them openly. Some of the subjects Dirk touched upon confused and bored the viewers, and while Joseph himself came to see their importance after the next day, he couldn't help but think they would do more benefit if shown to the general public instead, so that civilians everywhere would not block out the harsh realities of the war. The resistance was only interested in the fight, but Joseph found himself surprised by what recent events already felt like distant memories.

Dirk's presentations were sometimes delivered by a sergeant or a colonel, and through them, Joseph learned a few interesting facts about the Iron Wolves Corporation he did not know. The IWC were thought to be headed by the ex-prime minister of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and were comprised of organized crime syndicates and war profiteers. An Albanian crime family known as the "Golden Dawn" (which were not to be confused with the Golden Path) had been assimilated into their fold under the guidance of an American plutocrat named Dolan Trump. With the minimal aid of a few scratchy films, Nikita went into a little more detail about the irradiated status of Moscow, and how it was impossible ever to return to that land for decades to come. Even Ajay paid rapt attention and dropped his sour attitude, and Joseph suspected in these moments that maybe Ajay was not being himself. He also suspected Ajay wasn't sleeping well, as he remembered overhearing him complain that he woke up to find sixty cents in loose change wedged in his

arm.

Perhaps most important (and thereby most begrudging of the soldiers) were the intercultural seminars on treating the Golden Path with respect. Joseph mostly remembered the examples of fine cuisine and evocative artwork. Ajay lightened up enough to participate in these symposiums, and was coerced into delivering a few lessons of his own. He explained some rudimentary trivia about Indian and Chinese culture, explaining that his own mixed parentage gave him insight into both, and talked about the importance of Buddhism to the communist country. "I should tell you all about the five poisons in Buddhism: Ignorance, attachment, aversion, pride and envy."

"Oh boy!" Slavko said. "This'll be good!"

Of course, Ajay ended up screwing it up by getting personal. "They also don't like having their possessions confiscated."

Dirk tried to salvage the situation. "Look, the most important thing is that you don't offend one another with bullshit stereotypes. You think someone else smells bad? They think you smell bad, too. It's 'cause of diet. That's why I've been eatin' these eggs, so I can smell the worst than all o' yous and not let you feel bad!" With a laugh and a flabby grin, he smashed another egg in his mouth.

The day finally came when the Red October arrived at Marmagoa. Because of the warship's great size, it also possessed small passenger boats to carry people to land, although it only required enough space for an aircraft carrier to dock. The Chinese port was dead silent, and yet looked at first glance as if the dock workers were just on an extended lunch break. Signs of duress were noticeable on a cursory inspection: Algae crept up the docks from the ocean like dark green plaque on a sweet tooth. The shipping containers were rusted and dishevelled, and not a single one was not out of place. Some stacks had toppled outright, and other containers had burst open, their contents either long-since scavenged or abandoned, such as one full palette of bootleg sneakers. Through the periscopes, the lookouts perceived no present signs of life, and the Belorussian Resistance was left in suspense for a good few minutes. Joseph had just been on the verge of asking if anybody was arriving at all, and Ajay was on the verge of reassuring him at the same moment when someone confirmed a sighting.

A small procession emerged from the colourful and rusted stacks to approach the loading ramp which had been deployed. "Is that man wearing a turban?" Slavko asked, acting as one of the lookouts. At the forefront of the company on the docks was a man of protruding cheek bones and an expression that was stoic save for the natural way his eyebrows tilted inward, making him look ever so slightly agitated like all managerial types are. On his head was indeed a grey-blue turban wrapped so tight like he must've been bald underneath. If there was anything ominous about his appearance, it was in the eyes of the beholders who were wary about forming an alliance with a faction they knew little about besides hearsay.

"Lemme take a look," said Dirk. "Yeah, it is. Nothing wrong with that."

"No, I know that," said Slavko. "I was just saying that's more of a middle east fashion."

"Naw, I've seen them wear them when I was on a business trip to Siam once," Dirk said. "Besides, he could be from the middle east. They were scattered when the pegasi blew sandstorms over the entire region, remember?"

When Ajay was satisfied with hearing their opinions, he spoke without even needing to see who they were talking about. "That'll be Tian Zhao, the acting leader of the Golden Path. If he wants to tell you why he wears a turban, he'll say so himself."

Dirk persuaded Ajay to take a look through the periscope to confirm the identities of the men outside the ship. There was an overweight man who couldn't decide if he wanted an ordinary goatee or one of those cool Fu Manchu-type deals. He was walking beside a gangly skeleton of a man bedecked in bandoleers and a hat that looked like a condom with ear flaps. There were a couple of other men in army fatigues who didn't particularly stand out from afar, except for one light-skinned man with broad shoulders. He didn't look too unlike Duke Nukem except his blond hair wasn't sticking straight up like stalks of corn, and he had a bushy goatee beard surrounding a rather exaggerated smile that hid his teeth.

"Ooh, who's the blond?" Slavko asked with a hint of snark, waving his painted nails.

"Typical westerners," spat Ajay. "Always looking for hamburger in Narsinghgarh."

"Hamburg isn't that far west from Yugoslavia," Slavko muttered.

"Time to bring out the welcoming committee," Dirk said to Joseph. He then whispered over his shoulder in a stern tone, "Behave."

Joseph sighed through his nose. He'd been getting a bit too used to Dirk taking the lead on ideas, but now he could see his time for procrastination was up. He looked at the men immediately around him, and paused looking at Ajay. His father really was dead, and no matter how muddy they were nor how much they stank, he had big boots to fill. "Let's go."

Out he marched, now that the loading ramp was in place, with Ajay and Dirk on either side of him. Behind them was a contingency of their nearest and most important soldiers, including Nikita, Slavko and Artemis. The Queen also showed up with her reserved good intentions, and so invited Jenny alongside her as the two had struck up a bond in the past couple of days. Once they reached the bottom of the ramp where the Golden Path was standing, they idled for a bit. Dirk muttered affirmations to himself like he was shuffling notes before a speech, asking Joseph under his breath if he wanted to speak first. Slavko tried to crane his neck to see towards the back of the Golden Path's crowd. Ajay broke the silence by greeting Tian in Chinese, to which he received a nod in response.

The queen was first to officiate the proceedings. She curtsied and offered the well-wishes of the United Kingdom's refugees to Tian. He blinked and tensed his lips, bowing his head but a little, and that was as far as his acknowledgment went. Up close, he was something of an older man than supposed, who had seen ugly things that wore on his face. His jowls and neck chords sagged loosely, but he had a clean-shaven face. His intentions of keeping to business and dispensing with sentimentality were readily apparent, but the queen expertly hid her offense and backed away to watch the remainder of their meeting.

The Belarusian Resistance did not expect Tian to speak just then. "We are the Golden Path of the Indo-Chinese resistance." He focused his sights on Joseph. "You are Joseph Matskevich?"

Joseph was surprised that he'd been recognized and realized he still didn't know what he'd expected. "Yes, I am. We are the Belarusian Resistance. By now you've all heard that Moscow has fallen." He swallowed and started talking loudly to the entire group. "When my school was bombed by the ponies, they had assigned us to give speeches, so I never quite got to give one. With that out of the way, I'd rather just say what needs to be said. Speeches aren't history. War is history. We could sure use your help, and we can sure dish it out to boot."

Tian cracked the tiniest of smiles as though he was forcing it with every ounce of restraint. "I hope that your impressive vessel can contain my small army," he said.

"We have very few soldiers among the survivors of Moscow and Belarus," explained Dirk. "Trust me, there's plenty of room on the Red October." No sooner had he said this than soldiers from the Golden Path, formed from the Chinese and Indian resistances, emerged in droves from behind crates, behind storage compartments, storage compartments and long-abandoned debris. There must have been hundreds of human lives standing there, hidden from view up until now, outfitted in ACUs and various weapons to defend the human race from the everlasting pony menace. Dirk grinned wider than ever and shook with laughter like a bowl full of jelly. "Talk about manpower! Where've they been hidin' 'em all? See that? Crossing nationalist borders is a breeze when you got a common cause to fight for."

Still smiling as soldiers poured around him to embark on the Red October, Dirk turned to meet a figure hidden under a powder blue burqa. His smile stayed, but all the cheer drained out of it to an awkward sag. "Oh, shit," he said through clenched teeth.

"This is my daughter," Tian said in a threatening tone.

"Uh, what's her name?" The only thing discernible about Tian's daughter was that she was as tall as her father.

"To speak her name in front of an unfamiliar man would be a crime punishable by death." Tian's words sent uncomfortable shivers through the Belarusians' spines, and they each felt like a fish out of water. The phrase "fish out of water" is intended to conjure ichthyologist empathy with a fish that is lying somewhere, gasping for breath so hard that its gill flaps open wide as its mouth gapes helplessly. It struggles in the open air to flex its tail muscles, in desperation seeking the world of fluid pressure it knows from the empty space it cannot breathe. It can only see with its eyes the surface beneath it and the ceiling above, unable to use the veins along its sides that ordinarily feel the water currents. It is like being in space without a space suit. It is like being told your order of lemon-seared skipjack is off because the sous chef is a vegetarian. It is like being surprised in a restaurant with having to tip the waitron because the establishment is too inconsiderate to provide for its own employees and wishes instead to inconvenience its customers with further mathematical calculations. It is like being invited to a house and being the only person without a costume only to find that it isn't a costume party at all.

Tian spent much less ceremony on introducing Tubad Umad as the grim-looking, but handsome-faced man beside him, who looked a little like the 1990s rapper, Tupac.

"There's another one?" Joseph looked past Tian and his daughter to see another figure covered in a thick, dark veil. Actually, he had a bag over his head, and his arms were bound behind his back. The man was wearing a dirty long-sleeved shirt and military pants with worn-out shoes. There was a faint whistling inside the bag that disturbed Joseph.

Tian gestured to the man in the bag. "This is the prisoner we brought for you."

"What's with the bag on his head?" asked Joseph.

"That is for our benefit."

"How so?"

"He is ugly," Tian answered. Joseph wondered just how ugly he could be.

Dirk explained to Joseph. "Ah. You see, a couple months back, the Belarusians intercepted a transmission from the Golden Path about a suspicious prisoner they had. That opened up a dialog between our two factions, and voila."

"He'll find his accommodations quite bland." Ajay sneered.

Joseph whispered to Dirk. "Is this the uh..?" To this, Dirk nodded and whispered a couple words that Ajay could not hear. Joseph straightened up from leaning over and ordered the prisoner be put in "the second-most secure brig." As he walked behind the prisoner to guide him on board, he noticed the painful sight of the man's wrists and clenched fists. The skin was scarred over every inch and was an unnatural shade of red with wrinkled white flakes. Again he hushed his voice to Dirk. "Maybe get this man to the infirmary first."

"Alright. Whatever you wanna do." Dirk nodded his head in a circle. "You're the leader of the Human Resistance now."

The crowd bustled about them like somebody had flicked on a switch and charged them all with electricity or loitering. Long ago, the tsunamis had flung ashore, battering with tremendous force all the heavy machinery and objects on the dock. Now the ebb was here, washing people out aboard the Red October to abandon the land in hopes of rescuing it. Along the arduous day of settling in that followed, Joseph recalled the discussion on welcoming the Golden Path on board. The Belorussian Resistance had wanted to keep to themselves and not break apart the Golden Path, but Dirk had made it known he wished to avoid segregation and encourage mingling between the two foreign factions, a stance which had come as a surprise about him to everyone at the time. Joseph had sided with this perspective, vouching for equality among the masses. In the end, either side remained more or less grouped together out of convenience rather than intent, and chose to room with the allies they were friendliest with in their own squads. Because they were running exercises among their squads since before the Golden Path arrived, this arrangement ended up being the case, although there still remained a few people here and there, especially among the higher ranks, who roomed with some of their new Indo-Chinese allies.

3. When You're in Distress

Only a couple of days or so had passed since the coalition reached the destined port on China's mainland coast, but for all their puttering around, higher ups barking out orders to substitute authority, and reassigning duties to feign managerial expertise, the ship's hallways soon cleared enough for greater foot traffic as munitions and supplies, gathered from generous donations and looted from felled strongholds, were sorted into the warehouse storage aboard the titanic vessel. Now the cantankerous sergeants had to try to find work for their boisterous rabble of soldiers, so they spent their twilight hours rearranging the whole kit and caboodle of the resources (much to the chagrin of the ship's chef), and when that was done, they decided to rearrange the barracks next, even after the cluster-fuck of moving in an entire other army that outnumbered them.

Joseph was a bit preoccupied to deal with such mundane affairs. That's what the sergeants were there for, after all. If he had to stop and sign off on every menial whim of daily frivolity, he'd never get around to fighting the ponies. The first opportunity Dirk had had, he called Joseph aside. Joseph still found it a bit awkward to answer to this stout man who acted more on top of the situation than he himself felt, and probably even more than his father ever behaved. On the other side of it, while Dirk's get-to-it-ive-ness was off-putting, trust was easier than it was hard toward a man who knew where he was going in a world where the map was embroiled in shadow. Whether or not he looked the part was beneath the matter.

"I said I got somethin' to tell you," Dirk repeated because Joseph looked like he hadn't been paying attention. "We gotta talk

about Ajay. He's been drivin' people up the wall. Here, walk and talk with me." Dirk peeled a hard-boiled egg and hobbled down the hall. Keeping up with him was only difficult in so far as not over-treading his gait without trying, and Joseph hunched forward as though he had to listen close even to hear him, which wasn't the case. Dirk munched sloppily on the egg and talked with his mouth full, gesturing a karate chop with one arm when some bit of his news was important. "He's an influential person on this ship, now all our orders are complying with the Golden Path. We gotta keep working on his good side, but he still says we're hiding something from him, even after offering him to show him around the ship. I gave back most of the stuff we had confiscated, but we haven't finished analysing it. Down at the lab, they been sayin' this or that and the other thing about Duke Nukem in sickbay. I know the leader of the Human Resistance has better things to do than babysit ornery foreign nationals, but that just means he'll listen to you. I just need him off my ass for a coupl'a hours, that's all."

Joseph sighed and nodded in genuine agreement. He knew he was the best candidate for this, so he felt it was his responsibility to bring up any potential conflicts with the man making the suggestion. "I don't think he and I are gonna be getting along," he said with confidence.

"Of course not. He hasn't been getting along with anybody," Dirk said, shrugging his arms out. He popped the last bite of egg in his mouth and wiped his hands together, then on his pants. He then waved Joseph off as he trundled away from Ajay's quarters. "Just tell him you need to show him the infirmary or whatever. Say we gotta schedule medical check-ups for his delegates or whoever from the Golden Path. I gotta check in with the lab. There's somethin' really weird in that flask of his!"

Joseph felt swayed by Dirk's agreeable words, but he squeezed that hat of his in both of his fists nonetheless. He shoved the article of clothing into his back pocket and depressed the buzzer of Ajay's door. He kept the button pressed down so he could hear the cursing and shouting within. "Just a minute!" Ajay could be heard stumbling and kicking something, and a few minutes of muffled shuffling were heard before he yanked his door open. "Have you brought me my stuff back yet?"

Joseph clicked his heels together and saluted in order to intimidate Ajay with his jerky movements. "I'm here to escort you to sickbay for a preliminary medical meeting."

Ajay donned a cocky angle to his brow, knowing that the answer to his question was no. "If you expect me to turn my head and cough, I don't swing that way."

"Ha ha ha. Very funny, sir," Joseph said in a perfectly canned monotone. "One of our soldiers is sick, and we need your witness that he won't pose a threat of infection to the Golden Path."

Ajay blew some hot air out through the corner of his mouth. He hadn't felt very professional this past week. He slumped against the frame of the doorway and jerked his head instead of nodding. "Better late than never. Let's go. I need to take my chewable Flintstones?"

Joseph dropped his officious posturing for an extremely relaxed demeanour. "What? Just follow me." He half expected Ajay to dash off the moment his back was turned, but no such luck. The pair took what was admittedly not the shortest route to the infirmary, as Joseph was similarly unfamiliar with the Red October's interior floor plans, though he had been studying them. A stony silence kept them going, and Joseph could not help hearing in his mind's ear a melody timing itself to the rhythm of his footsteps. After a few repetitions of seven beats, he had brought Ajay to the medical station on board the Red October. The only marking was a sign, in Russian, translating to "Medical House" because most logos which are unconsciously associated with medical care are inexplicably copyrighted despite the fact that tending to an injured person's wounds is not a commercial property. The room inside was deceptively long, and looked like most things do to be larger within than without, as though they'd crammed three shared bunkers into the space of a closet. Several single-occupant beds stuck out away from the walls on either side of the long room, and there were curtains that could be drawn along tracks in the ceiling for some modicum of privacy. Each bed had a machine and an ivy stand,[9] but for now only three of them were occupied, one of which contained a soldier who'd sprained her back from not lifting with her legs instead of her hands. The other patient was Duke Nukem, and the third was the prisoner, who was asleep.

The room was perhaps the cleanest on the ship, which would have behoved the ship's galley to aspire to, especially as the head chef was right there in the room. No, he hadn't taken ill taste-testing his own concoctions. He was a strange-looking man with a bony forehead, greenish spots tattooed over his yellowish skin around the edges of his face, and a round, frizzy blond Mohawk that hung below his shoulders in the back. He had very long, thin mutton chops and an ugly suit that could be best described as semi-square-shaped, plaid paisley. He was standing over Duke Nukem who was lounging in bed the way one reclines on a pool flotation device with a cup holder, trying desperately to ignore the chef with the spoon from behind his sunglasses. There was no sun, but the fluorescent lights were somewhat bright, if that justified anything.

"Now eat it all up. Num num num num. It's good, isn't it?" When the ship's chef smiled, one could see his browned teeth,

---

[9] Postulated to be the initials "IV", but it's forgotten what they stood for. It is theorized to relate to the stick with intertwining vines growing around it that's been associated with pre-event medical practice.

filed down to sharp points, and his hazel eyes lit up in such a way as to appear as yellow as dandelions. His voice was weedy and nasally, but at the same time confident, as though he knew how annoying he sounded and it pleased him as punch. He was trying without remorse to spoon-feed some kind of sludge to Duke, who kept his lips tight and tried pretending the chef wasn't there, even as he jerked his head aside. "Now, come on, now. Here comes the pony into the abattoir." The chef's cajoling proved fruitless, but he didn't get upset. He plunked the spoon into the bowl and the bowl onto the end table beside Duke's bed. The bowl was filled with some speckled, pale yellow mush. The chef wiped his hairy, spotted hands onto his apron, and then smiled his crooked smile at Joseph and Ajay as if to connect his elongated mutton chops. "Well hey there, Joe! Whaddaya know?" He reached over to shake Ajay's hand, though Ajay didn't want to. Even Joseph looked uncomfortable towards the spotted man. "I'm Neelix, morale ambassador!"

Joseph turned halfway to Ajay. "He's the ship's cook." Ajay frowned.

Neelix looked even more pleased. "There ain't nothin' I can't rustle up from the galleys, cap'n! Ya want some cheese? 'Course ya do."

Joseph waved his palm out at Neelix. "No. No, we don't. We're only here to check up on our patient."

The two men that had been squatting on the other side of the bed were Nikita Dragovich and a man with five-o'clock shadow who was ostensibly a doctor. They'd been mumbling to one another about the contents of a cabinet under a monitoring machine, with little being overheard apart from Nikita complaining the issue was hardware and he was more of a "software engineer". He kept at inspecting the computer, and the doctor man stood up. His hands were stuck into the pockets of his pristine coat after running the fingers of his right hand through his shining coif. He had a set brow and a hard smile, and a stethoscope dangled around his neck like bling-bling. "Hello, gentlemen. I'm Dr Rafe Heartwell, MD." The suave doctor shook Joseph's and Ajay's hands in turn, and Ajay resented the sweat of Joseph's palm traveling to his in this manner.

Dr Heartwell grabbed Duke's clipboard which was hanging from the foot of the bed and hugged it to his chest. "I was worried he had a hiatus hernia, but it's something much odder." He pulled down the sheet covering Duke's protruding belly and announced, "This man is pregnant!"

Ajay swallowed hard and bulged his eyes out. Joseph took several long blinks and said, "Excuse me, what?"

Duke jostled in his bed, pounding the mattress with both fists. "No, no, no, I am not! That's unrealistic!"

"Now, now, of course you are. I've seen it before all the time!" Neelix assured him. "Your nipples are probably a little tender, ar-en't I right?"

Duke frowned and shook his head all the while, keeping his eyes hidden behind his shades. The good doctor flipped over the papers attached to the clipboard and read off his symptoms. "A lot of the tell-tale signs are here. Constant nausea and vomiting, fatigue and stretch marks, leaking colostrum, enlarged abdomen, Montgomery's tubercles, Braxton Hicks contractions."

Neelix leaned in close to Duke who stopped shaking his head all the while. "And you haven't had your period, either, have you?"

Joseph's scepticism was written all over his face, metaphorically speaking. He decided to stop feeling confused by guessing: "You're joking, right, doctor? I don't really have the patience for this nonsense."

"He really does have all those markers. They're why I'd like to get this baby up and running to take some ultrasounds." Rafe patted the monitor on the cabinet like it was a good dog.

Nikita frowned up at him. "It's working."

"What?"

"It's working. I tried turning it off and then on again, then I checked that it was plugged in, but all of humanity's greatest knowledge on computers wasn't working. Usually the very first step with any computer problem is just to replace the motherboard, but they're back in my lab, so I tried another method and inspected the internal hardware. The rusted capacitors just needed replacing." He flicked a heavy duty switch with a loud clunk and the machine whirred to action. "Some of the instrumentation is clearly worn out, too, and will probably be what goes next. I can knock around the hold to see what we've got, but it's really beneath me."

"Won't that be nifty?" The good doctor asked Duke. "Then we can monitor your progress."

"I think you're a quack," Duke said very sombrely. "I feel fine. I'm ready to kick gum and chew bubble ass, and I'm all out of ass."

"I'm teasing," said Rafe. "It's more likely you've got a pronounced beer gut and have a seafood allergy, or shouldn't have been eating in the mess hall at any rate. I think we've taken up enough of Mr Matskevich's time." He turned to Joseph without missing a beat. "You wanted to see the burn victim?"

"Yes. I remember Dirk being interested in hearing this, but he's not around." Joseph wrung his hat as he toddled behind Rafe a few beds down. Ajay followed because he had nothing better to do. Lying in bed with a bag over his head was the prisoner the Golden Path had delivered.

"He was found—" Ajay began.

Joseph hushed him with a pair of fingers. "Excuse me. I'd like to hear the medical details first from Dr Rape."

"Uh, Rafe. Anyway, the patient is suffering from bag-on-head-itis," said Dr Rafe, sounding deadly serious.

"What?"

"Luckily there's a ready cure." Rafe yanked the bag off of the man's head. Joseph and Ajay let out exclamations of disgust, although Joseph's was louder. The man's face was nothing but scar tissue. Severe burns marred the face of the man almost beyond recognition as a human being. His flesh was creased and red like raw meat. His nose was fused at the corners, and his lips were chapped and white. His ears looked like they were glued to the sides of his skull. There were scraggly, wiry scaps of white hair jutting forth in odd places on his scalp. His eyes looked almost swollen shut. "We have him under some pretty sweet pain meds. The real shit, not whatever the Golden Path was doping him up with. Not that weak-sauce morphine crap. Poor bastard's probably having the best sleep of his life right now. His wounds are so severe though. It's a miracle he survived whatever hell he was put through. I know I lost my appetite after seeing him the first time, which was just as well." Rafe shot a glance in Neelix's direction.

Neelix was trying to coax Duke to drink water, but it wasn't alcoholic enough for his taste. "It's Flooder's secret sauce. Want me to put the nipple on it?"

"I mean, I may be a doctor, but even my gag reflex kicks in at some point!" Rafe peeked under the thin bed sheet as if he wasn't really as squeamish as he let on. "What's more perplexing is I find myself trying to think how I'd explain his condition to one of my old med school professors. There's a limit on the human threshold for pain, and it's clear these were severe third-degree burns when they were inflicted. He should be dead. Probably against the hypocritical oath[10] to keep him alive. He's gonna be in constant, never-ending, everlasting pain the rest of his life."

"What grossed me out," said Ajay, "was the way his penis was burned down to a tiny nub." He almost gagged with revulsion at the wrinkled sight of wounded human flesh. Bits of him appeared withered and shrunk, and yet it looked as though his skin had tried to heal up without remembering what shape it was meant to keep, making him look swollen and fresh.

Neelix giggled. Rafe dropped the blanket. "Actually, it didn't lose much mass. There wasn't much to begin with. Certainly non-operational now, though, and his testicles are fused to his perineum."

Neelix coughed. Joseph was ready to tear the brim off his hat. He pointed at Dr Heartwell. "New rule. The leader of the Human Resistance only needs to know the important things. Okay now, what the hell is he a prisoner for?" He glanced sideways at Ajay and tried to force himself to look at the unconscious man.

"We didn't set him on fire. He was like that when we found him," Ajay said. Joseph wanted to believe him. He needed that relief right now. Ajay continued. "We found him loitering near the outskirts of Tibet. When we questioned him, he claimed the identity of an officer of the Human Resistance who was confirmed KIA since the fall of Moscow. About that time, I was assigned to aid our allies in South Africa for a few months. As for 'doping him up', he was probably on morphine every other week. It's not like the Golden Path has resources to spare on one suspicious mendicant. He's lucky we didn't pull martial law on him. You know, I've sort of wondered how your end of that conversation went."

Neelix was muttering something from across the room. Joseph shook his head. "You've spoken to my father more recently than I have."

"What about your constituents?"

"It's probably best if I ask Dirk Smidgeon. I haven't really been leader for that long." Joseph took another long look at the burned man as his mind drifted. "Who was he trying to impersonate?"

Ajay scoffed. "I'd hardly remember."

---

[10] Hippocratic Oath.

Joseph stared hard at the patient. He stared *harder*. Looking at those wounds sickened him. What was the point in living such a painful existence? He tried not to think about burning. The thoughts kept poking at him the harder he thought about what he wanted to avoid. He imagined the man must suffer from recurring nightmares. That he required constant treatment and care. That there was no guarantee the prisoner would have received that incarcerated by the Golden Path. Now that burden would fall to him. He could guarantee the man's custody.

Then another thought occurred to him. He looked up at the doctor. "I'll order to keep this man under constant guard, then at the first opportunity, they'll move him to our maximum security wing."

Neelix was pressing the call button on Duke's bed multiple times. The doctor's pager kept beeping until the man could no longer ignore the emasculating object. "I'm right here," Dr Heartwell said. "What the good gravy do you want? I'm a doctor, not a flight attendant."

Neelix did not need to answer, though he did anyway. "He's going into labour!"

Duke's face was red with manly frustration as his machismo battled with the immense severity of labour pains. If you lack a comparison for labour pains, try imagining doing the splits up to your stomach with Hemorroy Rogers and his Rrhoids boys flaring up, or else being in public school. His lips sunk inward as he struggled to hide his frown. Every second or so, he would belt out an intermittent, monotone yell. Every so often, he managed out a couple of words: "Rip and tear!" Overall, he was not a well man.

The shouts spilled up like hiccoughs as the five other conscious men in the room gathered around his bed. The doctor commanded Nikita to ready the ultrasound and explained its function to the others as if they were his students. "The ultrasound is basically a computer that reads data from a sonic probe."

Nikita scoffed. "It has a lot more complex parts than that. It uses a transducer probe to communicate to a central processing unit—"

Dr Heartwell reached over and switched the machine on himself. "Right now it's the only tool that's gonna show us an image of what's inside this man's tummy."

Nikita rolled his eyes. "Actually, no, it will show us a series of computer-generated images calculating the frequency of sonic waves reflecting—"

"Excuse me," said Dr Heartwell, gently nudging Nikita out of the way of the monitor. There were a lot of blurry pixels of various contrasts of grey, at least fifty shades or more, and they jumbled around like spilled ball bearings as the doctor strolled the probe around the circumference of Duke's gut. Nikita gave up interrupting. The powder blue Fleur de Lis pattern of Duke Nukem's maternity gown crinkled as he held the thin, scratchy fabric up to his own chest.

"My god." Ajay gazed at the console monitor. "What is it?"

"Just static. Probably needs some percussive maintenance." Dr Heartwell swatted the side of the console with an open hand for an ineffectual and hollow thunk. He jabbed the probe at Duke Nukem's prominent baby bump a few more times, then whacked the round end of the probe against his palm like he was shaking a carton of cigarettes. Joseph wondered what resources had been sunk into procuring this piece of technology. Nikita just stood there frowning.

"Aw, that's just precious," said Neelix, who now leaned in to gaze at the shapes which had manifested on the screen. Before Joseph could get a good look at them, the image faded into garbled static again.

"Some parts still need replacing," Nikita said, already moving out of the room. "I guess I'll go and fetch them."

He kept walking away even when Ajay tilted his head and said, "Do you hear humming?" Neelix was quick to assure him the phantom sound was real. Joseph, too, tried to listen, and he was sure he could hear something. He wasn't sure it was humming, but there was a music timbre behind the muffled grumbling. Duke let out a grunt and perspired profusely, a word which here means "more than an incontinent waiting for the restroom after eating clams that hadn’t opened.”

Then his stomach burst open in a haze of crimson sanies. Out like a puppet popped the front half of an Equestrian pony. "Shoo-be-doo, motherfuckers!" The colourful yellow pony, stained in chunky red blood, looked much like other Equestrians, with big, shiny eyes, a broad smile, and an almost luminous hue. It flailed its hooves in the air, nodding its head to the beat of its sycophantic chorus.

WHEN YOU'RE IN DISTRESS

The humans jolted away from the bed, with Duke's broken body unable to do much more than drink its last few choked breaths. As the members of the Human Resistance broke away from his side, the doctor rushed over to the woman patient in the room who had already awoken from the noise.

Neelix ran from the room, grunting and whining, pushed past Nikita outside in the hall, dashed panicked to the nearest stairwell, descended with caution by using the handrail, sprinted down another couple of corridors, inserted his key into his dorm door lock, quietly shut the door behind himself, then dove across the floor and underneath his bed. You could say he snapped into cowardice.

Instinctively, Joseph and Ajay both grabbed their guns at the exact same time and flung bullet after bullet into the singing pony's face. Its head became Swiss cheese, but that ridiculous, haunting smile remained on its face as it slouched over to one side like Bill Clinton's erectile dysfunction.[11] For a second, the only thing coming out of the pony's skull was blood and smoke. Then the song struck up again, and two more ponies popped out of Duke's belly, from in some impossible space they never should have been able to fit. By then, Duke gave a final jerk, and he died, staring at the two hideous creatures fighting over a scrap of sinewy flesh from his own body. Ajay raised his gun again, but Joseph saw the pattern. He touched Ajay's arm and ran over to the bed of the unknown prisoner.

The doctor and one nurse had transferred the woman patient with the sprained back onto a stretcher and were evacuating her on wheels. Rafe nodded to Joseph who nodded back as if to say he would escort the prisoner himself. Ajay half-skipped, half-jogged backwards to follow after Joseph, plugging a few more rounds into either of the ponies who were snapping like piranha fish in his direction. "No time for a stretcher! Get that guy out of here!" Ajay shouted, even though Joseph was right next to him. Duke's body appeared to deflate like a crumbled paper sack as more and more ponies popped from his body, and as they slid out of him entirely, the humans saw with revulsion what they were up against.

These ponies were unlike anything they'd seen before. Their bodies, from the middle down, lacked hind legs, and instead had almost serpentine, fish-like bodies that slapped around like horny dolphins to propel them across the linoleum floor. A new breed of pony had arisen as if a phoenix from the ashes of their latest heavy defeat, and at once Joseph dreaded that the sea would not be the safe haven they expected from the Equestrian menace. As the two men hoisted up the comatose prisoner over their shoulders, the half-fish ponies broke out into a noxious bout of singing.

Shoop-bee-doo! Shoop-shoop-bee-doo!
Call upon the sea ponies when you need distress!
Like piranha sharks, we will raze your corpse a mangled mess!
We'll leave your chest a gaping pit and your pants full of piss (piss)!
We'll be causing stress; better call your psychiatrist!

Joseph and Ajay did not have time to stop and complain that the syllable "stress" had been used to rhyme with itself in their song. They weren't really listening to the ponies' song at all, nor did they want to, although at least they had a name for their enemies: Sea ponies. The prisoner was lighter in weight than expected, probably because so much of him had burnt or wasted away, but it still wasn't effortless to escape the room with him in tow. With his free hand, Ajay kept firing upon the numerous sea ponies that multiplied before him, sauntering along the floor like half-broken zombies. With his free hand, Joseph contacted Red October security with his walkie-talkie to put the vessel on red alert.

At that moment, Dirk had launched into a spiel in one of the meeting rooms to inform cadets how they could teach small children back home about the war. "See, you gotta speak down to the younger generation on their level." He had shoved his meaty fist into a goggle-eyed hand puppet of a fox with a long, bushy tail, a green corduroy formal jacket with a red ascot, and a baseball cap worn with the brim on backwards so that it couldn't shield the sun from his eyes because dysfunctionality is cool to children. He made the fox puppet speak: "I'm Hippity Dawg, y'all! And if y'all don't do what Hippity Dawg says, y'all gonna get glocked!"

Red lights flashed throughout the ship as if a rave had started at a discotheque. The Belarusians wondered if this was a drill. The Golden Path wondered *what* the hell was going on. Dirk knew he could just call Joseph on the walkie. "Joseph, I know you said Ajay wasn't getting along, but what the heck happened?"

Ajay glared at Joseph, but kept firing at the encroaching equines. "Duke Nukem. Duke Nukem was sick. He was incubating these things. I mean, he was pregnant. Somehow. I don't get it. The doctor said he was pregnant, even though he's a dude. Look, how

[11] This information was ratified by a nutrition professor from a United States university.

do I explain it? It makes no sense! Argh! Ponies! We got ponies! Intruders aboard! And they're half fish!"

Shoop-bee-doo! Shoop-shoop-bee-doo!
When seahorses mate,
They fill the males with young,
Feast upon a human's flesh and turn their corpse to dung!
Turn their corpse to dung!

"Alright, I'll be there in a hurry. I'm not far." Dirk stuck his walkie-talkie to his belt and pulled his trusty service revolver from the drawer beneath his bathroom sink. Little did he realize that the sea ponies would be there in a hurry, too. Despite their lack of hind legs, their mobility proved restless on land. How so many had fit inside Duke's body was inexplicable, a word which here means "cannot be explained", and they were already pouring out into the halls from the infirmary. Dirk grabbed his walkie-talkie again, switched it to intercom mode, and broadcast his voice throughout the battleship. "This is not a drill. Enemy ponies sighted in the vicinity of the sick bay!" He pointed his gun at the wall and said "Bang!" to prepare himself for the bloody task ahead.

Ajay and Joseph shuffled out into the hallway, playing tug-of-war with the dozing prisoner. "To me!" Joseph barked as he drew his gun again.

"To you," Ajay said, ceasing fire long enough to follow after him.

"To me!"

"To you!"

Some scientist once said that an object at rest tends to stay at rest. While he may have been talking about inertial physics, the same can be applied in a metaphorical context to the sluggishness with which the Belarusians and Golden Path snapped into action, a phrase which here means "got ready to meet against the intruding pony menace". "Menace" is a word which here means "threatening to the human cause". "Cause" is a word which here means "a modus operandi of belief".[12] Soldiers seized their weapons and broke off into their respective squads, scouring the battleship's decks for pony infiltrators. Most didn't know what they were looking for, and a few foolishly did not know where the infirmary was yet. Worst of all, the Golden Path were still new allies, and neither side had been fully briefed on operation procedures aboard the vessel. They had not expected intruders out at sea. They had not been on alert.

Joseph charged from the fore starboard exit of the infirmary and banged his shoulder into the wall when overcompensating to pull Ajay out of there. Ajay let out a complaint about losing his shot, but cut himself off in the middle of his sentence when he remembered the gravity of the situation. Further down the hall, they could see the sea ponies dispensing from the aft starboard doorway. Dr Heartwell finished punching his thumb against a keypad just outside the door, and all four doors to the infirmary were sealed shut with blast doors that slid down from above. Before they closed all the way, several sea ponies had massed their way from the door, and there was no telling how many had escaped on the port side. "Port" is a word which here means "left". "Left" is a word which here means "the opposite side from right". "Right" is a word which here means "the side of the page you should be reading towards if you happen to be reading this in Russian."

As the doctor and nurse raced the stretcher down the hallway and out of sight, Joseph noticed something was not right as they left it. "Where the hell are my soldiers?" Down the adjacent corridor was a docking port for one of the electric carts used for getting around the Red October, but the elecart (as they were nicknamed) was out of place. "Where the hell is the elecart?" He looked about, but his attention was focused on shooting the villainous ponies with his free hand.

"Elecart?" Ajay asked in between taking pot shots at the slithering, crawling fish-ponies. They were proving resilient to bullets from his P15-T07. Between the gunshots and the harmonious singing of the sea ponies, neither of them heard the bubbly whir of the approaching elecart behind them until it was almost upon them. They dared to turn and look and saw the vehicle was driven by the blond man from the Golden Path's procession, for whom Ajay needed no introduction. The blond man had let out a loud, monotone scream to alert them to his presence, which he immediately shut up when they saw.

"Hurk Armstrong, reporting for duty, sir!" Hurk saluted Joseph with one hand while firing at the sea ponies with a Pistola con Caricato. He was standing up in the seat of a bulky, low-built vehicle that was almost wide enough where two could not pass by side-by-side down the same corridor. It looked something like a white-grey bumper car, but with sharp angles like the top of a vacuum's sucker. The front had a small logo of the Human Resistance and the Belorussian flag, as well as small print text reading: "If found, please return to the Red October."

Joseph wanted to ask how many sea ponies had spawned inside of Duke Nukem, but now was not the time. Now was the time to throw the prisoner's sleeping form across the backseat of the elecart and get some soldiers up in here. "Move that baby seat out

[12] Editor's note: Get on with it.

of the way!" Joseph demanded, plopping the prisoner down in the cramped seat. He and Ajay clambered into the snug vehicle next and noticed they both had to reload at the same time. There wasn't enough room for Hurk as well, so he got out and joined in firing on their enemies.

"Let's get outta here, Wide-Eyes!" Ajay said.

"Excuse me?" said Joseph.

"Roger! Where to, Commie?" Hurk shot back.

Joseph balked a moment as he recognized the familiarity between Ajay and Hurk. He was surprised Ajay got along with *anybody*. "Maximum security brig, and step on it. On the way, you can tell me what you're doing in one of these things."

"'On the way'?" Ajay asked.

Joseph cranked this and pressed that and wheeled the elecart around in an about face. Ajay trained his weapon over the back of the vehicle, which reached such a slow maximum speed that Hurk had to slow his gait so as not to out-pace it. Ajay and Hurk shot at the sea ponies the way two best friends are wont to do, and since the vehicle clipped along without hurry, Joseph also occasionally fired off a few rounds at their languid pursuers. Despite having to drag their weight across the floor by only two front legs, the sea ponies sped along the metal floor and fanned out like spawning maggots in every planar direction. Their numbers thinned out less because of the elecart's speed or the humans' efforts to defeat them, and more due to them branching out into other routes to spread like a virus throughout the ship. "How the hell are there so many of them?" Joseph asked.

"Frogs give birth to hundreds of tadpoles that later grow into frogs," Ajay said.

"Yep. That's called evolution." Hurk nodded sagely, a word for when people desperately want to sound as if they know what they're talking about.

Joseph gave Ajay a look. "Never mind him," Ajay told him. "He's a sack of bricks, but he hates the ponies just like we do." Joseph once more looked at Hurk, who was drumming on the elecart's steering column and humming mondegreens from Rod Stewart's *Young Turks*.[13]

Joseph wasn't sure he could "never mind" him. "What were you doing here with one of the elecarts?" he asked Hurk.

"I was here to meet my friend here, and I just knew I had to try out the wheels. I asked permission." He added this last part with much indignation.

Ajay wanted to change the subject, and the sea ponies had fallen behind enough. "Tell me, why are we bringing the prisoner to the max sec brig?" He was still familiar with the way there. "How did you know to keep him safe?" He nodded toward the prisoner whose lights were still out, though he did murmur now and again.

"My father was spying on the Russians," Joseph said. "About two years ago, an unknown prisoner was captured in Yemen. He turned out to be a creature from the ponies' dimension. I wasn't trying to keep him safe." He wondered, though, if he could succeed in keeping anyone safe, let alone the three men he was currently with. He'd been battling with whether his father's death had been sudden to him. In some ways, his father had been dead to him for a long time, but seeing his actual corpse dropped onto the floor before his very eyes was a shock, no matter what angle he reviewed the scene from. Even if he tried to look at it from Ajay's perspective, the scene was alarming. He'd thought he could ease into leadership over an entire race by putting it off, but procrastination, like the Icecapades, is never the answer. Now he was dropped head-first in the ice-cold drink of this intrusion no one could have expected.

The last time Joseph had been in a car with his father's presence being anything more than a ghost was five years ago. He was still only a teenager of nineteen, not even biologically an adult. His father was driving to Belarus from Moscow, and Joseph kept asking him all the wrong questions. "Wrong questions" is a more formal way of calling them "dumb questions". "Why aren't we staying in Moscow with the resistance, Dad?" "When are we heading back?" "Do we really have as many men as you offered them?" He remembered his questions just like that, all in a row, and then Ivan's responses all in a row, as if maybe he'd been pestering him too much to weasel out the replies he'd have preferred.

Ivan had kept driving on like he was too busy to answer them, yet he answered them all with a curt and brutal honesty. His own positive spin of honesty, that was, as if hiding out in Belarus and building a walled city was the best thing for the rest of the Human Resistance. Joseph wasn't as stupid as other people his age, going through the motions by attending university like he was. He saw first-hand what sort of a man his father was. He'd been treated this way by him, written off as an illegitimate accident to whom he

---

[13] One of the few compositions to survive the Event.

bore nothing but an obligation, but to see him treat other people this way in what he expected to be the adult arena was the first time he really got to know his father. He learned then that his dad was the sort of man who felt he owed nothing to anybody, so that he could always pretend he was the bigger man when he went as little out of his way as possible to pay back his debts. Maybe he had a right to be that way, but it didn't make him easy to love if he couldn't make an exception for his own son. He wondered if Ivan treated his other kids that way. He wondered how many kids his father had had. He always wondered if he treated them better. His entire life, he'd felt like he was being grounded for something he'd done that he couldn't even remember.

"Joseph! Snap to! We're here!" Ajay snapped his fingers in an annoying manner (there really are very few instances where this isn't the case) in front of Joseph's face. Joseph found himself sitting in the back of the elecart on the nearest stairwell to the brig on the deck below. Hurk had already gotten out, and Ajay was currently stepping off the vehicle. "Your new nickname's gonna be Sleeping Beauty."

"'Beauty', huh?" Joseph smirked as he clambered to the floor.

"God dammit, I said I didn't swing that way. Your nickname will be Sleepy Joe."

Joseph didn't appreciate the nickname. He couldn't be sleeping on the job. He caught himself on this as he entered the stairwell behind Hurk and Ajay who were pre-emptively carrying the unconscious prisoner between them. Joseph had started to wrestle his hat in his fists yet again, but stuck it away almost immediately when he went to grab the handrail. He turned sideways between the other two conscious men and helped to carry the prisoner's middle section. With both his arms occupied, he couldn't shut off his walkie-talkie, which overheard the channel reports of the infiltration.

Two small squadrons of soldiers from the Belarusians and Golden Path collected themselves near to the infirmary where the sea ponies had spilled from by the droves. One of the soldiers banged his boom stick as soon as he caught even a glimpse of something too quick to identify—it could have been a pony tail. In truth, the new breed of pony was not so much a shock as the innate trigger reflex ingrained upon all humans to shoot, to kill, to terminate the horrific, colourful enmities. His weapon ricocheted once, but struck nothing alive.

This riled his superior officer who came forward to reprimand him. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Otacon? Don't be so trigger-happy!"

Otacon was a shiny man with fat hips and moobs.[14] He had speckled, uneven stubble resulting from a poor shave, greasy hair from several too many chocolate bars, and thick, smudged glasses with rectangular frames. "But, gee, Snake, I told you I'm not much of a soldier! I really need to be down in engineering with Flawkes and Nikita."

Snake, alias Iroquois Pliskin, was a grizzled man of compulsively even stubble and a dark green bandanna around his greying hair. He had on a skin-tight latex suit modified with the logo of the Human Resistance. "Maybe we should just stick to the radio, huh?"

"Sir!" one of the privates shouted. "I forgot to go to the bathroom! I'll be right back!" He dashed off like a boomerang without even waiting to finish his own sentence.

This annoyed Snake. "Grr! This is a combat situation, private! I told you kids to do that before we left!"

The soldier with the bladder the size of a thimble hurried down the hallway, but the restroom door would not open for him. It was the ladies' room, and a special electronic scanner wouldn't accept his entry because he was male. He did a quick "pee-pee" dance, and then jogged down an adjacent hallway and into one parallel to the previous to find the men's room. This also wouldn't let him in because he scanned his dog tags too quickly the first time. The second time, the door *shunked* open and he raced inside for the middle stall with the most graffiti. He was reading an etching of "Your mom's a nice person," when the electric toilet started backing up. "Aw, gross!" The clear water bubbled under him, which was not something the automatic valve in an electric toilet was supposed to permit, but he was slow to flinch from the churning cold. The next thing he felt was a strange force pushing him off the toilet, like a small snap that carried the strength of a hundred arms shoving him away. The pain came a split second later, stinging and itching in an expanding radius from where he'd been struck. The electric toilet had malfunctioned!

The root cause of the malfunction followed the incontinent soldier from out the pipe. There was a gurgling groan, indistinguishable between voice and sound effect, and the toilet belched forth an inky, wet mass of darkness that slithered up the pipe like a rodent which had collapsed its own skeleton to make the fit. The sea pony's seaweed-coloured mane hung like a damp curtain over its face, and it jerked its body to pry one soaked limb over the rim. Once it pulled its other foreleg free and clunked the seat with its hoof, wresting its slimy, fish-like lower half free was effortless. Its whinny sputtered as it expelled water from its mouth. It snorted and bared its hard, dirty teeth, and reared back to flop out from the electric toilet, which discharged a lethal shock from its stressed

---

[14] "Moobs" is a word which here refers to a man's breasts when they become large enough to benefit from a brassiere.

mechanics through the sea pony's body. The soldier, too, felt the snaps and sparks of electricity kick his leg up with ghostly force. The pain left his leg trembling with disorientation.

The soldier picked himself up, though from his sole to his knee he still felt pins and needles. He leaned all his weight onto his other leg and tried to shake away the numbness. To ensure the sea pony was dead, he plugged a bullet into its skull. He then sauntered out of the room, dragging his limb as he went. He let out a sigh outside the bathroom and regretted that he had not relieved himself. He would never get the chance to do so. Another sea pony skipped mourning its fallen comrade as the base, foul creatures that they were, and seized the soldier's ankle in its gnashing jaws. It slew into his shin like a piranha, skeletonizing him with a few quick razor-sharp slides of its fangs and shredded his lower leg to ground chuck. He screamed in terror, and though his voice carried through the halls, he was tugged back into the semi-open lavatory where his blood would stain the good, clean linoleum floor.

Joseph's party arrived in the vicinity of the brig before too long. He wanted to shut off the sounds of gunfire and blood-curdling screaming broadcasting through his walkie-talkie, but his hands were full carrying the waking patient down the staircase. Along the way, the burnt prisoner showed signs of stirring, though they went unnoticed what with all the bouncing around. "Hurk, you were with the Golden Path more recently. Do you happen to know what this guy's story is?" Joseph asked.

"Uh, yes! He was posing as a deceased soldier of the Russian Human Resistance known as Colin Dwell. See? I'm not that dumb," said Hurk. "I can recite some information from memory that's been told to me!"

"Any idea who he really is? He's waking up, and I've never cared for 'John Doe'."

By then, the man was showing signs of groggy life. "Call this a leaky faucet? It's the only shower I've had in months."

"Hey. Hey, can he walk yet?" Ajay asked. They set the man's legs down as Ajay started slapping his face (not too hard since he didn't like touching such ugly skin). "Wake up, jerk. It's time for you to pick up the slack." They decided to stand the prisoner upright, and Ajay began kicking him in the back of the shins to get him to walk. "Hup two three!"

"Dude, be careful," Joseph said. "He may be using a pseudonym, but his burns are clearly real." Joseph reached for his walkie-talkie to silence the sounds of war, but stopped himself. He couldn't just turn off the sounds of his soldiers being ambushed and fighting their oppressors. As their leader, it was his duty to keep fully aware of his men's sacrifices.

"Doped up" is a phrase which here means "stuffed so full of drugs he couldn't remember what species he was". The fact of the matter was their John Doe was so doped up on painkillers that reintroducing himself to consciousness was faring against the collar, another phrase which refers to a task which is difficult to fight against. Grabbing a firm hold of his shoulders, Ajay and Joseph tried to coerce the half-asleep man to walk forward. His knees bent forward and his torso slouched straight downward as though he were taking the greatest limbo challenge there was. They tried to pick him up again, and this time he almost raised one leg. He twirled his right foot in the air, only to bend it backwards and take a giant step back towards the staircase.

"God dammit, grab his legs. Hurk, you hold his shoulders," Joseph said. He and Ajay took hold of John Doe's shins while Hurk complied, and together the three men "walked" the other man out of the foyer and into the next hallway. The going was slow.

"Wouldn't it be easier to carry him?" Hurk asked.

"No, Wide-Eyes, he's gotta learn the hard way to walk for himself," said Ajay.

"Forget it!" said Joseph. "Just carry him as fast as possible so we're less vulnerable."

"Sometimes I feel vulnerable, but my girlfriend's there for me," shared Hurk.

Getting an idea, Ajay pointed his gun around the corner and waved it this way and that, like the implement was peeking down the corridors. Nothing happened, so he poked his head around next. The hallways were the routine metallic rectangles most others were, with some signage indicating the nearby brig and stairwell. The echoes of shouts and footsteps could be heard, but there was nary a scrambled soldier to be seen in the area. Not that they were avoiding them, the group sneaked[15] through the hall like silent film crooks and into the prison which was guarded by two Minsk soldiers as per usual.

As Ajay and Hurk waited outside to guard the hall, Joseph took the prone man straight to the second-most secure cell in the brig and plopped his body down on a padded bench. The room was small and featureless save for padded walls and a television built into one wall, though it only showed the Home Shopping Network when it was turned on. "Looks like I have to change my mind," Joseph said. "I'm leaving you here for your own protection after all, and I don't have time to stay and chitchat, Colin."

Again Joseph would have to change his mind, because the man dubbed Colin spoke. "Where the hell am I?"

---

[15] snuck

Joseph drew back. He did not know when this opportunity would present itself again. "You're on board the Red October. I'm guessing by your accent you're from Scotland."

The man's wince turned into a second wince. "Ireland, you idiot. How could *anyone ever* mistake a Scottish accent and an Irish accent for sounding *at all* similar?"

"A little short on humour, aren't you? I need to go shoot me some ponies, but I guess I've got time to tell you you're in the custody of the Belorussian resistance. I've just got one question, but you can take the time to decide how you answer. We don't know what your real name is."

The man coughed and tried to sit up, but fell back flat again. "Yes you do. You called me Colin." He reached to the collar of his shirt and tugged it down as hard as he could. Joseph grimaced at the sight of the burn scars that marred every inch of his flesh. "Yeah, I'm trying to show you something, so you gotta look closer."

Joseph had a dreading sensation this was a trap, but what he saw lured him in closer. In the region of the man's collar bone was the imprint of a dog tag. The metal had singed into his skin so that Joseph could read the identifying alphanumeric symbols backwards: Colin Dwell.

The intercom fizzed to life with the harmonious siren song of the sea ponies. Perspiration blotched Dirk Smidgeon's grimy face as he whirled around another stack of containers that had been forgotten and pointed his gun down the hallway. Two more sea ponies were gnawing away at an unconscious man's fingers and hands, working their way to the muscle of his arms. "Make sure he doesn't bleed out too fast," said a crimson sea pony by the name of Period Blood. "Otherwise our spawn won't have enough time to develop in what's left of his body."

"You're biting off too much arm. Our spawn won't have enough flesh to feast on for the incubation process," said a yellow sea pony named Pee Stain.

"Holy shit," Dirk thought. "That bitch is rekt."

"You know what you need to do, Mr Derek, sir," said a voice in Dirk Smidgeon's ear. He looked aside and a corner of his mouth dropped to see Basil Brush was sitting there on his shoulder. "Boom-boom!"

"Good idea, British pepper weasel! I wouldn't have thought of that without you," whispered Dirk. It was hard to think with that noxious Equestrian melody blaring on all speakers. Luckily, a gun is a tool that prevents its wielder from needing to think. Dirk let off two well-practiced and noisy bangs from his revolver and pistol, blasting both sea ponies in the midst of their nefarious deed. Two massive craters had imploded right over the ponies' eyes, freezing dumbstruck expressions on their bleeding faces.

His guns were clamorous implements, and Basil warned him that more enemies would soon be hot on the heels of the hue and cry. Dirk toddled down the hallway, grunting and panting, waving both weapons in his meaty fists. "This is nuts!" he told Basil. "We got ponies eatin' people! I knew we weren't trained up enough yet!"

"It's quite a pickle thanks to so many dill weeds!" Basil said. "You should make provisions in case they try to eat you next."

"Oh yeah. How do I do that?" Dirk asked his imaginary friend.

"Eat all your choco-laxatives!" Basil let out a deep, stuttering laugh.

"Oh, good idea!" Dirk holstered one gun and reached into his pants pocket to shake all the rest of his chocolate-flavoured laxatives from their box. He popped them by the handful into his mouth and chewed sloppily. He devoured them in haste as the annoying pony melody whipped him into a frenzy. Drawing both guns once more, Dirk fought his way through the Red October, grunting and farting painfully all the way. On his shoulder, Basil Brush waggled his tail and jerked his body uncontrollably, shouting out whenever they sighted another sea pony coming their way.

"I gotta find my girlfriend," Dirk said to himself, sweating and panting. He rolled through the various frequencies on his walkie-talkie, asking, "Queenie, are you there?"

Most squad leaders were a bit preoccupied to respond to the civilian's distress hail. A few told him to get "the fuck" off the line, an extremely rude phrase which here means "I hate you" and is parsed into just about any grammatical position in vernacular like a cheap adverb.

Against all odds, a friendly voice responded to the plea for help. Slavko buzzed into Dirk's walkie-talkie. "Mr Smidgeon, is that you on the runny-speak-y?"

"It ain't the kitchen patrol. Where you at?" Juggling two guns and the communicator was difficult. Slavko responded with a letter and a number indicating his location aboard the vessel. "Shit, you're right on top of me! Why can't I see you?" This was a bit of an exaggeration.

"Because we've got about a dozen or so of those fish-ponies between us." Slavko scowled around a corner two hallways away. "I'll have to fight my way to you."

"Nonsense. We'll pincer 'em in between us." Dirk lustily cocked one of his guns and prepared to cock the other.

"With all due respect..."

"It's about time!"

"You're a civilian, not a soldier. It's my duty to protect you."

"I'm an American. We have whole organizations dedicated to shooting things with guns. Our NRA actually believes it's a matter of gun control to keep guns in the hands of random strangers. It helps us cope with erectile dysfunction and other sexual maladies."

"I'm from the Soviet Union. In Russia, we had a whole game show designed to emulate Grand Theft Auto. We want guns so bad we smuggle in *American*-made weapons, and we don't *need* any governing body to tell us how to use them. It's just how we learned to solve our interpersonal problems."

"Then how about instead of using our skills to boast at each other, we meet in the middle? Unless you're scared of a little friendly fire."

Now, there were other hallways, and they could've taken the long way around to meet up, but now there was a hallway full of evil, Satanic sea ponies from the devil's own deep blue sea. What would you do in such a situation? If you said you'd take on the vile ponies, congratulations: You're a communist.

This hallway was infested by the scourge of five or seven or six sea ponies, flopping their fishy tails around on the dead corpses of a noble but not-very-good squad of soldiers. Slavko could see they were lingering at the wall, but he was outnumbered, and they were armed with the weapons of his fallen comrades and comradettes. They appeared clumsy with them, but it really isn't difficult to point a gun and pull the trigger. It's so easy, why, a baby could do it. An aquamarine sea pony named Leaky Faucet with a cutey mark of a spigot with a drip of water was banging with her gun on the pipes located at the corner where the ceiling met the wall. These were HVAC,[16] plumbing and electrical cables which supplied the ship, and they were clearly labelled with a warning which said "No banging" in Russian.

A black sea pony named Oil Slick said, "Just shoot it point blank!"

"No way, you imbecile," Leaky replied. "Unless you wanna eat ricochet barbecue. We need all the numbers we have if we wanna take this ship."

"So what's the plan?"

"Humans, like us and all things, came from the sea, but they betrayed it by leaving. Now the ocean has rebuked them. We'll flood the ship, and they'll all drown."

"Except for the ones we incubate by that process we invented: Rape. What's drowning again?"

"'Drowning', of which you know the gerund, means 'choking to death on water'." Leaky shook her head. "Wait, what the hell is that sound?"

The sound Leaky was referring to the hell was a human voice. Slavko was telling Dirk, "Now, let's take 'em! Open fire on 'em from behind!" There was a shuffling of loud clicks as the sea ponies trained their weapons down that end of the hall. A couple pointed their weapons down the opposite direction to cover their rear guard, and they moved down like a school of fish towards the origin of the voice. They whirled around the corner, their guns pointed in every direction, and found Dirk's walkie-talkie. They all turned to inspect it.

"What the hell is this thing?" asked Oil Slick. That was when his head got sniped off. The explosion was just louder than the sea ponies' song blaring on the speakers. The ponies whirled around on the spot and noticed Slavko ducking past the far end of the

---

[16] Heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

corridor. They opened fire, and amidst the commotion of their own weaponry, they failed to notice two more of their number getting blasted into Oblivion by Dirk Smidgeon, who had used his diminutive form to hide behind some inconspicuous cover of barrels of creamed corn. Against his better luck, they had spotted him too, and the three remaining ponies had to split up in their pursuit.

Leaky Faucet was at a crossroads as the third wheel. On one hoof, the sea pony treading down the long hallway to Slavko would need help. On the other hoof, the shorter route to creep up on Dirk's hiding spot seemed less dangerous. That moment of hesitation would cost her her life. Dirk started to lunge out from behind his barrel, but ducked back in fear. He lacked the soldiers' killer instincts. Slavko reached around the hall corner and sniped Leaky, blasting off her lower jaw and puncturing her chest. The sea pony heading down his way was quick to retaliate, and Slavko let out a manly scream of pain as a red mark exploded clean through his hand—he'd been shot through the centre of his palm. As he dropped to his butt behind the wall again, trying to will his injured hand to stop shaking, he heard the gurgling laugh of the approaching sea pony.

Dirk was all too sure he'd heard Slavko's pained outcry. He cursed with worry and shifted like a turkey inviting another turkey to dance. He could hear the clop-shloop, clop-shloop rhythm of the sea pony dragging its half-ichthyd body by one hoof towards him because its other hoof carried a gun. He could smell the mingling stench of salt water and afterbirth on the devil spawn. He could also push over the barrel of creamed corn so that it rolled along the ground. It bounced off the floor and picked up speed when a dent collapsed into a hole that fumed highly-pressurized creamed corn out of it, sending the container barrelling into the oncoming sea pony. The creature let cry a shrill bark as it flopped around under the heavy obstacle, and when the cylinder had passed over him, he found Dirk Smidgeon standing over him with both guns pointed at him like dark, empty eyes. He was a short man, but still taller than a pony, and infinitely tall when that pony was knocked prone.

"Hasta la vista, shithead." Dirk cocked both guns then fired them off in a big one-two, blasting the sea pony's skull and chest into oblivion. He chuckled to himself and blew on the smoking barrels. "We really creamed 'em that time, Basil," he said to his shoulder.

The imaginary British fox puppet let out a wry chuckle. "That's one of your corniest puns yet."

Nobody was laughing in the other hallway. "Come out and surrender, or I sink this ship like kitchen plumbing!" The sea pony shot its rifle at the pipes in the wall, puncturing the septic line. Cloudy grey water fumed forth in an arc and into a big, wet mess on the rust-resistant metal floor. Behind the wall, Slavko choked at the sight of blood running down his fingers. Every now and then, his hand gave a twitch. He tried to stick his right hand under his left armpit to squeeze out the pain like mayonnaise from a bottle, but he couldn't support his heavy R1F-L3 automatic weapon with just his one off arm. Though he was a muscular man, his muscles ached as he struggled to keep his weapon aloft. He could hear the slippery wriggling of the marine monstrosity making its way towards him. He needed to maintain his strength for whenever the decisive moment would come. That was when he heard the clang of the barrel echoing down the hall toward him. His itchy trigger finger blasted off maybe two or three rounds before he fumbled and dropped his gun, banging its butt against his knee. When he grappled with his gun to hold it steady once more, he heard another shot and felt the sharp pang of fear strike him.

It passed when he heard Dirk's voice. "Yo! Blazkowicz, you alright?"

He couldn't see Dirk, but after a moment further, he realized he was alive. Dirk had slain the evil sea pony down the hallway. "I'm okay!" he called back before rounding the corner to meet Dirk. He was clutching his injured hand underneath his armpit again. "Just wish we could carry first aid kits."

"Can't afford it. Here, show me your arm." Dirk opened out his own personal first aid kit.

Slavko reached out his bleeding hand which was dripping on the floor like a tender sauce. "I guess living in America, you'd be good with gunshot wounds. How bad does it look?" By now the water had almost poured out to where they stood, and they both stepped away from the encroaching puddle.

"Who're you shittin'? I read the news about the criminal violence in eastern Europe. I read up on your personal history, too. Yugoslavian Civil War, huh?" Dirk started wrapping a bandage but tight across Slavko's palm and around the back of his hand. "Bullet passed all the way through. We just need to staunch the bleeding 'til we can get you to the medic. Lemme ask you somethin'. Why you got paint on your nails?"

Slavko winced. "It's for my wife. Ponies ate her arms. She can't paint her own nails anymore, so I let her do mine. Let me ask you something. Do you read every single soldier's history?"

"There are very few men with your level of experience left in the Belorussian branch of the Human Resistance," Dirk said. "Is that tight enough? 'Cause we gotta hurry. Walk and talk with me. I read your background, but readin' about a person doesn't tell you the same things as hearing them talk about himself. Tell me your story, Blazkowicz."

The two marched side by side down the halls. Dirk took the lead, and Slavko kept watch behind them. "Like you said, I

fought in the Yugoslavian Civil War in the early 1990s. We had the best living conditions under all the Warsaw Pact, until Tito died. Then, thanks to Ronald Reagan's manipulation, all hell broke loose. Croatia demanded independence from Socialism and government-granted girlfriends, forsaking the trucker gods. All the money was spent in Afghanistan, so the Soviet Union collapsed. The capitalist war machine was making us into western sweatshop workers, serving coffees in Starbucks and greeting trailer trash in Wally World. Ratko Mladic was the new leader, the 'Stalin of Yugoslavia', and with him came new policies to ethnically cleanse the Bosnian for their Islamic beliefs. In a matter of months, Niko Bellic and I, my best friend whom I survived all this with, defected to Switzerland. I admit I didn't want to join the Human Resistance when he did, knowing what the darkness of man's heart could do to good people, but when the stinking Equestrians destroyed the Swiss people, I signed up with Belarus as soon as possible."

Dirk listened to this entire spiel even as he kept an eye out for sea ponies. When Slavko had finished, he said, "Okay, but what does that little history lesson tell me about you?"

Slavko frowned in silence. "Well, I'd like to avenge Niko Bellic's death."

"Huh? How'd he bite it?"

"Killed in battle in Africa last year."

Dirk squinted. "There weren't ponies in Africa last year. Joseph Kony was down there, and he's dead."

Basil whispered, "Awkward!"

By this point in the conversation, they had reached the wing where Tian's quarters were kept. They could hear agitated shouting from within and knew trouble was afoot, a word which has less to do with feet and more to do with indicating that something nefarious was transpiring. Dirk pushed the intercom button outside the door and spoke into it. He decided to be polite. "Excuse me, is everything alright in there?"

Cussing and clattering responded. Dirk prepared to open the door, but Slavko stopped him. He, too, decided to be polite. "Beg pardon, but I'm the trained soldier here," he said. "This is kind of my job." Dirk nodded in agreement and watched Slavko pry on the door. He couldn't get it open.

"It's a push door," Dirk reminded him.

Slavko was a heavy soldier, and he wore a heavy boot. He didn't think he could brace himself with one wounded arm, but he angered himself on the pain, raised one leg, and let forth a kick as vicious as a stack of three mother bears picking their cubs up from day-care. The door swung open on a chaotic scene. The furniture of living quarters just above Spartan levels of decor was upturned; nothing not built into the walls had been overlooked in overturning. The first thing Slavko noticed was an ornate lamp whizzing just past him and shattering with a buzz against the wall. He hoped the fact he didn't even register to duck looked macho. There were at least three sea ponies spaced out in the room: One was splashing about in the overflowing sink, another was lobbing any object it could find off the shelves by kicking with its forelegs or flinging with its mouth or swatting its tail, and the third was using its curly sea horse tail to hang from the ceiling fan and lob whatever the second sea pony tossed up to her.

Behind all this commotion, Slavko almost didn't notice Tian's turban-clad head bobbing up from behind an upside-down couch to fire off a pistol at the sea pony dangling from the ceiling fan. He kept missing as the pony whirled around and around and hurled heavy objects like the Koran and Saudi Arabian artefacts at him. Treating books in such a way is disrespectful, even if they come a dime a dozen and most are overrated smut aimed at the easily impressed, but the Equestrians were not known for their respect of human culture, in case you haven't noticed. "Christian filth!" Tian yelled. "When will your medieval crusade end?" He was running low on ammunition because the sea ponies had blocked his route to his personal effects with their antics.

Slavko ignored this questionable outburst (Tian may have been agitated after all, but the middle ages have been long over for a few centuries at least), and picked out the easiest sea pony to blast dead with his rifle. He barely had to turn his gun with his one good arm to finish the beast off with three to four bullets from his R1-F73. The pony hanging from the ceiling responded by hurtling a knife with precision aiming beneath Slavko's helmet and into his temple. The gleaming blade sliced close enough behind his ocular nerve to dislodge his right eye. With frightening sharpness, the implement cleaved flesh and bone and burrowed into a portion of his brain. Already dying, his next knee-jerk reaction would be his final mistake speeding along his fatality: With an agonized yell, Slavko swatted at the knife with his wounded arm. The weapon wobbled some more, but a bit of the blade broke off within his head. Blood was spurting down his face and his vision was a distorted mess. Hugging his gun to his chest, he collapsed forward like a felled tree and died.

Tian was only partly aware of the tragedy. Not wanting to part with his gun, he hurled a bowl of Krave cereal like a Frisbee and socked the ceiling fan pony right in its pudgy gut. Milk and bits of sugary candy went flying every which way, only adding to the mess and mayhem. The bowl came rattling to a stop in a concave position on the floor.

To Dirk, it was do or die. Basil even said as much. He may not have been a soldier, but as a human being, it was Dirk's innate racial duty to eradicate all ponies to the best of his ability, even at the cost of his own safety. He wasn't very acrobatic, but he loped into the room as best he could and threw one of his guns at Tian. "Catch, turban man! I forgot your name already!"

Tian did not catch, but he did glare like a lemon over the edge of the couch at Dirk. The gun fell to his side where he picked it up. Dirk aimed to fire at the sea pony sitting in the sink, but the deadly Equestrian slipped out of the basin like a bobsledder and wrapped its tail around his throat. Dirk's stocky nature proved finding his neck a bit of a challenge, and he had time to seize the slippery sea pony by its neck in turn and squeeze as hard as he could with both his bare hands, having dropped his second gun. He growled and gasped, producing a staccato, guttural sound as his blotchy face turned red with rage. "Oh, I do hope you don't die," Basil told him. "I would get all choked up over it. Boom, boom!"

The next boom was not a voice inside of Dirk's head, though it did leave a terrible ringing in his ears. With a sickly squish, the head of the pony gushed out of his hands in a hail of brain and skin, and his stubby hands slipped into thin air. The tail remained clutched around his throat, and he had to dig his fingernails under the slick, amphibious flesh to loosen it.

Meanwhile, the ceiling fan pony had leapt upon Tian's face and was biting madly at his forehead. Tian screamed. "No! You must not remove my turban under any circumstances! I wear my hair to express my religion!"

Dirk aimed his gun, but knew that the bullet might well go through the sea pony and kill Tian. That was no way to welcome new allies onto the ship. Tian roared in pain as he flailed to scratch, to slap, to punch his attacker off of his face and chest. Then there was a new kind of pressure that shoved into him. It released then thrust forth again, and the sea pony's grip slackened. Tian groaned as Dirk pried the dead sea pony from his face, and grimaced at the blood that smeared down himself. Dirk had stabbed the enemy Equestrian in the spine and base of the skull several times using the knife that had slain Slavko.

Dirk reached down to help Tian up, and Tian slapped his hand away. "It is an insult for an infidel to treat me like his woman," Tian explained. He teetered on his back like a turtle a few times before using the upturned couch to pull himself to his feet. The two older men stood and glared at one another before arming themselves with their own weapons, Tian slapping Dirk's gun into the latter's hand before reloading his own 53M1-4UT0 semi-automatic gun. Before they had a chance to debate their next movement, a voice crackled in on Slavko's walkie-talkie. Tian pointed it out. "The movey-speaky is on."

"Slavko. Come in, Slavko. We want you to rendezvous with Dirk." This was Joseph's voice.

Before Joseph could relay Dirk's expected channel, Dirk contacted him. "Matskevich, it's me, Dirk Smidgeon. Slavko's dead. The ponies got him."

"It was a rather cutting loss to our forces," Basil joked. “We blade him farewell.”

"What? God dammit! Listen up, we're leaving the prisoner in max sec.[17] I know that it'll be dangerous what with the Red October swarming with unprecedented numbers of sea ponies, but it's imperative that you rendezvous with us in the—"

The communication cut off with a hush of static, and then the song of the sea ponies came through loud and clear. It emanated from every walkie-talkie aboard the ship, including that of the deceased Slavko.

Shoop-bee-doo! Shoop-shoop-bee-doo!
Call upon the sea ponies when you're nearing death!
Harmful as can be ponies as you draw your final breath!
When you fear for your mortal life and hear your own death knell (knell)!
Call upon the sea ponies; they'll see you in Hell!

The haunting rhythm repeated like some cultist mantra throughout the entire ship, including in the maximum security brig where the man calling himself Colin Dwell dwelt. He had been poised on the edge of the bed, trying to calm himself on the teetering crepuscule of being too weary to endure his pain. When the singing broke out in his cell, he leapt to his feet and became antsy. A new kind of pain drove his feet to pacing. "What the hell is that?" he shouted aloud, wanting to drown out the chorus of horrible pony voices. "Are they celebrating? Have they won?"

A new voice echoed through from somewhere that gave it a rich, deep timbre so Colin could hear it even through the annoying, melodious tune. "The ponies are always quick to celebrate, just as you're a bit quick to give up. A regular bundle of laughs, aren't you?"

Colin turned about, but he knew he wouldn't see the figure speaking to him. There was little space in the six-by-eight padded cell. The bed was a built-in rectangle of wood with a mattress, and there was no space between it and the walls or the floor for any

[17] Maximum security.

object let alone a person to be placed. His first guess was that the prisoner cells were not soundproofed. His second was the small ventilation shaft in the upper corner that could never hope to fit a human being through, nor even one of the sea ponies. Colin couldn't decide whether it was the sassy words or just the sound of the voice itself that pissed him off. "So it is the ponies," he said. Maybe it was this news that angered him.

"Yes." The voice pushed into the room, sounding dire. Was it urgent? Was it didactic? Colin couldn't tell.

"Then I'm dead. Again. When it comes to ponies, the best way to survive is to run as far away as possible from them, and now my own people have me locked up in a tiny room with no way out."

"You need to be more optimistic. Maybe the humans will win."

"'Maybe' ain't optimistic enough." Colin spat and slumped back down onto the bed. He rocked his spine back and forth. "Who the hell are you, one of the guards? Please tell me there are guards out there."

The voice was quiet for a moment of suspense. "I'm not one of the guards," it finally said. "I'm in the next cell over. I'm the prisoner in the highest security cell. You're number two."

Great, thought Colin. *The only person I have to speak to is an enemy of the Resistance. This can only get better.* He shut off his internal dialog when he wondered why he was inhibiting himself like this. He was going to die soon, right? "What are the odds you're like me, and locked up by mistake?"

"Highly unlikely." The voice answered with too much certainty for Colin's comfort.

Colin frowned and shifted his eyes, ceasing his rocking. "Okay, maybe I'm crazy and talking to myself."

"I'm sorry, but that's not the case, either."

"You're not helping me keep optimistic." Colin left a deliberate note of anger in his voice. "I can't even tell if you're a hot chick or a creepy guy named Bubba."

"Oh, I'm a dude." There was almost the hint of a laugh in the voice. "I was like you, once."

"Yeah, I was a man once, too." Colin blushed, even though he could not be seen. "That came out wrong! I used to be a normal man. Now I'm burnt to a crisp. I look like freaking raw jerky." As he tried to explain this, the words just flowed out of him like an open faucet, and he started to rant at this voice. "Every day I'm in constant pain. Some areas are just numb like pins and needles, and others hurt like giant blisters that will never heal. I've lost my front teeth. I haven't had a beer in ages, but now they've got me so doped up I'm dribbling while I talk. I've been treated like a criminal and nobody will even call me by my own name anymore. And now, after hiding from the ponies for over a year, they've caught up with me. They're going to torture me all over again."

There was another pregnant pause. "I'm so sorry for what the ponies have done to you. If you'd like, you can tell me your name. I'm Trey Barker. My parents used to live in Queens before Equestria invaded. The immigration department changed our names from Bunker."

"I'm Colin. Is there any way to shut that damn music up?"

"I hope to God there is. Whether there is a god or not. I'm not religious. It's just a phrase, if you know what I mean." For the first time, Trey's voice belied some emotion to it. There was a hiccup of fear.

"What is it? What is the song?"

"Definitely some form of psychological warfare," Trey said, using a phrase which here refers to a conflict which induces mental stress to reduce morale. "I've only heard about it in legends. They called them the sea ponies, but they're supposedly extinct, just like the bat-winged thestrals. Their siren song is a hypnotic charm with subliminal effects. Maybe they have the power to interfere with artificial forms of communication as well, but I don't know much about it."

"You certainly know more about it than I bet most people do!" Colin said. "I've never even heard of sea ponies before. I've fought against brutish land ponies, conniving unicorns, and been grounded by pegasi from overhead. Now you're telling me the ponies are attacking by sea as well? How do you know so much? You've got to tell me."

There was another pause as Trey thought. "Do you know the story of the lady and the tiger hall? An ancient king challenged all suitors with a colosseum of three doors. Behind one door was the exit to freedom. Behind another door was a vicious tiger, kept hungry to devour whoever set it free. Behind the last door, the king said, was his daughter, and her hand in marriage."

"What the hell does that story have to do with anything?" Colin yelled. He slouched on the bed and banged the back of his head against the wall a few times. "This whole war has everybody crazy! I can't believe I'm not that far gone myself yet! God, I remember the first half of this war. My friends and I used to drink together and sing songs about killing ponies to save the human race. What I wouldn't give to turn their obnoxious-as-fuck song around on them!"

In the silence that followed, Colin thought he'd weep. Then Trey spoke. "I think you've hit the nail on the head."

Joseph and Ajay were still hammering their way to the bridge, having sent Hurk to fetch Dirk and Tian. They were glad to see the command centre of their great vessel had not yet been overtaken, and noticed the large ratio of women in the room. Among the soldiers who were of a female majority were the acting queen of England and Tian's daughter, Amita. At least, they assumed it was her underneath that dark blue burqa. "What's the status report?" Joseph asked.

"We joined up here to defend command," Artemis said. So far the pony scum haven't infiltrated this portion of the ship, but it was hell fighting our way here."

"Yeah, we saw some of your handiwork on the way here," said Ajay. "You must be a pretty quick shot with a bow to get so many arrows out." Artemis shrugged in response to Ajay's praise.

"Don't worry, we kept the queen and Amita safe," Jenny Everywhere said. She gestured at Tian's silent bodyguard, or whatever he was, Tubad Umad, who crossed his arms. "He helped in his own way."

"Don't worry, we kept the queen and Amita safe," Artemis said, although she said this in a very whiny and sarcastic tone of voice, a word for which here is "mocking".

Jenny ignored her aside from a disbelieving glance. "We think the sea ponies are targeting the men over the women. A lot more casualties are male, but at least they've been minimal overall."

"Most of the Golden Path happens to be men," Ajay said. "Perhaps they have a reason for it?"

Joseph felt his iDroidBerry Smartphone vibrate in his pocket. "The hell?" He picked it up and answered it, realizing it was a form of communication not yet being superseded by the incessant singing of the sea sirens.

Dirk and Hurk were on the other end of the line on speaker phone. Hurk spoke up first. "Sir, I've located Mr Smidgeon and Mr Zhao, but they're not cooperating."

"I demand to find Queenie first!" Dirk said. "Hey, gimme that."

Tian grabbed the phone. "I demand you find my daughter, Amita. If one of your filthy degenerates has his way with her, I will go all jihad all over your ass!"

Joseph scowled. "They both happen to be right here on the bridge. Now hurry up your own insolent asses and help us out here! We've got a strategy meeting to strategize!" He almost hung up the phone, and then thought better of setting it to speaker and laying it out on a console table that he and the other important figures gathered around.

"I have an idea on the gender thing," Joseph said. "Patient zero, Duke Nukem, was a man impregnated by sea ponies. I'm guessing they need more males to propagate due to their weird seahorse physiology, but the incubation period must be insanely fast to spawn so many ponies so quickly. We've got to act even faster. It's obvious their music is psychological warfare, and since it's interfering with most electronic channels, we need to be put into direct communication somehow with engineering."

Dirk was out of breath when he answered. "Use the voice pipes."

"The what?"

"Exactly what it says on the tin! They're tubes you speak into to communicate with other sections of the ship. They're labelled on the wall over there."

"I thought they were like those suction tubes they used to have at banks," the queen said. Everyone looked at her in puzzlement, save for Jenny.

"Nobody better have stuck anything into those, honey. We got the mail tubes, too, on the other wall. I wanted the ship not to rely so much on electrical power. Versatility is its secret."

"Inefficiency is its secret." Tian started to argue, but Joseph hushed him before he could even start.

"Hey, hey! We need to be working together. Now you two come to the bridge with Hurk, and I'll send a couple of guys to the engine room straightaway in case they already need our help." Joseph looked over at Artemis and Jenny. "If the ponies aren't attacking women, I think you're our best candidates."

"I'm the best candidate regardless." Artemis nocked an arrow to her bow.

"Actually, they're attacking women, too. It's just that they're targeting men over women," Jenny said. "Not that I have any intention of shirking the challenge to get us out of this mess." She outright ignored Artemis mimicking her with her tongue out.

"In the interest of cooperation, how about I pick the two men? You will come to rely on the Golden Path inevitably." Ajay strolled over to a pair of men standing beside one another and introduced them.

The scrawnier, lankier soldier was Panjit Gavaskar, an Indian soldier of the Golden Path alliance who wielded an M-TAR. Once a captain of the Indian Resistance Movement before his assumption into the Golden Path, he'd survived a metaphorical pressure cooker from Equestrian, Japanese and North Korean forces until pulling his unit into a full and successful retreat at the last moment.

The bulkier, slightly overweight soldier with the bitter look on his face was Pham "Inferno" Quan, so nicknamed for his love of kimchi, a food so spicy it overpowers all other flavour and dulls the meal. Every generation of his family had been haunted by the horrors of war, with Pham no different defending Vietnam from Equestria, the Japanese empire, and North Korea. His grandfather fought the French forces in the Vietnamese war of independence, and his father fought against American Green Berets during the infamous "Vietnam War".

"These two men will go to your engineering section and make contact to deliver our plans," Ajay said.

"Do they know the way there yet?" asked Joseph.

"The Golden Path has familiarized themselves with the Red October's schematics already," he explained. "That will not be a problem." And with that, Panjit and Inferno were dispatched to main engineering to scout out the situation down there.

"Now we just need to come up with a plan, but I suppose reworking the sound systems will be engineering's prerogative."

"This is foolish," Tian said. "We should just self-destruct the ship. Take our enemies with us into Hell. Well, I, of course, will go to Heaven."

Everyone looked upset at Tian's suggestion, but it was Dirk who verbally objected just as he entered the bridge. "This ship wasn't designed with a self-destruct. It was designed with an ideal to win this war against the stupid ponies once and for all. Why waste the money to kill ourselves when we can spend it going down with a fight?"

The Belorussian resistance members looked uncomfortable about something, and most of the present Golden Path members looked shocked. Tian was incensed, which is a word which here means "annoyed". "We may be a different dividend of the Human Resistance," he began, "but we've instated a utopian ideal of foregoing currency. Although I loathe to agree with them, the Williams family decided that we won't wait until we beat the ponies to eradicate the stain of plutocracy and free humanity from its pubescent phase of capitalism. So explain to me why money should matter in the construction of humanity's lifeline. Exactly who are you supposed to be, anyway, you deranged, deformed little man?" Even some of the Golden Path members who had been nodding in condemnation of money looked as though that last remark of Tian's had been taken too far.

"Who am I?" Dirk asked rhetorically, a word which here means "because it sounded good." "The name's Dirk Smidgeon, but you know that. I'm the financier of this whole operation. I bought and sold all the scrap parts that make up the Red October. I helped commission it to be built. Who do you think got the satellites into space that our radar and our surveillance and our cell phones use? Who do you think paid for your iPhone DroidBerries, and the cigarettes you been smoking, and all the beers you been drinkin'? All those bazookas, they just fall outta the sky? Or do you think Santy Claus gave 'em to you for being such a good boy all year? Or perhaps those tanks were all welded together to fight those dragons out of the goodness of someone's heart? Nobody does nothin' for nothin' in this world. Most folks if they could would bide their time hiding out in the mountains, watching cable television, thinkin' the ponies would never come for them, or worse, resigning themselves to their fate. The only reason anybody thought it'd be a good idea to build a giant flying fortress instead of building a few hundred more tanks was because my money convinced 'em to do it."

Everyone was silent for a moment, for there was not a single commissioned soldier in the room who did not drink, or was not thankful to have ammunition. They were reminded of the dragons and the ponies, and the fact that magic simply does not exist to spawn whatever means they needed, or this war would have ended in its very first year. They were aware that nothing came from nothing, but they were still surprised, as it was a surprise the universe itself should exist from some source unknowable, when it was Joseph himself who retorted to Dirk's well-earned lecture.

"Alright. So maybe you are a means to an end. Maybe the human race did cave in and buy its victory, if any of us here still

believe in victory. I do, for one. And yeah, we do have someone to thank for our alcoholism and our smoking and our other vices and toys, and the world full of weapons that has allowed us to defend our lives time and again. But at the same time, I cannot, and I will not, rescind my desperate belief that if push came to shove, we would melt down every screw into bullets and shoot any pony that came our way right in the teeth."

Dirk nodded with dignity. "I hope it never comes to that." With an easy smile, he strode over to the acting Queen Elizabeth III and she stooped down so they could kiss repeatedly. "I missed you, honey."

"Right. Now let's see if this voice tube works," Joseph said.

Down in engineering, the klaxon blared into everyone's ears alongside the tune of the sea ponies' hymn. This section consisted of the largest rooms on the ship, sized to house the various infrastructural systems as well as the gigantic multi-powered engine. Cooling the monstrosity alone required colossal fans, like being inside of a top-shelf home-built computer. HVAC and plumbing systems lined the walls, along with super-powered computer terminals that resembled something out of an old, pre-event science fiction film recovered from Hollywood's vaults.

A mannish woman stood at one such terminal. She had many big tools sticking out of every bit of clothing she wore from the cuffs of her jumpsuit trousers and sides of her boots to the suspenders strapped over her white tank top. She wore only the bottom half of her jumpsuit and scratched at her short, dishevelled red hair with a much-deserved look of consternation. On the terminal read the line, "Communication systems anomaly preventing communication. Please contact the bridge." Thumping her fist against the swivelling keyboard panel, she shouted over her shoulder in an accent that sounded like a mix of British and Russian. "Somebody check on the irradium core! If the plutonium's compromised, we'll never get this machine up into the air, no matter how many propellers we strap onto it!"

A Texan named Hank stood behind her looking sorry for the whole situation. "You know, propane gives you a cleaner heat with less green glow," the man said. She ignored him at first, but not when he said something more pertinent as he pointed and shuddered in disgusted horror at what slid through the doors. "Guh! Flawkes, I just saw the little creature! What *is* that?" A woman shrieked. Flawkes turned away from the console and seethed at what was actually a pair of sea ponies sliding along the floor on their bellies like penguins on the snow. They had their front limbs bent and were propelling their slippery, wet bodies as if by flippers.

Flawkes swept an arm in front of Hank. "Do not engage. The sea pony is dangerous and risky. We must report this."

Hank wasn't the sort to let a woman fight his battles for him. "Nonsense, woman! Stick with me. We've gotta defend freedom!"

"No relationships until I am done," Flawkes said. She folded one hand in a beckoning gesture and moved to a pipe on the wall labelled "Bridge". "There is a voice coming from the voice pipe," she said. Hank stroked his chin at the notion. Speaking over the voice, Flawkes shouted, "Where are those blasted soldiers to do their killing work? We need them!"

"You got those, uh, killer mutant fish ponies down here," added Hank with disappointment.

As Flawkes walked over to kick a sea pony's brains in with her steel-toed boot and then stomp it to death, Joseph's voice rang in through the pipe. "We've ordered some soldiers to your location. Please do not engage the ponies unarmed. We cannot risk the people who know how to run this thing." There was some muffled arguing as Ajay interrupted him to complain, and then Joseph continued speaking. "Please try to fix the comm systems if you can, so we can receive reports from around the ship."

"Okay, let me see here." Hank moved to the nearby terminal and adjusted his glasses. Flawkes returned to his side, trying to wipe her boot on the floor. Hank pointed his finger along the terminal monitor as he read. "Okay, it looks like there's an anomaly with the communication systems, as well as fifty free hours of AOL, whatever that is. Golly."

Flawkes also pointed at the screen and half-spoke to him and half to the tube. "That is a log. We actually ran a diagnostic check and patched the systems, and they're operating as expected now."

On the bridge, Joseph was very confused as to why the voice he was speaking to kept changing between male and female, but instead he asked, "Then why do we all still hear the singing?"

The mess hall was a mess, but Panjit and Inferno had yet to traverse it to reach engineering by the most direct route, or at least what they surmised to be the most direct route. The arrangements within were not exactly what one would call a five-star cafeteria, with rather plain and drab tables, spruced up with colour only by a desperate swatch of motivational posters along the walls and a catastrophic smorgasbord of wasted food hurled about everywhere. The least pleasant detail had to be the half-eaten corpses of human soldiers, especially their own Golden Path allies who'd yet to see combat alongside the Belorussian branch of the resistance before today. At least the stench of death was masked by the odours of Indian cooking, but never again would they read the propaganda set with rigid intermission on the walls with Russian phrases such as, "Casualties cause loss," or, "Ponies go for the

genitals. Don't leave your genitals hanging about."

Across the room, they spotted a table cleverly set upon its side to provide cover from sea pony attacks. In one corner of the room was a man whose nametag read "Phil". In the opposite corner of the room were several sea ponies making strange noises that can only be best described as "what it would sound like if fish could hiss". "Best described" is a phrase which here, like an adverb, means "I'm not very good at this whole writing thing, sorry." Phil was trying to pick off the sea ponies with a double-barrelled shotgun, but the spread just wasn't reaching them with any effect. In response, Phil was getting madder and madder, his face flushed with rage and half-spoken curses eking past his puffed-out lips. The ponies were getting closer.

Panjit and Inferno unleashed their rifles and shot down the three ponies like the opposite of a fixed carnie game. "No!" Phil shouted. "Rifles are for short range! Shotguns are for long range! Why the hell isn't it working? Who the hell manufactures this garbage?" But it was too late. As Panjit and Inferno fought off the sea ponies in one direction, another had snuck up on Phil while he was complaining and tripped him up with its curly seahorse tail. This sea pony was larger than the others, with a big shark-like mouth that gobbled up Phil feet first, almost all the way to the waist in one go. "What? No!" Phil whined, his voice nearing a pitch only dogs can hear. "Unbelievable! Why does this have to happen to me? Just because I missed those three ponies over there? Fine! Ugh! Whatever!" As he continued to bitch and moan, the shark-pony gobbled furiously, swallowing him down into its slimy body whole. Its shiny scales seemed to glisten with delight as its jaws worked around him, its body wriggling to fill itself with writhing, warm meat. "God, dammit, what the hell? It reeks of fish! And it's so dark inside! This is all your fault, you two! You had one job to do! Why didn't you save me?" Phil kept criticizing everything like Cole Smithey on a sweet summer day. Even once the overgrown specimen had consumed him whole and he was flailing around within its snug belly, the sounds of him bickering out loud to nobody in particular could be heard over the terminal gurgling of the marine equine's nasty gut. As he finally disappeared completely down the shark-pony's ravenous gullet, they thought they could hear him complaining still, in the proverbial belly of the beast, about how he was pressing buttons and there was nothing he could do, and that the developers had done a nice job.

Inferno and Panjit had been tied up with another slew of sea ponies that had hopped up from out of view behind another table, and they debated whether it was safe to shoot the consuming shark-pony without harming Phil. "He sure complained a lot," Panjit remarked.

"Tell me about it." Inferno scoffed. "No wonder he was without a squad. I bet the guy never shut up."

They then spent the next minute or so going back and forth apprising Phil's behaviour. "And his voice was irritating. Truly something gods-forsaken," said Panjit.

"'Gods-forsaken'?" Inferno frowned and shook his head. "I get the 'gods' thing, but that still sounds a bit strange. You can probably get by just saying 'godforsaken'."

Their conversation was interrupted by a godforsaken blast of noise. Both Panjit and Inferno hurtled through the air, with Inferno flailing his arms and legs. This was ironic because not long ago, the both of them had been arguing that when you're blown clear, your limbs don't really flail like that. Inferno had been against flailing, and Panjit, whose body was still as a statue, said flailing was an invariable response, a phrase which here means "an inevitable occurrence". What was also inevitable was that they were both turning backwards like planets spinning on axes, headed for a special "Welcome to the Red October" celebratory cake Neelix had prepared from a particular odoriferous fish known in Italian as the baccalà. Their faces mashed into the whipped frosting, the fondant, and all the marbled batter within. It wasn't as cushioning as one might hope, and they both still felt the brunt of the table pressing through their noses.

"I told you to get out of the way!" an angry voice chided them. It was Nikita. "Didn't you hear me?"

When Inferno and Panjit plucked themselves from the cake, their faces were covered in so much frosting they resembled Danish circus clowns. Scowling over their shoulders in a daze, they were shocked to see the decimated corpses of sea ponies they hadn't even remembered were there. Pulling themselves around on shaky legs, they found Nikita peering over the top of the counter where the lunch ladies served food. They also found the shark pony came in chunky tuna form, blood oozing around countless pieces of shrapnel.

"You idiots are lucky that grenade didn't shred you to pieces." Nikita now stood, holding a 74UN-CH3R model grenade launcher. He cocked it in case he forgot later. "Stop bickering about every little thing like an old married couple and get me to engineering."

"Wait, you already know where we want to take you?" Panjit asked.

"No, but I'm a brilliant engineer. Take me to engineering so I can engine up something engine-y."

"Argh! Make it stop! Make that damn noise stop!" Such cries echoed down the halls alongside the sound of pouring water. Something had gone horribly wrong and the ship was sinking, but the Human Resistance was too addled to search for the cause. So

far, the water was only ankle-deep on the lowest decks, but it was enough to ever so slightly hinder the pace of their boots and aid the slippery sea ponies scuttling through the ship.

One scrawny scout with a baseball cap named Edward P. Winterbottom Sniftersnatch was going hysterical. A combat medic with five o'clock shadow prescribed a swift slap across the face. "Pull yourself together, man!" the medic said in a strong eastern European accent of vague origin.

The scout pouted and rubbed his face which had a red handprint on it now. "You bonked me."

A third resistance member carrying a massive flamethrower and wearing a gas mask lifted the weighty nozzle of his deadly tool, ready to fire. He'd been worrying a few moments ago what effect the water would have on his weapon, but now the flamer had an entirely different worry on his mind. Frantic mumbling came out of him in swift droves, like an alcoholic throwing up all over himself, but his words were muffled by his mask. The scout above knew this particular flamer well enough to ascertain his meaning. "You're right! Hey, you! Turn around! There's a pony behind you! I'm from Brooklyn, so listen to me! Did I mention I'm from Brooklyn? Let me restate that!"

The man they were speaking to was a member of the Golden Path named Wei Shen. "What? No there isn't." He even turned around to see nothing in the water there. "I'm doing this job for free for a new motherboard. I don't need this shit." When he turned back around to face the flamer, he let out an audible gasp just like the kind once heard in animated film. "You are the one with the pony crawling up your back! Look out!" With that as his only warning, Wei Shen unloaded his pistol on the flamer, trying to aim for the pony only he could see, striking his comrade from the Belorussian Resistance twice in each shoulder. The flamer responded with a jet of fire issuing forth from his nozzle. Just like that, chaos had broken out through a whole new level on the Red October.

It would not be long before the same confusion reached the bridge. Reports were coming in of squads attacking one another. "What?" Tian shouted. "What is this? How dare your people attack my people! We can obliterate you all with a single command."

"Oh really? We got some reports in that your guys are attacking ours!" Dirk retorted. "So there!"

"Please don't give in to this fighting," the queen said. "If you'll listen to all of the reports, there are incidents of friendly fire that don't transgress faction."

"Joseph Matskevich, what do you have to say for yourself?" Tian asked, but when everyone turned to look at Joseph, he was nowhere to be seen.

To see him, they would have had to be in the forward port stairwell numbered thirty-three, racing downward just shy of parking his rear on the railing and riding it in neutral all the way to his destination. Out in the hall, he faced one journey too many without incident and encountered a pair of soldiers who had their rifles pointed at one another. Human turned against human in suspense, ready to lay turmoil to one another at the slightest provocation. In a few seconds, two families would lose another member. In just a couple of moments, either faction could have another example to break their alliance. And in but a moment, Joseph could get caught in that crossfire himself and see his life end before the rest of humanity.

"Whoa!" he said, hoping they wouldn't take this exclamation as a nervous excuse to fire. He was lucky they did not. "Lower your weapons, both of you, by order of the leader of the Human Resistance!"

"He's got a pony on him, sir! Hidin' on his back! See?" The Belorussian soldier jostled his weapon.

"What are you saying? I've already checked on my back," said the Golden Path soldier. "You pony! Play the tail with a pink!"

They both turned to Joseph with looks of shock and aimed their weapons at him. "S-s-s-sir! One of them ponies is crawlin' up yer shirt!"

Joseph looked down at himself, and for a second, he thought he saw something there. Like the rainbow in an oil puddle, he thought he could see shades of a sea pony clambering up his chest, but he couldn't *feel* it. He hadn't felt much there in a long while. He would know when the numbness had passed. Like a drip of water down a drain, the visage had disappeared. He raised his eyes to the other two soldiers and saw that they were convinced to absolution that he had one of the slimy enemies leeching off of him like some giant parasite. "Hold up," Joseph said, raising both of his arms, one of which held his gun. The fingers of his free hand itched to mangle his hat, but it was still jammed in his back pocket. "You say it's on my chest, is that right?"

"Right."

"I can see it too!"

"Then how about this? I'll shoot it off myself." Joseph cocked the gun as though the imaginary pony were asleep, and angled

his arm to point it parallel to his chest. "Where is it? Right here?"

"It's just around the corner finish!"

"Now, sir! Shoot it now!"

Joseph looked down the hall his gun was pointed through. Nobody was there. He hoped that remained the same in the next millisecond. Bang! A loud bang went off. To the eyes of the onlookers, the image evaporated like salt thrown up in air never to land. The illusion was dispelled. There was something altogether not right about the way the two allies no longer saw the sea ponies attacking one another, but Joseph had no time to argue. He only had a time to put a stop to this madness. People were seeing ponies everywhere, making their appearances up in their heads, like obsession. It was unhealthy.

Along the way to the detention centre, Joseph happened to encounter another pair of soldiers. This time, the Golden Path member was already dead. The Moscow refugee was kneeling over him in grief, too hardened by soldiering to cry, but too shaken with doubt to contain himself. When questioned, the resistance member replied, "Ajay Ghale told me the pony did this to him, but I can't find where it got to."

Joseph placed a hand on the man's shoulder to console him, but pulled it away at the feel of the dead man's blood splattered there. "We'll get 'em. We'll get every last stinking one of them." He did not linger. He stood and hurried on, knowing Ajay would be ahead of him. He was unsurprised to find Ajay rooting through the confiscation drawers of the brig. "If you got those keys disordered, you're going to be in trouble."

Ajay spun around and stood there like a child caught with its hand in the cookie jar, a phrase which here means exactly what it sounds like. He said nothing. He didn't try to explain himself outright nor bluff his way out of his scandalous predicament. He didn't have to, and Joseph appreciated the invitation to speak first. "It'll be under 'G' for 'Ghale'. Dirk authorized an English alphabet filing system. Just make sure you put the keys back, but you gotta tell me what's in that jar if you wanna see,"—Joseph paused to bob his index finger at the maximum security cell—"what's in the box."

Ajay screwed up his face. "My mother's ashes." He anticipated confusion on Joseph's part. "She was Indian fighting for the Maoist insurgency. My father, born in Kyrat, worked for the Chinese Ministry of State Security. They met when he was sent in secret to aid the Maoist rebels in establishing an Indian communist state. That's the story my father told me. He usually went into a little more detail until I asked him to stop, but never mind. I'm to dump her ashes in Kyrat."

Joseph was quiet for a second, because that was all he could allow time for. "Kyrat's near Korea. We can't head anywhere that close to Equestrian territory just yet. It'll no doubt be on our stop list, but it won't be the next stop."

"What's in the box?" Ajay asked, though he thought the right question should be, "Why should I care what's in there?"

Joseph gave him such a look that knew what was on Ajay's mind from his sarcastic tone of voice. He unlocked the maximum security cell next to Colin's and slid the door open. He stood in the doorway until he let Ajay enter the narrow little room.

The pony was a tall male with an orange pelt and a green, spiky mane. His cutie mark was a Douglas fir tree. He didn't look particularly well-kept, but he was chained up in four different directions by manacles around his fetlocks and had a Hannibal Lecter™[18] mask around his muzzle. There was that glassy stare in his huge buggy brown eyes, but what perplexed Ajay even more than the shock at seeing what the prisoner was was the twinge of something familiar in those eyes. Something he'd never seen in a pony's eyes before; something he recognized after much pause for thought: The look of fear.

It matched his own expression. His lips drooped, and his chin sagged. His brow lined itself with wrinkles, and his eyes widened like full moons. This was one of those moments one can hardly refrain from pointing out the obvious which Ajay did when he said, "You at least can keep prisoners pony?" In his shock, Ajay was having trouble with his broken Russian.

"We have the one pony prisoner. It's complicated. I don't have time to go into it now. His name is Tree Barker, and he's going to tell me what these fish ponies are," said Joseph.

"What, am I a mute now, is that it? I can't even introduce myself?" The earth pony let out a heavy sigh. "They're called sea ponies. I was telling your human prisoner, Colin."

"How? These are private cells."

"They share the same ventilation."

---

[18] In Engrish, Lecter sounds like "rectal".

"You mean to tell me," said Colin from his own cell, "that you've been one of the goddamn ponies all this time? I'll fucking break you dead!"

"God dammit!" Joseph said. "We don't have time for fixing this fuck-up. I'll chew Dirk out for this later. Right now, tell me what the sea ponies are doing and how we can stop them."

Ajay gaped as Tree Barker relayed to Joseph all that he had told Colin. "The ponies' song works like a form of projected echolocation, which they normally use to communicate underwater like dolphins. Colin actually had a fantastic idea, however, to use their own song against them somehow. I can't imagine how you would do that."

Deep in the recesses of the ship's main engine room, Flawkes couldn't imagine how she'd repair the damage the ponies had done to the great vessel and get the mighty machine airborne. At this point, all she could think of was to attach a lot of propellers to the top, but there were more pressing concerns to their desperate situation.

Because the Red October was meant for water landings due to its great size, consideration had to be thrown in regarding how much water it displaced, and as such the intended air fortress possessed mighty ballast tanks used to control the balance levels of water on board. This proved to be a vulnerability which the sea ponies were somehow familiar with, because these machines were their next target. Though sturdy to their purpose, the ballast tanks were very sensitive equipment. They wouldn't be able to forever withstand the percussive maintenance of sea ponies tackling into them. The aquatic equines had slick, moist bodies by nature, and by this time they had discovered they could slide along the smooth metal floors of the vessel by pushing with their forelegs and keeping their fins aloft, at least now that the ship was gradually being flooded. They rammed their bodies against the 2A ballast tank then set to work slapping and hammering away with their tails and hooves. Though they first had to exert great effort, they busted open the machinery, and soon cold sea water was bursting in as if from a broken fire hydrant, gushing and frothing into the ship. Before Inferno and Panjit could arrive, the damage had been done.

"What took you so long?" came the brusque greeting from Flawkes. She held a bloodied wrench in one hand and was cracking a dead pony's body from its skull like she was opening a cooked lobster. She did not look happy, not one bit.

"Look out! That pony's gonna bite you!" Panjit raised his weapon. Flawkes groaned in disgust and drop-kicked the dead pony's body before Panjit did anything rash. Once the sanguine corpse skidded closer to his feet, he recognized the creature had not been alive as he had first thought. Strange moments like this were peppering both factions of the Human Resistance.

On the bridge, their strategies had broken down into flippant arguing, the sort dysfunctional families have where they can't work out their problems and start kicking blood relatives to the curb then selling their dismal situation to MTV to monopolize on their own dirty laundry. "And now our esteemed leader has gone missing along with one of my top soldiers," Tian was saying. Well, it was more like griping. "How do we know this hasn't been a trap all along?"

"You know, I've tried to be patient, but you really try my patience," said Dirk.

Tian wouldn't hear him. "The conquered country collaborating with equine westerners and their new weapon. You eradicate their fleet with only two jets? You 'survivors' are nothing more than slaves, aren't you? And this must be their new weapon! I didn't survive Afghanistan without more than a healthy dose of paranoia."

Everybody looked uneasy at the accusation. It was so wild and preposterous that they were intimidated by its very suggestion. Everyone but Dirk of course. He just laughed out loud like Father Christmas. "Ho ho ho! Haaah! You shittin' me? You've been aboard for days. You don't think our pony overlords would've jumped you by then while you're stranded out at sea? Or that maybe they wouldn't want to confine you here to outnumber them? Or that they wouldn't try to sabotage a vessel as useful to them as it is to us?"

Their little conversation was then interrupted by a shriek and the extensive clacking of a gun, like someone was juggling jawbreakers in their hand and opening a can of pop. The queen huddled behind her boyfriend while Tian's eyes flew open with rage. A soldier was pointing a shaky rifle at Amita who repelled backwards like a very tall, wobbly blancmange. "Take off your dress, now! Prove to me you aren't just three ponies stacked up under there!"

Someone said, "It's a burqa, not a dress, you idiot."

Tian raised his gun, sputtering above his breath. "You will die for this insolence today, infidel."

"I wear this burqa to express my religion," Amita said in a tiny feminine voice so her father couldn't hear her.

Hurk seized Tian's gun. It was a bold, foolish move. "Sir, please! We can't afford to make these mistakes! These little ponies and their singing are confusing everybody, making them turn on each other!"

"Soldier, put your gun down, now!" Dirk barked at the frightened infantryman.

"All due respect sir," the fretful soldier said, "but you're not my superior officer." He was starting to take better aim.

"No, but I am!" Joseph's voice emanated from the voice pipe connected to the brig. He had overheard the conversation, and didn't appreciate it. He wished he hadn't left the bridge now. How could he lead them from away when he was only a distant voice? How could he get them to listen and behave like the driver in the front seat of their vehicle?

But they did. There was a long pause, and then Dirk said aloud, "He put the gun down."

Joseph exhaled all the weight in his chest. "Our first priority has to be to counteract the sea ponies' song. Do we have any way of cancelling out the frequency or something? It's a technique they used to show on old television programmes from time to time. A sound can be counteracted by its opposite or something like that. In fact, patch me into engineering. I wanna talk to anybody down there about this."

Amita was the first one to make a move. She appeared to crumple to the ground, flat as a sheet, and in her place stood three sea ponies, stacked on top of one another. "Shooby-doo, motherfuckers!" They bolted without waiting for anyone to take stock of what they were seeing, and each took on a different victim: Tian Zhao, Dirk Smidgeon, and Hurk Armstrong. The three of them were hopelessly outnumbered, but they had listened all this time and sought out three of the most important or dangerous people in the room. The remainder were still driven to paranoia. The queen shrieked out Dirk's name, Jenny Everywhere looked on in worry, and Artemis readied an arrow to her compound bow.

For one of the few, if only the first, times in her life, Artemis couldn't take the shot. Someone slipped her the drunk goggles, so to speak, because she was seeing double...triple...quadruple. In a similar debacle, Jenny hurried over to Hurk, but kept her distance from the veritable hydra of sea ponies she saw wandering his broad-shouldered form. Like many of their hallucinating subordinates, Hurk and Tian swatted at the encroaching terrors, feeling the sharp sting of bites along their necks and ribs. Dirk tried to fight back by prying two magnum guns out from his pockets, hoping to point them at where he thought the ponies were, but the queen screamed that he might very well shoot himself instead. It was Jenny who ultimately ran over to the voice pipes in a fit of opacity and connected the prison tube to the engineering section on Joseph's behalf.

"Hello? Hello? Engineering? We don't have much time!" Joseph yelled into the pipe, speaking quickly but clearly. "We have a plan to counteract the frequency of the sea ponies' singing. Is there any way to do that?"

Down in engineering, Nikita Dragovich strolled over to the voice pipe amidst the danger. "Repeat. You want to what?"

"Counteract the frequency of the sea ponies' singing! Reverse its polarity or something! God! We don't have much time! The bridge is in danger!"

Despite the warning, Nikita thought for a moment. "It would take a while. There are clearly layered frequencies at work. But it just so happens that I've been constructing a numbers program in my spare time that could be used to subvert the neural processes. I'll still have to make some adjustments for the impulse commands, but it is doable. You there, Hank! Get me on the system! Program Nikita umpteen gamma!"

Hank shuddered aloud to watch what the sea ponies were doing next to some poor soldier. They were trying to forcibly impregnate him like they had with Duke. Luckily Panjit golf-clubbed the attacker off in the nick of time, and the sight of the misfire was too graphic to depict here. "I'll get right on it," Hank said, moving swiftly to the nearest terminal, and pretty soon he was finger-tapping at a console. "We should override the variance fifteen degrees before the whole thing overloads. What's the frequency, Kenneth?" Poor Kenneth was far too busy deflecting a sea pony tail with an industrial-sized wrench. He let out a Tarzan-like scream as the pony's next low blow tripped him up, and the squirming sea monster clambered atop him to start chewing its way through to his spine. "Aw, forget it," said Hank, "I'll do it myself!"

"You there! Fat man! Cover me!" Nikita shouted to Inferno. "Don't shoot any sea ponies you see directly in front of me! I know where to run!"

Inferno took a moment to understand why. Soon, he and Panjit were back-to-back, with Inferno firing off the sea ponies sliding after Nikita, whether they were real or not. Nikita was making his way towards the central communications amplifier, a largish console among the extensive computer equipment located at the front central portion of engineering. Doing something he wasn't exactly supposed to, he transferred the readout of Hank's console to his own nearer terminal and plucked a USB drive that was hanging around his neck like a pendant. Only a bit of lightning-fast typing after the insertion of the drive later, he covered his ears with a pair of noise-reducing headphones. He scowled at the scene around him for only a moment longer, and then initiated his program.

Everything went deaf.

White noise[19] thrummed out of every communications system on board the Red October like a scream from beneath the waves. It could be said that something down there wanted to keep them afloat, but in reality, the lower audio bands were flooded with uncompressed sound that was enough to bombard the sea pony anthem and knock some sense into the perceptions of the Human Resistance. Those who were only engaged with spectres noticed the change and were stunned for the moment, whereas those actively engaged in battling almost didn't sense anything had occurred. Dirk's face was bloodied, but he'd found the pony in the sights of both guns. Two slugs tore their way with loud report through the equine's body, the first one exploding off its front right limb and the other making mashed potatoes of its head. Hurk bellowed as trying to pull the sea pony off made it tear into the nape of his shoulder with its teeth, but a sharp punch from Jenny, who did not look the sort to pull such a feat off, sent the beast tumbling to the floor where Hurk stamped on its face repeatedly under his boot. Not the most efficient way of offing the enemy, but he was slightly pissed.

Artemis took aim and loosed a decisive arrow that impaled the throat of the sea pony attacking Tian. It almost looked like one of those gag arrows one wears on one's head, that is actually a headband with two arrow portions attached to either extremity, but this was very, very real. Tian did not appreciate blood and phlegm spewing upon his person. He even less appreciated being rescued and clicked his tongue. "Saved by a girl."

Artemis screwed up her face in annoyance. She wanted to nock a second arrow and send it into his face, but thought better of this. Her sarcasm was just as piercing. "You're welcome, sir."

Tian didn't care. "Where the hell is my daughter then?"

Unlike many others in the aftermath of the ensuing battle, Amita was alive and well, trapped behind a water basin. Tian insisted on being the one to find her to return her burqa to her. Gunfire and splashing filled the ship with violence, but it was only a matter of time before the small numbers of sea ponies were rooted out and emasculated from their population. Almost another hour passed since they smashed through the Equestrian tactics to seize a decisive victory on their home turf. Another few hours were spent bailing out water as the engineering crews worked to fix the ballast. The Red October may not have been any closer to being able to fly, but it could once again remain afloat. All at once, both the Belorussian Resistance and the Golden Path were working together as one team, putting behind themselves the tragedy of friendly fire that had been wrought against them.

There were many questions left on the minds of the collective Human Resistance. Each side wondered if they would continue to get along. Others wondered if the sea ponies were truly gone for good. The queen wondered what she would do if she lost Dirk. Jenny wondered when she would next see home, Tian wondered if anyone would guess the dark secret he was hiding, and Ajay wondered when if ever he'd get to honour his mother the way his father intended.

Joseph had multiple questions. The first was a rhetorical disbelief: Was his father truly dead? His body had been given a burial at sea in a time-honoured ceremony. There was no other way to close the question for him. The second someone asked for him. Flawkes wondered why Nikita had such a program available, to which the latter replied that his brainwashing algorithm was concocted to rehabilitate prisoners in the new socialist-Buddhist empire that would reclaim the earth once the ponies were vanquished.

Joseph asked his third question out loud himself. He did so while he was letting a prisoner out from his cell. "Tell me: How did you manage to survive the fall of Moscow, 'Irish'?"

4. Notch's First World Problems

The next several weeks after consisted of innumerable training drills designed with operating their great vessel. Then one day the monotony was broken by Dirk calling an assembly on Joseph's behalf. It took the latter some while before he felt like speaking with the former again, to which he asked if it would be okay to propose a strategy. After a sound reminder that Dirk was no general and had no military ranking, and Joseph himself was the acting leader of the Human Resistance, Dirk ultimately relented to commence proceedings himself. He knew it would be the only way to prompt Joseph to speak his mind to his men, and so for all intents and purposes, Dirk found himself still useful to the ship he had figuratively birthed.

Dirk sat in a room with some of the higher up soldiers, including the newly-formed Burke Squad whose members involved Hurk Armstrong, Jenny Everywhere, Panjit Gavaskar, Ajay Ghale, and Pham "Inferno" Quan. Joseph Matskevich was also technically a member, but at that moment he had not yet arrived. Alessandra "Artemis" Galanos acted as the squad's semi-formal liaison to the Red Hammer Platoon, whom they hadn't been officially briefed on yet. The word "liaison" here means "contact between two organizations". The room was instead being briefed on their nearby location.

"Now we're three days off the coast of southern California, whose capital city is Hollywood. Now, who here knows a little bit about the country? Who here can tell me something that's important to the U.S. of America?" Dirk scanned his audience. Nobody wanted to speak first, but there were a few mumbles he overheard. "C'mon, c'mon, say it aloud. Basil can't hear you." Nobody knew which of them Basil was, but at least the soldiers stopped pussyfooting around the situation, a phrase which here means "avoiding taking the plunge the way a cat stalks across a narrow ledge."

[19] Technically, there are different "colours" of noise.

"Eating!" said Inferno.

Artemis raised her hand and spoke without being called on. "Guns?" she said in a monotone.

Pretty soon others were encouraged into the swing of things. "Home-schooling. So their conservative government can't fill their kids' heads with liberal propaganda!"

"High infant mortality rates."

"High child mortality rates!"

"Well that ties back in with guns."

"Domestic terrorism," Ajay said.

"Wait, really?" Everyone looked confused.

"Sure," Artemis said. "The KKK, Scientology, PETA, the NRA."

Dirk interrupted. "In fact, speaking of guns, they probably would've beaten the ponies back for being so well-armed, but I guess it just goes to show that just 'cause you pass a test to possess a gun doesn't mean you can be trusted with one."

"I got one," Panjit said. "They're the only country in the entire world that used oil."

An older woman said, "American movies told me to smoke because all the glamorous women did it!"

"Oh, oh oh! They all generalize about foreign countries all the time."

"While these are all very good answers, and I'm glad to hear some chatter, does anybody know why we brought this to your attention today?" Dirk asked.

Basil nodded on his shoulder. "Good show, mate. Be bold. Shall I toss them some treats if they get the answer right?"

Many people didn't answer, but donned thoughtful expressions on their faces. Certainly the answer couldn't be too obvious. Oh god, what if they answered and got it wrong? They'd look foolish. It had to be a trick question. Well, it certainly was a question to give pause for thought, wasn't it? Maybe if they kept quiet, they wouldn't be hurt. Questions sure were good, weren't they? Why did Dirk bring up the United States? Why *did* Dirk bring up the United States? As the majority of the group mulled over this query, a couple members of Burke Squad mumbled out the correct answer more or less together. "We got a mission there."

"Ah, good timing," Dirk said when Joseph entered the room. He did not enter alone, and was followed by Colin "Irish" Dwell, whose scarred and burnt appearance elicited a few gasps and made everyone generally uncomfortable. "Joseph's going to brief you on a couple of missions in the North Americas."

Everyone listened with more or less rapt attention to what Joseph was going to say, though some gawked at Irish's dyspeptic appearance. Joseph cleared his throat, having noticed this disturbance, and he himself stuck his hat in his back pocket. He hesitated before deciding the best place to begin was to just blurt out what he wanted. "Dasvidaniya, comrades and comradettes. As we make our way southeast around Cape Horn, I'm going to split Burke Squadron across two missions on either coast of the U.S. Jimmy Walsh, our best pilot, is going to escort the first group, Alpha Squad, to Hollywood, and the second group, Tango Squad, to Tampon, Florida.

"You see, it's my mission that we reunite some of the best soldiers we ever had to fight the ponies. They called themselves Delta Squad back in Russia when their leader controlled the Human Resistance. These guys have the most experience fighting the ponies, and I believe their expertise is what will see us through the last days of this war. I have every intention of being the last generation to have to fight these pony scums, and I promise that to you now.

"Alpha Squad, you stop by Hollywood and look for a man by the name of Tyrone Jones. This man joined our Belorussian Resistance in the wake of the fall of Moscow, then said he was going to retire for personal reasons. My dad didn't want to let him go, but the man lost his entire squad—or so he thought. We're chasing a lead that he may have travelled across the Atlantic and made his way to one of the stud ranches here which, as you know, are tasked with repopulating the Earth from the losses the ponies have caused us. Provided how quickly they can manage this, they'll meet up to aid Tango Squad.

"Tango Squad has the riskier mission by far. As many of you may be well aware, especially you, Mr Armstrong, much of the south-eastern United States was converted into a large-scale slave plantation by the ponies we've come to know as the Apple family. While their prime leaders were killed three years ago, their operation still stands, and it's up to Tango to incite some rebellion. Plus

which, we have some scanty intel that refugees from Cuba have been sent there. We expect the place to be holed up like a continental concentration camp.

"Naturally, neither team will be dropped off directly on their target, and for the sake of erring on the side of caution, we'll be taking an infiltration approach. Alpha, you inquire to the location of Tyrone Jones and recover him, then Walsh will return to shuttle you to Florida. Tango, your mission will be to infiltrate the Tampon Sea Parks plantation from Pepsicola, Florida and liberate the human slaves there. It's time we took the fight to them. And above all, kill the ponies."

Dirk nodded. "That was very good. I liked that, but who're you gonna send where?"

Joseph's eyes lit up toward the audience. "Well I was gonna listen for some volunteers first."

Some soldiers looked awkward. Some didn't want to be presumptuous, and others didn't want to step on the toes of their fellow soldiers. Amita Zhao shot a hand up underneath her burqa to volunteer first. "In the name of free women everywhere, I wish to fight the Equestrian menace."

Tian was not happy about that. Nobody even noticed he was there, even though he was the only man in a turban instead of a helmet. "You absolutely will not. That is a direct order from your father."

Joseph frowned. He knew better than to get between a parent and child in an argument, but he had too much experience dealing with his own father to give a crap about that. "This is a free society. All have the right to be heard. Besides which, this certainly isn't a pleasure cruise. There must be something your daughter can do for the cause."

"No. Absolutely not." Tian crossed his arms to try and appear staunch on the matter. "She will not be sent off on any missions with your men."

"They're mostly *your* men," Basil snarked. Dirk repeated this verbatim.

"How about this?" Joseph shook his hand in the air for calm. "Amita Zhao, Jenny Everywhere, and Artemis Galanos will go to Hollywood, alright? All women, if that's your problem. Frankly, I *trust* my soldiers and the soldiers of *your* Golden Path."

Those words sent a chill of silence through the room. Nobody was used to anybody talking down Tian before, which Joseph gleaned from their expressions. Knowing he had crossed a line, he had no intention of crossing back over. "Artemis. Amita. Jenny. It's time to gear up and meet Jimmy Walsh on deck."

NOTCH'S FIRST WORLD PROBLEMS

"I never thought that America would look so green," Amita said when she was up in a helicopter over California, a state on the western coast of the U.S. of A. "There are so many trees. They almost look like they can reach out and touch us." She pressed both gloved hands to the window. At least nobody could complain she might leave a smudge.

"They're called redwoods," said Jenny. "They're among the largest and tallest trees in the entire world. They're also endangered." She leaned over to the other window to peer out. "Although you wouldn't know it to look at them. It looks as if they're springing right up over the city. That's pretty amazing. I guess nature really does take over, but I thought it took these sorts of trees thousands of years to grow." She could just barely see evidence of buildings covered in branches and roots through the green foliage that stretched upwards like pointed fingertips.

"Maybe they grow fast and survive that long," thought Amita. "They look so alien to me."

Artemis had an unlit cigarette in her mouth which flapped up and down when she spoke. "Exactly what is she bringing to the table?" she asked Jenny, speaking as though Amita wasn't there with them. "Does she even have any body armour under that blanket?"

Jenny's jaw dropped at the uncomfortable proposition. Amita answered. "Of course I do. I wear this burqa to express myself. You'll notice it will be fully camouflaged in the surrounding environment." Her burqa was indeed patterned in a dark green camou print, but whether her hypothesis would ring true remained to be seen.

Artemis sneered and said nothing for a moment, putting a close to that conversation. It wasn't long before she started another. "So I guess we pass the dyke test, huh?"

Again Jenny appeared offended, a word which here means, “surprised at how disappointingly stupid someone could be.” “Excuse me?”

“The dyke test. When just women get together and have a conversation without mentioning a man, they pass,” Artemis explained.

“That sounds both outright and potentially offensive on multiple levels,” Jenny said.

Artemis shrugged and chewed on her cigarette butt. “A woman came up with it. How do you know she wasn’t a lesbian?”

“How do you know she wasn’t a closet lesbian? Who came up with it is a moot point. It’s a derogatory term where I’m from.”

“Maybe it’s okay for a lesbian to call another lesbian a dyke.”

“That way makes it a form of censorship. Hermione Granger once said ‘Fear of the name only increases fear of the thing itself.’ Promoting that fear instils a co-dependent bias.”

“Excuse me, Miss Three-Dollar-Words, but what in the hell kinda name is ‘Hermione Granger’? Another dyke?”

Jenny was showing her upset on her face. “She’s a character from a series of J.K. Rowling novels.”

Artemis spewed a plume of foul tobacco smoke. “Pshaw. Excuse me for not reading all the books the ponies burned or hoarded. She sounds like a Mary Sue anyway.”

“Alright, let’s just drop it,” Jenny said, holding out her arms as if to instil order. Artemis smiled and gripped her cigarette between her teeth again, feeling that she had won the conversation.

The flight continued for a few moments before Artemis grew impatient. “Hey, chauffeur,” she called to Jimmy Walsh, who was piloting. “Where the heck are we landing? We paying them a surprise visit or not?”

“The state’s been overrun with sequoia over the past years,” Jimmy said. “There’s a hospital helipad we’re going to be using just within city limits. It’ll be a walk to Hollywood civilization, but it’ll be a scenic one.”

“Listen to him,” Artemis scoffed, sitting back in her seat again. “Talks to us like we’re girl scouts selling cookies.”

Jimmy frowned and said in a quiet, defensive voice, “I like hiking through the woods.” Nevertheless, he set the chopper down with professional precision atop the hospital, and allowed everyone to disembark. Once everyone had their kit and caboodle together, he took off again, heading back to the Red October for the next mission’s load.

Artemis sat forward. “Hey, wait. Isn’t there someone named Nikita?”

“Yes, he is actually a man,” Amita said.

The hospital wasn’t abandoned, and was operating as a clinic both for wounded rebels recuperating from battles throughout Canada and the central U.S., as well as a mass maternity ward in conjunction with the Hollywood stud camps. The sound of crying on the upper floors made it very difficult for the soldiers below to get any rest. On the uppermost floors were the nurseries, then the wards where the expectant mothers sat around eating barbecue chocolates and attending Lamaze classes, and finally several floors of wounded soldiers. Some were comatose, many had grievous injuries or missing heads, and some of them just acted jittery or seriously unnerved about the ordeals war had thrust upon them like ill-fitting hand-me-downs prior to several social rights movements. One man kept chanting “two legs good, four legs bad,” while rocking back and forth on his buttocks. A lady kept muttering, “A horse is a horse of course, of course,” while spinning around in circles to make herself high from getting dizzy. Jenny couldn’t decide who was worse off—the patients suffering from shell shock or those missing a major limb or three.

This was the sorry sight of most human settlements nowadays: Huddling little hospice towns of the casualties of war, soldiers waiting to recuperate before they could become fighting fit again, if they were so lucky. Some would maintain the survivors weren’t the lucky ones after all, but not everyone was so eager to give up when facing extinction. Although the Equestrians had been struck many severe blows over the course of the war in the wake of them razing the planet, humanity was not yet ready to bounce back and repopulate their abandoned cities and homes. The very face of the planet had changed as society had to be restructured after such a catastrophic collapse. Whole countries had been wiped out as the very best intel reported, and others like Jenny revelled in guilty hopes that other pocket settlements of survivors were still out there among some of the earliest countries to be overrun.

When the trio reached the ground floor lobby, they almost walked right past a pair of men trying to greet them. "You radio in as Burke Squad?” asked an Australian man holding a sniper rifle that was about as long as his body was tall. Its name was stamped on its

side: Snipey. It was named after him. He probably should've kept it under wraps in a place such as this. The man sitting next to him was tinkering with a set of tools on his tool belt, taking them out and adjusting them, flipping them over and over in his hands as if to play with their weight. He introduced himself as Michael A. Nichols and had a gruff voice as well, which suited his Texan accent. Both men were dressed in reddish civvies with some rudimentary body armor. When Jenny confirmed their identity, Snipey briefed them on their purpose. "We'll be here to escort you into Hollywood. It's a long trek through the woods these days, and you never know what dangers lurk out there."

"There haven't been any pony sightings this far west, have there?" asked Jenny. "Not since the attack on New York."

"Fluttershy let loose a bunch of wild animals and made them do her bidding," said Snipey. Snipey knew his stuff. "Never know what's out there," he repeated as if to say he was right all along and should be trusted as such. "You ever kill a pony?"

Artemis let out an annoyed sigh. "Yes, we just killed like a hundred ponies. Can we please get moving? You can bore us on the way there at least."

A forest is a magical place. They are eerie and mystical collections of trees shooting up from the ground like hands stretching toward the sky, creating an impression of being both outdoors and inside somewhere at the same time. The planet's free atmosphere wafts and settles in amongst a sort of bubble beneath the canopy, making you one with the earth and trees just by inhaling. By exhaling, you give a part of yourself back. A forest is a lot like a library in some ways, and certainly most libraries contain a forest or two, and while there may be associates out there to disagree with on which is more important, both sides of the schism can agree that burning either is of no benefit to anyone. Each tree is a living book with its hidden stories and branching chapters. From the top, a forest may seem like a patch of moss, and yet from underneath this illusion makes us appear to be tiny in a giant's world. Redwood trees in particular are among the tallest specimens in the entire world, as Jenny had said earlier, but to see the immensity up close wowed even the stony heart of Artemis. The spirit of adventure kindled inside all of them.

It was too bad Snipey had to ruin the mood with his incessant chatter and littering of cigarette butts. "Y'know a pony's major weakness?" he asked, flicking another butt like a bogey he'd just picked.

"Their front legs carry most of their weight, and all those bones are delicate," Jenny answered. She was spot on.

Snipey looked impressed with his frown and his nod. "I wanted to say that." So he said it, as though he needed to confirm for them what Jenny had just spoken.

So many fallen leaves, branches, and grit obscured the roads from recognition as such almost to their entirety. Hollywood was ostensibly and eerily abandoned. Buildings were overgrown with creeper vine, the pavement was cracked and dishevelled, and pollen had caked the windows to obscure all visibility. The scene almost looked as if a forest had exploded up from the ground just because some hypothetical gardener had forgotten to trim the lawns. Storefronts were barely recognizable for wear against the elements, reminding the group that when humans have gone, nature thrives. Ever the optimist, Jenny thought to herself that it looked like a nice world to start over in, once the threat was gone.

As though her morbid thought were a curse, the hairs on the back of her neck tickled when everyone heard the growl. Everyone turned to their left to face a run-down bridal shop. Apart from an astounding fifty-percent-off sale on all off-white gowns, the other eye-catching sight they saw was a vicious brown wolf lurking in the shadows of the canopy. It snarled at them, a vicious sort of primitive threat that needed no words to warn the larger group of danger. Each of them marvelled at the spectacle of the lone animal rumbling its voice at them despite being outnumbered. They sensed there was something amiss about this encounter, but they each had their weapons trained on the savage beast and could easily pick it off should it make a motion toward them.

"Hold on," said Mike. "This is a perfect opportunity for me to display my skill." He sat down on the ground and began removing mechanical implements from his backpack, assembling telescoping pipes into a tripod by twisting and hitting things with an over-sized adjustable spanner. The other four people there shifted their weight impatiently as they watched his tedious work. Next he was trying to assemble a sight-seeking turret gun on top of the stand, and it was sure taking him a while. It took him so long that the wolf behind them had time to dash up and seize him around the back of the neck with its powerful fangs and crush his upper spine like a pencil. Screams of alarm rose up as the quartet of humans watched this transpire in utter surprise. Snipey, who was closest, fired off a lethal bullet that sent the creature bursting apart in a wholly unexpected fashion, splintering away onto the ground in a squillion pieces.

Mike had died near-instantly. He slumped forward over his half-finished turret, his head twisted at a stupefying angle. His body was covered in shards of wood, which mystified his mourning onlookers. Snipey's chin seemed to swell at his own tight-lipped expression of regret. Before they wasted too much time, Artemis and Jenny looked back at the first wolf to see that it had gone. They looked up and down the street, but there was no sign of him. Amita boggled at Snipey who was crouching down, holding his hat to his chest, to revere Mike's corpse. All around him were these wooden fragments from where the wolf had exploded.

"What do you make of it?" Jenny asked.

“Clever girl,” he muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“I was speaking of the wolf pincering us like that, but that’s not the least natural aspect about this. That thing was made entirely out of wood.” He stood up again, putting his hat back on.

Artemis butted in. “What in the hell are you talking about? You been hittin’ the booze again?”

Snipey swept his arm through the air over what was once Mike. “I don’t see a wolf carcass here, do ya? And you all saw me shoot the thing.”

“He has a point. There’s something strange going on here,” Jenny said. “I’ve seen something like this before.”

“What point?” shouted Artemis. She leaned her sneer in close to Jenny. “Wood won’t walk.”

“All I’m saying is we shouldn’t let our guard down. Let’s remain cautious.”

“Brilliant strategy, Napoleon! Watch out for snakes in the snake pit!” Artemis rearranged her bow and made as if to continue their march, but Jenny grabbed her arm. “Don’t touch me,” she said, and then she took a look at what Jenny was pointing at.

The debris was moving like a squadron of tumbleweeds affixing themselves together into one point. They rattled and flipped and stuck together, almost defying gravity as they assembled into a recognizable form: That of the wolf they had obliterated only a minute or two ago. They could see now, up close and with a second glance, that this was no ordinary beast. It was a construct made entirely of wood and none of them denied that its bark was worse than its bite. None of them also wanted to say the name that immediately sprung to mind when looking at a lupine made of tree: Timber wolf. “Run,” Jenny said, and this time Artemis gave no smart remarks. The foul-breathed botanical canine was hot on their heels as they fled, but Amita couldn’t run well in her burqa. She fired her second amendment at the beast, breaking off one of its legs in a series of blows. It tumbled to the cracked pavement, but soon reassembled itself to give chase once more. Ahead of them, they were herded to turn down a perpendicular street by the reappearance of the first timber wolf.

“Ugh. Less running, more shooting.” Artemis nocked an arrow to her bow and fired. The arrow struck deep in the centre of the timber wolf’s forehead, but had no real effect other than quivering there. The snarling plant-animal lunged.

“Very felching,” said Amita.

“That’s fletching,” Artemis corrected her.

“Run on the soles of your feet, Amita!” Jenny commanded. “Leave the pressure off your heels!”

The group hoisted their knees, nipping off pot-shots every once in a while. There was now a pack of the dreaded Timberwolves pursuing them, and though they reconstituted their forms every time they broke apart, the tactic slowed them down somewhat. With the pack behind them, the humans had free reign to alter their route, cutting things close with every corner they rounded through the wooded city. Behind every tree emerged yet another timber wolf, and it was the automatic weapons that blew them up a treat.

“Should we try a grenade?” Amita asked, only to be shot down (not literally). Why waste a grenade when the guns were more efficient?

“If they were ponies, we wouldn’t be running,” Artemis complained.

“If they were ponies, they wouldn’t be chasing us. They’d know they’re just as mortal as we are,” Snipey said. “Check the light off ‘em, though, and their coloration. They’re definitely Equestrian, but they’re wild varmints.”

Artemis scoffed as she scurried out of range of a leaping timber wolf. “I’ve never seen the like before.”

The ligneous beasts were furious and none too wise in the ways of war. Each time they were easily dispatched, easily killed, and just as easily built back together by some force like magnetism. There was no end in sight to their scampering, and the creaking of their joints was hot on their heels. With a vicious will they galloped after their prey. The tearing of cloth and a shriek alerted the party that Amita had fallen behind. The hem of her flowing, magical robe had slowed her down and provided a promising latch for a timber wolf’s jaws. The unarmed creature was dispatched by Jenny with just as much haste as its brethren. She shattered apart its trunk and hips, but its head remained firmly attached to Amita’s full-body dress. This ceased when they paused long enough for Artemis to steal the kill by stomping the wooden skull into oblivion.

“Cover my six!” ordered Snipey. “I’ll get the vantage and clear your route to the edge of the forest. They won’t follow you out there.” It was mere supposition, but somehow they all chose to believe it. Jenny obliterated a timber wolf that had followed Snipey to the door of a store that sold nothing but baseball caps, and I mean nothing, only to have the door slam shut and lock when it was naught but a pile of tinder.

Reaching the roof was as simple as busting through the access door attached to the employees’ lounge. The store had long since been broken into, so locks were no problem for the sniper. A massive tree grew up the corner of the building facing the alleyway. The city forest wasn’t the most ideal for scoping, with enormous trees and buildings blocking his view, but from this particular stand he had a pretty workable sight of the street. Snipey had spent his entire life since childhood sniping things. Ever since he got his first slingshot, he would chuck pine cones at the neighbourhood girls. One Christmas he got a BB gun and spent the next few years picking off neighbourhood pets and animals with it from his tree house. Then the pony nation attacked.

Though time was of the essence, Snipey was a master of his craft. Time was not as slow as it felt as he gazed down that scope and entered into that round, narrow world of cross hairs and targets. It was like falling into a dream, and every bullet he fired tried to yank him back out. He would not wake up, however. Not until every last enemy lie dead on the ground, unaware of what hit them. Every bang saw the shattering crunch of another timber wolf, and one less reason for his comrades to look back. They were almost to the edge of the forest now, to the main street of Hollywood, and he knew they would not be followed there. When he glanced away, he could see that some of the Timberwolves, though snarling and baring their crooked fangs, kept back to the commercial district and left their prey to their escape.

Something peculiar caught his eye when he looked in the direction from whence they’d come. Checking down his scope, he discovered what had piqued his curiosity. There was a blue pony lurking on a grassy knoll some yards away, wearing a balaclava and sporting a cutie mark of a smoking cigar. Without a second thought, he fired off a lethal shot. The pony dropped dead onto the grass. Odd that there would be a lone pony lurking so close to human civilization. Snipey couldn’t leave until he’d investigated this. He stroked his chin as he waited.

There was a scraping behind him on the roof, along with the stench of rotten cabbage and halitosis. “Now how the hell’d you get there?” Snipey asked. There was a swift bark. Snipey whirled around waving his sniper rifle like a bludgeon, but he swung too high. The wooden wolf caught him by the wrist and broke it with one tug of its jaws. Snipey wailed in pain, dropping his heavy weapon. The creature pounced him, knocking him back so that his neck slammed against the ledge of the rooftop. The Equestrian beast set upon him, razing his chest and torso with its claws and jaws, but especially chewing up his genitalia before killing him slow but quick.

The women waited for Snipey, but he never came out of the redwoods. “We’ve got to go back in there,” said Jenny. “We can’t abandon a human life.”

“He’s a big boy. He can take care of himself,” Artemis said.

They were interrupted by the arrival of several armed soldiers speaking in English. “Were you responsible for the gunfire?” one soldier asked. He was clad in so much armour and kit that it was difficult to discern whether he was a man or a woman under it all.

The trio, being bilingual, responded in English to patronize the Americans who in all likelihood didn’t speak Russian as they were supposed to after the formation of the Human Resistance. Jenny started to speak when Artemis talked right over her like a classic Vespa mowing down a geriatric. “You’ve got quite the infestation out there. We have one casualty and one man missing.”

“We’re calling them Timberwolves,” said a second soldier, also clad in heavy ACUs. “Wolves made from actual timber.”

The first soldier spoke again. “We can discuss it later. We’ll go scour the wood for your guy. In the meantime, head down half a mile that way to the Church of Tom Jones Film Studios.” He turned to his fellow soldiers. “Alright, let’s move out!” They assumed a marching formation of two lines and left the trio by themselves on the golden-paved streets of Hollywood.

“Can we rely on them?” Artemis asked in Russian.

“You already made that choice, didn’t you?” Jenny retorted.

After a short walk, they were greeted outside of the film studio by a short, heavyset woman with short, curly black hair and severe eyebrows. She was wearing a maroon sweater with dangling bead-like things and a tight pair of blue jeans above some plain dress shoes. She introduced herself in English as, “Emily. Emily Emilil. Welcome to the ranch!” She gestured proudly with her hands which were adorned with cheap baubles and large, ugly costume jewellery. “We’ve been expecting you since we scrambled the guard. Security is our number one priority here at Propagation.”

Emily insisted on leading the group on a tour through the facilities. They’d heard the name Propagation before, but Jenny and Amita were unfamiliar with the actual goings-on other than it was a crucial location to the Human Resistance. Artemis just looked

bored, but it was hard to tell if that was because of her general disposition rather than already having read the brochure, so to speak. Though questions lay on their minds, Emily swept them away with a kind of charismatic presence as she welcomed them onto the studio grounds. “Here we keep the human race plugging along, ready to fight the good fight with state-of-the-art recycled infrastructure, assuring our people are kept in the topmost comfort the post-event world has to offer.”

It all sounded very impressive as she led them through a studio where a rehearsal was taking place for a war propaganda film. A grizzled, handsome-faced actor named Breckin Meyer was speaking in the halting dialect of the late William Shatner as was the height of kitsch in the trade. “Dammit, Daniel Williams, Delta Squad is prepared to follow you through Hell and back to see the end of these accursed pony villains. And when we find that Rainbow Dash, you know what I’ll say to her? See you next Tuesday.”

Dean Cain looked over to Sam Neill who was playing Logan Walker before he responded to Meyer. “Thanks, Tom. I know I can always count on you. Now you’re gonna get up on that tower and help their snipers during the battle, because otherwise you’ll regret it. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next week, but today, and for the rest of the short lives we’ve got left to live if you don’t.”

Cuba Gooding Jr. ran onto the set, playing Tyrone Jones. “We got a problem, dudes! A whole mess of ponies are headed for Hainan!”

“It must be nice to get paid to live-action role-play for a living,” Amita observed.

“All part of our aim to benefit the war effort, even though we’re out in such a remote settlement,” Emily said. “I’m proud to say we’ve operated efficiently for the past five years nonstop.” She led them outside of the building and then to another building altogether. “Here is the heart of our operation.” She thrust open the doors with a grandiose push, and the group wandered into a sudden scene of scantily-clad saturnalia. Hollywood starlets strutted around a large, spacious interior in flimsy, sparkling garb. Photographers snapped their images down their camera lenses as the women posed and pouted. Loud pop music of the surviving greats blared throughout the complex. Emily seized a clipboard and studied it as the trio gawked at the thighs that weren’t allowed to touch each other, and the pneumatic builds to the ladies of Emily’s operation.

“Through here is another building: Our nursery. Lamaze classes, natural water births, you name it. It was recently converted since traveling to the hospital is such a chore of late. Our courtesans are kept in the fittest conditions before and during pregnancy, and only the most eligible sires are permitted. We ensure strong, healthy donors to the population. After all, our number one priority here is repopulation.”

“Well they’ve gotta have something to do once they hit twenty-one and are too old to be of any use,” Artemis said.

Emily continued. “There have been many losses in the war, and we’re struggling to keep up with demand. We already have plenty of brunettes, but the two of you look fit enough.” She looked toward Amita. “You ought to take that sheet off, dear. We can’t tell how good of stock you are with it on.”

Amita stared at the floor and said nothing. Artemis scoffed and looked away. Jenny was aghast, but all she could do was stammer. “We’re not here to be courtesans,” she said, hesitating on the word. “We’re looking for Tyrone Jones. We’re from Burke Squad with the Human Resistance. Our intel suggests he may have arrived here after leaving the Belorussian faction.”

“Jones. Jones.” Emily flipped some pages on her clipboard. “Ah, yes, he did come to stay with us. You might try suite fifteen or sixteen, but I’m sure you’d much rather see the rest of the facilities first.” She smiled.

“Uh, no, sorry. We’re a bit pressed for time,” Jenny said, her eyes wandering to the dusky tones of a woman passing by, carrying a plate of cocktails to a pair of men seated at a round table with a pole on it.

Emily frowned, looking a tad surprised. “Suit yourself. The suites are upstairs,” she said. “I’m usually supervising here if you need me.”

“Why must they live in squalor and sin to mass produce?” Amita asked as they headed upstairs. Artemis shushed her.

“I’m not going to say cultural relativism is right,” Jenny said, “but sometimes you have to prioritize the problems you fix.”

The second floor up was about an extra story high. Decorated in hard carpeting of dark reddish tones, the hallway was eerily quiet, and Artemis surmised that the numerous symmetrical doors they found were soundproofed. Suite fifteen was the only one that didn’t have an “occupied” or “room service” tag on the handle. As cautiously as if they were planning to ambush a pony, they tugged on the handle, but it wouldn’t open. Was it locked? They pushed instead and it swung right open, allowing them to peer inside. The room was a dimly lit hovel of gratuitous comfort, with a soft padded couch in front of an imitation fireplace with a grisly bearskin rug on the floor. The walls were lined with movie posters for films long since lost to civilization during the ponies’ purge of human culture, none of which were identifiable. The wallpaper was ugly beyond recognition, and the floor was laid out in shag carpeting. Making out any colour was difficult in the darkness.

They had found Tyrone. He was lying asleep in a four-poster bed, covered up to his navel in sheets of silk and fuzzy cheetah-print. He looked a bit uncomfortable, halfway propped up like he was against the headboard. The three women stopped at the foot of his bed, frowning in thought. Artemis reached to yank the blankets down, but Jenny stopped her and gestured with her gun to a chair where clothes had been flung with abandon. Artemis mouthed, "So?" but let go of the covers.

Jenny spoke to wake him up. "Mr Jones? Tyrone?" He did not stir. She cupped one hand to the side of her mouth and shouted. "Hello, Tyrone Jones! Time to get up now, we're at Grandma's."

Dazed, he opened his eyes which rolled around in their sockets. He took one muddled look at Amita and said, "Holy shit, it's the Grand High Wizard." That woke him up tout suite.

"Uh, no, Tyrone?" Jenny launched into a formal introduction, smiling with awkward politesse. "We're from the Human Resistance. I'm working on behalf of Belarus, Artemis is from the Red Hammer Platoon, and Amita here is from the Golden Path. We came at the request of the leader of the Resistance."

Tyrone squinted. "Daniel Williams?"

"No, Joseph Matskevich. He took over after his father's passing. He's convinced your expertise could benefit the war effort."

"What does he want with me?" Tyrone was still groggy.

Jenny repeated herself. "He believes your expertise could be a benefit to him."

Tyrone waved a hand dismissively and shook his head. "I'm done with fighting. Done. Lost too many good people."

Artemis slammed her hands onto the footboard. "We're losing a lot more trying to keep the human race alive! You may be done, Jones, but the ponies aren't! You're just lying around here banging Hollywood starlets, but let me tell you something: You're living a lie."

Tyrone glared at Artemis but said nothing. Then Amita spoke. "Um, if I may be so bold, speaking in front of a man, but are you really vital breeding stock? You have an artificial organ, do you not?"

Tyrone looked shocked. "I was injured in my appendix during the post-Moscow attack. How do you know that?"

Jenny and Artemis also wanted to know, so Amita explained. "My father keeps a dossier on all the crucial players in the war."

Tyrone crossed his arms. "It doesn't matter what you say. I ain't leaving. Sorry you came all this way for nothing. Now, if you don't mind leaving..." Tyrone shooed them from the room.

Realizing they weren't getting through to him, they opted to depart, but not before voicing their disappointment in him. "I expected better from a member of Delta Squad," said Jenny. "From what I read, they didn't give up when liberating Berlin from Twilight Sparkle, and they didn't give up when their leader was abducted by Rainbow Dash."

They shut the door behind themselves. "Should I tell Emily about his artificial appendix now?" Amita asked.

Jenny shook her head. "No, I think we'll save that card for when we need it. Let's give him time to think over our offer first. We have got a few days before Walsh returns to pick us up."

"What the heck was that bit about 'speaking in front of a man'?" Artemis asked Amita.

"I am a firm believer in equal rights for women," Amita said defensively. "I would want men to respect my culture just as much as I respect my father's."

Artemis sneered. "How about you start crawling first, then some day you can walk the path of equal rights? Until then, you're still letting your daddy dress you."

The three of them decided to take Emily up on her offer of sitting in on a studio audience for post-event televised entertainment. Artemis figured they had nothing better to do, and Jenny posited with optimism that maybe it would grant them some insight into current events of the local region. The three women found the performance eccentric, but then it appeared to be one in a series of episodes, and the unfamiliar characters had long been established. The process took a while, but they gathered from watching that they were seeing a comedic lampooning of pre-event bourgeoisie.

Fram Fomp was a former prostitute hired as a nanny by an over-the-top British play producer in his wealthy abode. She had the figure measurements of an upside-down cello, but the noise her mouth made when she spoke was not the rich, dulcet tones of music. It

sounded more like a cheese grater fixed to an engine with no muffler as it was ran over gravel pavement as a goose was being tortured. The audience was laughing in admiration of her boorish harlotry as it undermined the pretentious dignity of her employer, Mr Shefmeal, a man characterized by the boring and uptight three-piece suit he wore, ostensibly to bed. He was seated behind his desk in his office which she had parked her ever-bloatening posterior upon, clad in a clashing fur-lined latex miniskirt.

"I say, I was sitting in my therapist's when rather a sudden epiphany came to me," Mr Shefmeal said.

"Ooh, Mistah Shefmeal, a therapist? Sounds kinky!" Fram said.

Mr Shefmeal interjected, annoyed. "Miss Fomp! It's perfectly customary for us bourgeoisie to have therapy for the desperate problems we suffer being rich and privileged. As I was saying," and here his eyes lit up with excitement, "I realized that, oh my God, Andy Lloyd Weber *is* God!" The audience laughed at what must have been a recurring in-joke. Even though they didn't quite get it, Jenny and Artemis found themselves compelled to laugh as well, if only just a bit. Jenny caught this and smiled that Artemis's sour disposition had cracked.

Amita sat there like a table prepped for Christmas dinner. "I don't get it," she said, though her muffled voice was even harder to hear than usual amid the raucous plaudits of the studio audience. "Is it okay to stand up and leave?" she asked, standing up.

"Pff, yeah, just duck out," Artemis said without looking at her.

"Meet us later outside this studio," Jenny said.

"The harlot's behaviour and mode of dress offend me greatly," Amita said, referring to the actress on stage. With that, she wobbled out of the room like a bowl full of jelly and into the open air outdoors.

Standing outside in this foreign land, surrounded by buildings of exotic and blasphemous purpose, envisioned by scenery so alien to her world, Amita was swept by memories of the fairy tales her father used to read to her as a child. As her father had told her, a princess was trying to decide which of three cousins to marry by sending them off around the world to fetch priceless treasures, only to have to rescue the princess who had gotten sick from delaying her marriage. Never had she imagined the foreign lands they sought could look like these cluttered, busy kingdoms of the western world. Her imagination had always roamed to the vast desert. The unknown overwhelmed her, and curiosity drove her feet across the pavement. When she regained awareness for where she was, she became nervous, realizing that her father would strongly disapprove of her being alone like this, in this country of iniquity. Amita hustled to the nearest building, another large, squat recording studio or sound stage or whatever the staff had called it.

The interior was much like any other recording studio. Some cameras, floodlights, and flimsy-looking chairs faced a green platform stage with a green wall behind it. Amita was the only person in the room. She walked close to the equipment and was unable to read the letters printed on the back of one chair: "Ronald Reagan". She approached the platform and took a tentative step onto it, going all the way to the green screen toward the back. She wondered why the stage looked this way, her inspection not uncovering that sets were expensive and had been abolished in lieu of a more cost-effective technique of superimposing location images behind the performers. She whirled back around when she heard the door creak open and slam shut.

There were voices speaking. "It's dangerous for you to be here. There are members of the Human Resistance lounging around."

"Darling, there's nothing more dangerous than moi."

Amita backed against the wall. She could see that short, dumpy woman with the Italian accent—Emily Emilil, was it?—and of all things a pony entering the room. She wondered why they didn't see her, and realized that in the darkness her green burqa was indistinguishable against the green screen. The pony was snowy white with an elegant, curled purple mane and tail. She had the distinct marking of three blue diamonds on her flank. From the description, Amita had to surmise this was Rarity, presumed killed in Hainan until her recent sighting in South Africa. "Eavesdropping" is a word which here means "listening in on a conversation you were not invited to" which is ordinarily a rude thing to do, but it's okay if you're overhearing the plans of a murderous, evil pony. Just be careful.

"I can't understand why the ponies would be interested in keeping the human production ranch going," said Emily.

"An army marches on its stomach, dear, but I'm not just here to check you're operating at peak efficiency," said Rarity.

"Then why are you here, milady? The stock won't be ready to ship for years yet."

Rarity hopped into Ronald Reagan's chair and sat with her forelegs draped across the arms. "We don't need to wait for them to mature, though that's not why I'm here today. I'm looking for a precious stone to add to my collection: The Klopman diamond. I simply haven't been able to find it without my magic, so I figure why not head to the gaudiest and most luxurious locale in human civilization?"

Emily shifted awkwardly. “Um, okay. I don’t believe we have anything of that description here. Just cheap costume jewellery.”

“Tch! Is that so? I’m sure you’d hate for the Human Resistance to find out a sizable portion of your recent shipment went out to the Iron Wolves Corporation instead.”

Emily fidgeted. Her eyes twitched, but she maintained her composure. “You ask too much. We really know nothing about this Klopman diamond of which you speak.” The middle-aged woman perspired under Rarity’s keen gaze.

Rarity rested her chin on her hoof. “Alright, I suppose you don’t. We’ll still spare you when our holocaust is finished with your planet. Now I suppose we must conjure up a plan for your little resistance problem. How many are there?”

“Just three women,” Emily said.

“Is that so? Well if they don’t want to join your ranch, I’d say just kill them. Simple as that.” Rarity hopped down off of the chair and started to head for a door opposite from where she’d entered. She paused and looked around, her gaze lingering on the stage. After a moment, she asked, “Are you coming? We have more to discuss.” Then the two of them left the building.

It took a while for Amita to breathe normally again and for her heart to stop pounding so hard. She waited a little while longer until the room almost felt as if it were swirling around her like a flushing toilet, then she too left the building, but through where she and the others had come in. Every footfall of hers that clapped against the pavement sent a jolt of panic through her already frenzied heart.

As Jenny and Artemis exited the filming, they were unaware of the agonizing moments Amita spent catching up with them. They did notice the way she kept tripping over the front of her burqa’s hem once she was in view. Jenny nodded her head sideways to beckon Amita with them. “C’mon, we’re going to go grab a bite to eat. Maybe they have something halal here.”

They had already passed her when Amita said, “Can’t you two see that I have something important to tell you both?”

They both turned around, blank-faced. Artemis’s gaze was sterner as she traced her eyes up and down the burqa. “No, we can’t.”

Jenny shot an uncomfortable sideways glance at Artemis, and then asked Amita, “What’s the matter? Is it to do with the mission?”

“I won’t tell. You’re being offensive to me.”

Though Jenny had tried her hardest to tiptoe around inadvertently trespassing against Amita’s fragile sensibilities, she looked to Artemis again and muttered, “Please apologize. We may not have time for this.”

Artemis’s face descended into a fit of rage. “That’s the exact reason why I shouldn’t!” Jenny’s frown didn’t soften Artemis’s glare any, but the latter’s face contorted and blinked as though she were suffering from some kind of stroke. “I’m…sorey,” she choked out. It took her a few tries, though.

“Now promise you’ll read the Koran,” Amita said.

“Enough of that!” Even Jenny was beginning to lose her patience by this point. “As your commanding officer, I order you to spill the beans.”

“I thought I was in charge,” Artemis snarled.

“I thought nobody was, and whoever gave a command, everyone had to obey,” said Amita.

“Amita, please,” Jenny said.

“Fine. I witnessed that large American woman, Emily, talking with a pony in the green room.”

Jenny even let out a short little gasp at the news. “Did you manage to capture any evidence? The Human Resistance will be desperate for this intel.”

“Evidence? My word is my bond. My father will believe me.”

Jenny’s shoulders drooped, but she maintained her didactic disposition. “Amita, I’m sure that he will, but the Human Resistance has to disseminate this information to thousands of soldiers, and even more civilians. They don’t all know you or your father personally.”

“Plus I don’t think that Tyrone guy will believe us. I don’t think anything short of an Equestrian attack will budge him,” Artemis snapped.

Jenny appeared thoughtful, but the pressing matter kept her mind skirting from one issue to another. She needed to collect her thoughts in order to improvise a plan, knowing that those plans might change at any moment, but just then there was a dreadful gravity sapping at her back. She sensed she was being watched. When she turned around, she found Emily Emilil standing less than two feet away from her with a disarming and strange grin on her face. “How did you enjoy the filming?” she asked.

Artemis sneered, but before she could say something disparaging and truthful, Jenny stammered an interruption. “It was, er, it was interesting to see how it all came together, that’s for sure.”

Emily was insistent on inviting the women back to the concubine studio for a bite to eat. The three exchanged knowing glances. Emily turned on her heel and waggled a chubby, beckoning finger. "Come, come, ladies. I guarantee you'll be thankful for a satisfying meal after nothing but army rations to eat." She was right on that count, but she’d be incorrect to assume they'd trust anything she had to feed them. The four of them had a long walk across dull pavement and past large, featureless buildings before returning to their prior location. None of the Human Resistance members particularly cared for seeing the inside of this particular studio again, but knew that their mission mandated Tyrone's recruitment.

"It seems a shame you'll miss the filming of the final episode of *The Nanneth*." Emily was wrong again.

"Yeah, that's a real bitch," Artemis answered before anyone could draw a breath.

The walk grew tenser with every step. Jenny could not make up her mind if she should shoot Emily here and now, and the threat bounced around her mind until she cursed her own unbecoming indecision. Sooner than any of them could formulate a plan, they had arrived at the concubine studio, and Emily was opening the door to welcome them inside. None of them knew what to expect, and each was fingering their respective weapons as their eyes drifted around the room. All they saw were the usual round tables with poles sticking out of them surrounded by circular tables, and the crowds of scantily-clad women and drunken soldiers and actors. Some of the actors were singing:

Oh, I love crack!
Crack is my best friend!
If we didn't have crack,
Then we wouldn't be men!

Emily pulled the door shut with a foreboding clang. The three Human Resistance members whirled around, but did not cease their station of scouting their surroundings in three different directions at once. There was not a pony to be seen. Nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary. "It's not very often we have visitors," Emily told them. "Especially three young women in their prime. You know, it really is a cushy life repopulating the Earth. Are you certain the three of you wouldn't rather settle down here, working with us?"

Naturally the three soldiers balked at this prospect, regardless of the scandal which Amita had overheard. "I beg your pardon?" Artemis said.

"Um, I really don't think that's for us," Jenny said, attempting to politely decline such a candid invitation to debauchery.

"Oh, but I must insist," said Emily. "We've got an excellent incentives program. You could live like queens. After all, our race depends on what we do here."

"We said we'll pass." Somehow, though she was turning down what could easily be considered a demeaning and improper offer, Artemis somehow still managed to sound incredibly rude.

Jenny, on the other hand, felt a trickle of worry slide down her temple. Trusting Amita's tale, if there were ponies afoot, she wasn't certain she could get away with flat out refusing Emily and the dreaded Iron Wolves Corporation. Anticipating repercussions should Emily's persistence fall flat, Jenny opted instead to feign consideration. "Well, we'll think it over and get back to you on that, okay? It's kind of a big deal to just up and leave our jobs behind."

"We'll what? No we won't!" Artemis said.

Emily pressed forward. "Oh, but you should make your minds up quickly. After all, when is the next time you'll be out this way? We only take the most beautiful, most conducive to propagating the ideal offspring to breed the human race we want."

Jenny found it difficult to fake approval of this entire disturbing idea. She frowned and shot Artemis a warning glance. "How about this? We can tour the facilities some more, get a better idea of what conditions here are like. We promise we'll have our minds made up before we're due to leave."

Emily's eyes narrowed with suspicion, but her cheery smile did not fade. She only nodded and gave a "humph" in reply as affirmation. She kept a close eye on the trio as they made their uncomfortable departure through the room in search of the stairwell.

When they were sure to be out of earshot beneath the awful, noisy dubstep music and the muttered, raucous flirtations, they still did not deign to speak because by now the three women were on the same page. None of them had to voice their plans or explain their behaviour at this point; they were dead set on faking their allegiance long enough to extract Tyrone. Surely if the ranch's leader was in league with the ponies or the IWC, nobody here could be trusted, not even the actors or the drunken soldiers on leave. The rational course of action would be to report their findings of treachery so that a larger force more competent to deal with these numbers could be dispatched.

They soon barged back into Tyrone's room in time to see a naked woman swivelling above him in the bed. Shocked by the noisome entry, she whirled around, gripping the shiny sheet to her stiff, synthetic bosom. In the process, she almost fell to the floor as she stumbled out of bed, leaving Tyrone covered up to the waist under a heap of blankets. They could see where his pudgy body had been scarred from his wound and subsequent surgery over a year ago. His head and shoulders were propped up against the headboard. He raised his arms in dismay, only to slap them back down. "Man! Are you three gonna bother me every hour for the rest of my life?"

"Something's come up," Jenny said, taking charge. She eyed the cowering, ditzy harlot who in turn was eying the weapons of the three armed women. "We need to speak with you. Urgently." Jenny kept her eye on the naked woman currently edging her way along the wall until she fled from the room outright. Tyrone patted his thigh a couple times and a lump rose like a soufflé in the centre of the bed. A second woman emerged, struggling to clamber out of the sheets. She became entangled and oozed off the side where she plunked her face straight onto the floor. She scrambled to her feet, and she, too, escaped from the room. Amita shut the door behind her.

"Well, uh." Jenny turned to look at Amita, thinking she might be a more direct witness. She was stared back at by yet another figure in a sheet. Realizing her gung ho idiom was slipping away at the simplicity of what she had to tell running through her mind, she stammered. "We saw Emily Emilil, the matron of this establishment, concocting a deal with a pony. From Equestria."

Tyrone's head slumped onto one shoulder as he frowned at them. "You don’t believe us, do you?" Jenny asked.

"Nonsense," Tyrone said. "We've only been at war with the ponies for the last six or so years. However would you make such a story up?"

"Mr Jones, we are telling the truth!" Jenny insisted as she moved to the side of the bed, but Tyrone was having none of it.

Artemis strode up to the opposite side of the bed from Jenny. She stomped a boot onto the mattress and sneered. "Alright, you listen here, Don Juan. I personally don't give a horse's ass whether you choose to believe us or not. What is personal is how disgusting I find your life here. Lying around in bed all day, sleeping with Hollywood bimbos? Being fed and catered to like an animal in captivity? You aren’t some retired hero doing what he can to further the cause of the human race. You're their pet!"

Jenny's eyes went wide. "Artemis, I think that's a bit much!"

"Nah, I got a lot more to say to lazy, spoiled—"

Artemis was interrupted. Behind Amita, the tacky double doors flew open once again, and in strode two tallish, impossibly slender women with artificial proportions. The platinum blonde was chewing gum. The black-haired beauty quirked one eyebrow and placed a hand on her hip. Both wore stiletto heels, G-strings, and tasselled pasties, along with see-through pink culottes and negligees. Not exactly the least objectifying fare in the apparel kingdom. The blonde was named Chianti, and the other woman was named Merlot.

Merlot's eyebrows seemed to do a little hopping dance as she spoke. "Mistress Emilil wants to speak with you three immediately." Her voice was shrill, as if scratching the record currently playing muffled pop music of the late John Lennon's immortal hit, "Barbie Girl", emanating from somewhere outside the room.

"Sorry. We've got other plans. We need to bring this man back with us." Jenny looked from the scantily-clad women back to Tyrone and asked a silly question. "Where are your clothes?"

Chianti stepped forward then adopted her haughty pose again. Her voice was a grating squeak, exactly like nails on a chalkboard. "He doesn't want to go with you! He wants to stay here, with us. Don't you, darling?" She bent over forward, hands on her knees with a very patronizing tone.

Tyrone drew in breath, aware that all eyes in the room were on him. He exhaled, and then inhaled again. "Actually, I'm gonna go with them. I can always come back, can't I?"

Chianti's voice rose higher like a balloon letting out helium. "No! You're *our* breeding stock, not theirs! We have orders not to let them take you alive!"

Jenny furrowed her brow in disappointment and hoisted her semiautomatic rifle towards the two concubines. She had the safety on with no real intention to shoot civilians. "What are you going to do, fight us for him?"

Chianti smiled and rolled her shoulders as she up-righted herself. "If we—"

Merlot whirled one of her long, graceful legs around in a wide arc and kicked Jenny's weapon right from her hands. She sputtered in disbelief, examining her empty grasp. Amita was quick to react: She lifted her own weapon and shot Merlot right in the breast. For a second, nobody knew what had happened. Merlot flung backwards in that time, colliding with the corner of the wall and floor. She then picked herself back up and stared down at the smoking crater in her cleavage. She glared at Amita. Her silicone had stopped the bullet! “Do you know how much these cost?” she squealed.

Chianti was the next to attack, striking Amita in the base of her skull with her stiletto heel. Amita fell forward flat onto her face. Artemis was standing right behind her and already had her bow drawn. She whipped her bow across Chianti's face and immediately followed up by kicking her in the upper abdomen with the sole of her boot. Chianti stumbled, but remained upright. She tried to punch forward at Artemis's face, but the well-trained archer ducked low and swept her other leg out at Chianti's feet. Chianti dodged expertly by bending her entire body backwards and leapt from her feet to her hands, then somersaulted back to her feet again.

By this time, Tyrone had got his boxers on. Not wanting to waste their time nor draw attention with a lengthy close-quarters combat, he joined the three marines in vacating the room as they kept their weapons trained on the two prostitutes the entire time. No doubt Amita's gunshot may have been heard over the loud music still playing downstairs. At least their guns stymied the two adversaries from following them, for now.

The metal railing rattled as the quartet descended the stairs in haste. The three women clutched their weapons in the event that they would not be permitted to leave without a fight. "Remember not to shoot them; they're still civilians no matter how fanatical they are," Jenny said.

"Screw that! Anybody tries to attack me, they're getting what's coming to 'em," Artemis said, nocking an arrow to her bow.

They were spotted almost instantly by Emily Emilil. Even though it is rude to point, she pointed at them. Even though it is rude to shout indoors, she shouted. "Seize them, my bimbos! They're absconding with one of our men!" "Absconded" is a word which here means "escape to avoid detection".

"Wuh-oh." Jenny and her companions gazed around the massive room which was crowded with people, most notably the numerous waitresses and strippers. These women adopted various stances of martial arts, such as krav maga and bushiban.

"No way out but through 'em," Tyrone said whilst cowering behind the three marines.

The various soldiers lounging around were disinterested at first in the loss of a rival male, but when their Hollywood starlets closed in for the kill, they interpreted this action as their bed partners being threatened, even though it was Alpha Squad that was outnumbered. Okay, so numbers didn’t matter if one side had the guns. "Just run," Jenny said smartly. Easier said than done. Hoping the ceiling would stop any bullets, Jenny spewed a couple of rounds skyward to warn off any would-be enemies. It did not work.

Even Artemis was incensed with disbelief. "Why the hell do they keep coming?"

"Haven't you ever been devoted to your beliefs?" Amita said matter-of-factly. Her three allies gave her bizarre looks, but no one had time to rebut. Someone had pitched a bottle of Amontillado, smashing it on the wall just above their doorway. Each of them ducked, and then smartly guarded Tyrone with their bodies in their bid for the exit.

When they trod too close to a table, one the strippers whirled around the pole like a tether ball, whipping her disgustingly skinny legs like knives at Artemis's face. Artemis lowered too late and felt an ankle clip her head. Still, she was strong, and endured the hit. When the assailant finished spinning and landed on the table again, Artemis clubbed her in the knee with her bow. Ever the aggressive personality, Artemis readied her arrow again and fired it off into the artificial chest of another lady celebrity. The impact stunned the actress, though she was unharmed. Jenny waved her firearm threateningly, but it was Amita who sprayed a blast of hot lead into the floor before the on comers' feet, keeping them at bay. Through these methods, the four of them managed to clear their way towards the exit.

"If only we could use a table for cover," Amita suggested.

"The poles are fixed to the ceiling," said Tyrone. "Hey, look out!"

As the group had been focused on the larger numbers, they failed to notice the escorts that had snuck up behind them. One such minion had seized Artemis's bow and grappled to pry the weapon from her hands. Jenny had been jumped by an especially exuberant exotic dancer who squeezed her head between two greased-up legs. Despite the oils slickening her skin like a burst derrick, her thighs pinched Jenny's face from either side and behind. Amita clutched her sidearm in one arm and sought anything of the scanty garb to pull the attacker off as Tyrone, unarmed, watched in dismay. Artemis circled around with the other offender as though locked in some malevolent tango; the other woman had incredible crack strength and would not relinquish the weapon. She did not, however, anticipate Artemis's forehead abruptly crashing into her face, breaking her nose. The recipient also had a bad cold, so this made things much worse for her.

Artemis yanked her bow free and jabbed one of the pointed ends up under her opponent's chin, sending her stumbling backward over a stool. Jenny whirled left and right, but could not detach the stripper from her shoulders. All one-hundred and eight pounds weighed down upon her spine, and she started to sputter for breath as her knees weakened. One leg buckled as she lurched forward, but by some oomph of determination, she propelled herself backwards as though bouncing off a spring, and like a professional wrestler and trailer inhabitant, she doubled over backwards and slammed her enemy onto the nearest table, upsetting a platter of sushi and a pickled egg and some cheap, paper-wrapped Chablis titled Hoop-de-hah once domestic to Toledo.

Not knowing the full extent of Emily's intentions, the men present began howling in derision, barking at Alpha Squad to depart and never darken their doors again. Chianti and Merlot caught up, wielding improvised weapons: Merlot had a rat-whacking stick, a phrase which here means "a baseball bat with metal spikes wound around it," and Chianti had the classic toaster wrapped in a blanket which she whirled in slow, heavy circles above her head.

By that point, Tyrone and the women escaped the studio and met the outside lot. Keeping an eye on their six, a word which here means "behind their ass", each of them were stunned to encounter Rarity the unicorn and her gang of sycophantic lookalikes. They took one look at that string of white ponies scattered about the lot like villains in a western and froze. Rarity herself was adorned in a blue sailor's neckerchief. Perched upon Rarity's back was a white Persian with a purple bow in its fur and a rather grotesque look of disdain for its surroundings. Waving a foreleg to point the escaping humans out, Rarity shouted at them. "You there! Surrender now, or prepare to fight!"

The cat meowed.

Alpha Squad raised their weapons as Tyrone cowered and peeked out from behind them. Rarity's dozen or so followers whipped out their Unishots. Thinking it was the better part of valour and cussing to boot, the members of Alpha retreated away from the looming threat. At that moment, a stunt was being filmed for the final episode of *The Nanneth*. The eponymous character was moseying down the street. In another scene located in an office, her employer was negotiating peace between the Arabs and the Jews. Along that very same street, a Mack truck was trundling very near to the sidewalk. The Nanneth cavorted into the street in a fit of stupidity and was utterly blindsided by the vehicle. Her body tumbled erratically up the grill, across the hood, and up the windshield. The exact moment this happened, her boss across town waved his arm before his chest and proclaimed, "In order to solidify peace in the Middle East, we must go…up the windshield!" Naturally this confused and outraged the adversarial world leaders. Also at the moment of the truck's collision, Alpha Squad hustled onto the sidewalk, pitting the vehicle between them and Rarity's ensemble.

Rarity waved a front hoof. "Stay your weapons, my minions. You don't want to kill ideal cattle stock by mistake, do you? Make sure you only hit the foul Human Resistance soldiers!"

The foul Human Resistance soldiers were fleeing the scene, all four of them thinking the same thing: That they needed to reach the cover of the chest-high wall between them and the redwood forest that had consumed the Hollywood rainbow district. A rainbow district is where the embarrassing members of the homosexual community are inexplicably drawn to, so the sane homosexual people can relax in peace.

It would only be approximately twenty feet to the woods, and the humungous trees could provide plenty of cover against the ponies' ranged weaponry. Jenny called a sudden halt to their mad dash. "There's no way we can make that. We'll be sitting ducks!"

"What do you expect us to do?" Artemis asked. "Wait for a diversion?"

By that time, Emily and her breeder women had formed an ad hoc mob and burst out of doors. Except for Emily herself, they were shocked to see a small platoon of ponies patrolling their pavement. She tried to dissuade her ladies' murmurs of understandable concern, but with every pony turning toward them, waving their weapons, their morale was at stake, like a herd of cattle with a canister of wacky humour snakes. Alpha Squad took no time to listen in on the ensuing peas and carrots; they rushed as one for that chest-high brick wall. They hadn't quite made it when one of Rarity's doppelgangers raised the alarm. "Hey, there they are! They're gettin' away!"

Rarity stuck a hoof to her chest. "Darling, we do not use the garish term 'gettin". They are absconding with our property!"

"Jump!" yelled one of Alpha Squad, as though that would help their impetus. Tyrone in particular had to be half-thrown over the wall by Artemis, but the other three, even Amita, managed to hurtle over the wall in time to feel several projectiles whipping through the air in their wake. One even tore through the lower portion of Amita's burqa between her legs. The resulting collision was painful, but thankfully it was the only set of injuries they sustained. They could hear a set of loud "thock" noises as uncounted Unishots stuck into the mortar behind them.

Amita checked herself for injuries in a panic. Jenny cocked her rifle and sat with her back to the wall. "Should one of us hold 'em off here?"

"Heck naw." Artemis had swiftly recovered. "Let's split up and make our way to the helipad."

"What about the Timberwolves?" Amita asked. The other two had almost forgotten.

"The what now?" A confused expression wrinkled Tyrone's forehead.

Artemis rolled her eyes. "Shit, someone's gotta escort him. He doesn't know about those monsters. Jenny, I nominate you."

Jenny frowned her disapproval towards Artemis's third-party volunteerism, but saw fit to explain the situation to Tyrone with as much speed as she could. She would have then and there, had the shouts of ponies not far behind them reminded her of their dire situation. "Tyrone, you're with me! Everybody split up and meet you-know-where! If you get lost, shoot off a flare." Nobody argued this time. The four of them broke off in three separate directions along the broken streets of Hollywood.

Talking while running was about as easy to endure as understanding why there must be so many late night talk shows, but Jenny knew Tyrone ought to be apprised of the situation. "There are these wolf-like monsters made of wood that can reassemble themselves when broken. Have you not seen them before?" She checked over her shoulder to see if they were being followed before rounding a street corner. She caught a glimpse of a few ponies clambering over the wall where they'd been.

"No, I have not." Tyrone had a very stern tone of voice. "You seem pretty blasé about it, though."

Again Jenny glanced over her shoulder. "Believe me; I've seen some crazy stuff in my time. The worst are the web comics."

Artemis could hear the hue and cry behind her and guessed that the bulk of the pursuing mob was after her. She didn't really care, to be honest. Sure, it was a little annoying that Jenny and Amita couldn't pick up more of the slack, but she was just more capable of getting things done when the faecal matter hit the fan. "Faecal" is a word which here means "poo-poo".

Kneeling behind a massive tree that had halfway grown into a couple of clothing outlets, Artemis pulled out and loaded one of her special arrows. It was these unique arrows she had used to liberate Athens from the Albanian mafia. She affixed a small explosive device to the head of the arrow that would trigger upon a heavy impact. She pulled back on the drawstring and leaned out into the open where she could aim. She stopped herself from firing.

The crowd of white ponies was accompanied by several of the strippers under Emily's employ. Artemis gritted her teeth, leaning behind the tree again for a second. Then she re-aimed her bow at the throng. These people had made their bed. Now they had to sleep in it. They may not have yet implicated themselves in the ponies' attempts at genocide, but Artemis decided they weren't that different from the criminals she'd had to maim and kill in the past. She launched her arrow. One pony dodged it in the nick of time, but then the missile exploded, blasting a large group of ponies and people every which way, tearing some of them apart from the force.

The face of Amita's burqa clung to her mouth when she inhaled and rippled when she exhaled. She could not cast off the dreaded sensation that she was not alone, which is a crucial factor when trying not to be followed. Ordinarily one could disguise themselves as a shopkeeper, newspaper reader, or ornery dental hygienist to escape detection, but Amita had no time to disguise herself, and she was already playing dress-up as it was. It did cross her mind on occasion that the manner of dress her father had instilled upon her did not afford her the largest field of vision, but she had to make do with to what she was accustomed. Running for her life all day in this low outfit may have been a Sisyphean ordeal, but she managed.

As her self-consciousness grew exponentially, Amita slid around the massive trunk of a redwood that had the back end of a car leaning up against it. She had to admit to herself that she was not used to such missions. Her father rarely afforded her such freedom, and truthfully she lacked the same extensive training the proper Golden Path army had. Her burqa was not so thick that she could not hear the footsteps somewhere behind her, however. What she didn't hear until too late was the snapping of sharp jaws around her ankle. A squeak emanated from her wobbling body as she stumbled to one knee. The fearsome grip just above her foot did not permit her enough movement even to fall down. The sharp pain dug into where she thought her bone might be, and she had to take a second glance to confirm that blood was soaking through her high sock. She said a few choice words in Arabic that did not quite add up to an obscenity, but were fairly inferential of one.

The footsteps drew closer, and when the pursuer spoke, Amita recognized the voice of Chianti. "Show yourself! When I find you, I'm gonna rip that blanket off and stuff you into a strapless thigh-high latex evening gown!"

Amita wondered by her language whether there was really only one person chasing after her. She would have to pick her own words more carefully. "It is you who should hide, for I will find you wherever you are. I will not be a slave like you in a society where men are regarded as superior to women."

As predicted, Chianti stopped to scoff. "Excuse me?" Her voice was reaching that horrendous dog-whistle pitch. "I am empowered. Men are subservient dogs before my raw sexuality. You're the one who can't even show her face and had to get married off when she was twelve."

Amita had heard it all before from ignorant foreigners who did not know better than her. "You should not align yourselves with the Equestrians. I fight for a better future of equality. Perhaps one where women are even superior to men, to balance out a long history of social injustice."

Chianti had reached the tree with the car. Though unarmed, she was confident in her ability to sneak up on a woman with a lethal weapon. She did not expect that Amita was hoping to lure her in close, like a spider to its web. Amita, however, was stunned by the ever-tightening clench of those wolfish jaws around her ankle. She looked downwards to see the head of a Timberwolf had sprouted from the base of the tree and was gnawing at her ankle. The pain grew to be too much for her. She emitted a shrill whimper and collapsed halfway again, releasing her gun from one hand. She stopped herself from reaching for those splintery fangs. Realizing that Chianti should be around the corner by now, she looked up to hear a choked, gurgling noise from close by. Mustering the willpower, Amita pivoted on her one trapped heel and pointed her gun out at the empty air. She saw Chianti stuck to the tree by her back, a goggle-eyed look on her face. Blood was gushing down her shoulders and chest from the scissor-like wooden mouth that jutted out from the tree around her neck, gouging her throat. Another Timberwolf had grown out from the tree and was presently killing the woman.

Amita's heart pounded as if an alarm clock of the still present danger she faced. She rammed the butt of her gun down at her ensnared ankle and splintered the beast that held her. She rammed again, cracking the wood with tremendous effort, but it was effort enough to free her. She dashed away from the tree a few good yards, and did not even stop when she heard Emily's voice shouting behind her. Emily huffed and puffed to catch up. "Chianti! Merlot! Wait up! I got you a gun! Where did you go? Chianti? Chianti! What happened to you?" Hysterical screams over her prized breeder rang out through the chaotic streets.

Emerging from the tree where Amita had been stopped moments ago was an entire Timberwolf, pushing forth into freedom as though being birthed from the redwood. Its lower jaw was absent until the shards of wood at its front paws scrambled back into place, forming its insidious lower fangs and chin. Seeing that Emily was closer prey, it instead rounded on her. Distraught over Chianti currently pinned dead to the tree by a gruesome, lupine face, Emily still had not caught her breath. She huffed and puffed as she spotted the vicious, unearthly beast before her. "Oh, muerta."

She hobbled as fast as she could in the opposite direction and fought to open the door of the tilted car. She knew she could not outrun the predator, but she could not even so much as seal herself away, either. She wailed in dismay, and then screamed bloody murder as the foul creature was upon her, severing chunks of her flesh away with its deadly teeth. Because it truly had no stomach to speak of, being more like a wooden skeleton of a wolf, parts of Emily's body flung to the ground beneath the Timberwolf in a bloodied heap of mangled meat and shreds of clothing.

Tyrone was close on Jenny's heels when they were blindsided by Merlot popping out from a narrow alleyway. Jenny almost skidded onto her posterior. "Whoa! How did you get ahead of us?" Though she recognized the question as ridiculous, it still shot out of her mouth. She noticed Merlot was clutching her stiletto heels in her hands. She lashed one out at Jenny's face. Jenny hopped back and raised her gun at the same time, feeling the wind from Merlot's missed attack cross her eye. Merlot swept her other stiletto heel across and jammed it partway into Jenny's temple. Jenny let out a shriek as she fell sideways. Merlot next rounded on Tyrone, a pouty glare on her face.

"Damn, bitch, you're crazy!" It was sort of an astute observation on Tyrone's part. "What the hell are you getting out of all this?"

"You don't get it, you dog." Merlot stepped over Jenny's prone form. "Emily treats us like the royalty we are. She keeps us in fancy chocolate and overpriced shoes. We celebrities are like real-life demigods."

Having confirmed his obscene hypothesis, Tyrone kept backing away, hunched over with his arms out, though wanting to keep her at a much further distance. He tried looking from side to side for anything that might aid him, but all he saw was an abandoned specialty breads bakery and his own silk boxers. It was fortunate, then, that Jenny should hop back to her feet and clock Merlot upside the back of her head with her assault rifle. Merlot went down like a sack of potatoes.

Jenny had a trail of blood trickling down the right side of her face. "Dang, that stung! I have half a mind to call you a very filthy name," she said, addressing her unconscious assailant. With a nod, she beckoned Tyrone to follow once more.

Artemis was falling behind. Though she was a crack shot with her weapon of choice, as anachronistic as it might be, patience was still required in nocking each arrow and sizing up the perfect shot. To her, this wasn't just about picking off ponies as fast as possible. It was about picking off the most tactical target to cause the most damage. Since her explosive arrow, the enemy had wised up and de-grouped. She had not noticed any more humans following her, and she knew not where they had gone. For all she could guess, they had been utterly demotivated and scurried on back to the safety of their ranch compound.

Overestimating the pace of her comrades and shirking the octane of the chase, Artemis found herself a discrete vantage point atop an abandoned RV trailer where she lay in wait for her enemy to come. An RV is sort of a combination between a truck and an unliveably tiny house, once often seen sold by shysters to gullible nuclear families heading on vacation. The word "vacation" here means "escape from the drudgery of work that impairs the human condition." She saw one pony; a pegasus that had tied her wings shut and adorned her forehead with a false horn to appear like her mistress, scuttling along the sidewalk, eyes wide to keep a forward lookout. Artemis pulled her drawstring taut. This wasn't their leader. She looked towards the right, behind a dumpster filled with used Botox paraphernalia, and saw another pony, an earth pony variety with another false horn, keeping a steady watch on its comrades and gesturing to one far back to take a keen look into the shops as he or she passed.

This one would receive her arrow. With a whoosh and a thock, Artemis had struck so fast from her stealthy position that the arrow almost appeared to sprout out from the front of the Equestrian's skull like an overzealous flower. Though the nearby ponies heard this noise, it took them a moment to realize what had happened. By then, Artemis had slid her body down from the roof of the RV and fled the scene, knowing her hasty footfalls would betray her position.

Now she was reaching the denser part of this forested city, where buildings had been virtually obliterated by the frenzied and unnatural growth of Mother Nature. Artemis reflected on what had been said earlier during her first dangerous trek through these woods; that it should have taken ages for these redwood trees to grow, but here they were. More Equestrian engineering, perhaps? They were a seedy, crafty lot, capable of many bizarre abominations against the natural order. Here, the only decent cover she could find was these huge trees. Artemis stared up at one in particular and shook her head at the impossibility of climbing up into the branches to hide. Hiding. It sounded like the coward's way, but it wasn't. Not when she could fight from hiding. Then it was tactics.

The urge to do harm was more antagonizing to Artemis than the duty to run. She thrust her back up against a trunk and pulled another arrow from her quiver. She wanted that pony to come. She wondered which organ she should pierce this time. There was a groaning, cracking sound, and several symmetrical branches, sharpened to deadly points, curled out from the tree and seized her torso, hoisting her feet off the ground. A disgusting odour poured into her face, like rotting cabbage or a deep mud hole. A growl rumbled like thunder just above her head, and when she looked up she saw the underside of the jaws of a Timberwolf's head. Another set of branches grew forth around her neck and chin, forming the beast's lower jaw, and Artemis's vision was then framed from the inside of the monster's maw.

Her first inclination was to take the arrow she had drawn and impale it through the creature's eye socket. There was a wail of pain, but it was soon followed by her own; the ribcage that ensnared her tightened, the pointed ends trying to jab into her through her body armour. Even without stabbing her, their grip was immense, putting incredible pressure on her own ribcage.

Elsewhere, Jenny offered her hand to Tyrone to navigate over some steep terrain of the roots between a pair of redwoods. "Alright, I think we're home free from here. Hopefully we'll meet up with Artemis and Amita soon."

A butch voice called out for help somewhere nearby, and though the emotion behind it was not what Jenny was used to, the voice was familiar. "Artemis?" She took a sharp turn and headed off in that direction, and Tyrone followed a few steps behind after a heavy huff of breath. Fallen branches cracked noisily beneath Jenny's boots. Those same branches rose up around Tyrone's legs, catching him in place.

"Help!" Tyrone called out. Now there were two voices begging Jenny's assistance. She faltered for a moment, but ultimately decided to rescue Tyrone first. Artemis was a marine-trained soldier, and would be prepared for these unfortunate circumstances. She didn't know Tyrone was also a soldier, but she knew he was nearly stark naked and of vital importance to her superior officers.

She found Tyrone lying on his back, caught up to his waist in a strange collection of gnarled wood, as though a small tree had sprouted from his middle. The shape whirled about in repose, bending its body to deliver a ferocious snarl straight at her. Jenny scrambled to aim her assault rifle and fired one blunt shot through the Timberwolf's forehead. The bullet shot right through its entire head, and she could see where the bullet collided with the dirt ground behind it.

The Timberwolf was unfazed. It kept on growling, its wooden lips creaking as they bared back to reveal giant, thorny fangs.

Amita also heard the cries for aid, and she was first to reach Artemis's side. After taking a moment of awe to examine the living trap during which Artemis yelled at her, Amita smashed the butt of her gun against the Timberwolf's upper head. The monster

responded by tightening its branches even harder around its captive. Artemis couldn't even scream out, but the look on her face was enough to convey the twisted anguish she was in. A foreleg grew out from the tree next, swiping at Amita's gun and seizing it with that very same strength, tugging it from her grasp.

Hoping to bring more anguish, Rarity appeared on the scene, flanked by a pair of her lookalikes. "Egad! Is that a Timberwolf? Ghastly creature. Pity I won't be the one to kill your ugly friend. Speaking of which, is that why you wear that unfashionable sheet?"

Amita looked to be in dire straits. She was outnumbered, her ally was pinned to a tree, and her rifle had been snatched from her. Still, she exuded the courage to stand her ground, burying her arms under her burqa. "I wear this 'sheet' to express myself." She fired a concealed pistol from beneath her wardrobe and struck the pony to Rarity's left, catching him in the throat. He fell to the ground where he convulsed in excruciating pain, but it would be nothing compared to the Unishot the other mare held suctioned to her hoof with a stirrup trigger.

The second lackey pony fired, but missed when Amita sidestepped behind Artemis's tree. "You simpering fool!" Rarity cried. "Go up there and kill it the old-fashioned way."

The subservient took a big dump of fear for which she was again chastised. With this motivation, the mare mustered her courage like a hot dog and sauntered warily towards Amita. She gnashed her teeth at the human, making "waka waka waka" sounds with every step. Amita wasted no time in pulling the trigger again. Nothing happened, save for a disheartening click. Somehow, she had neglected to load a clip, but a bullet had been left in the chamber.

The pony recognized this noise and grew delighted at the taste of human fear. It hardened her lady boner. Her face contorted into a wicked and vile grin with each hoofstep she took towards Amita. Amita kept her arms buried under her burqa as she backed away, as though any sudden movement would provoke this evil predator. When she gripped the haft of her machete, the pony pounced. Despite the equine's small frame, it bore a terrible weight upon her and socked her to the dirt ground and twisted roots.

Rarity held her right front hoof to the left side of her snout and laughed an evil laugh. "Oh ho ho ho ho! Now you will die! And you will be dead! Because she will kill you to death! Then I shall be one step closer to finding the Klopman's diamond!"

A savage growl thundered from her left. In an instant, the front half of a Timberwolf, dragging the upturned form of Tyrone behind it, lunged. Its brutal thorns of teeth severed Rarity's face and tore it clean away. In its place was left the bloodied visage of veins and meat and two gaping white eyes in the middle, and the black pit of her toothy mouth screaming in agony. "Ah! My face! My beautiful face! Why couldn't it have been their ugly faces?" This was a bit difficult to decipher due to her recent lack of lips. "Oh what a world!" she said, perhaps quoting something from somewhere.

Jenny was hot on the heels—or rather, the shoulders—of Tyrone. She had put away her rifle for fear of hitting him and instead was brandishing her machete, but still she could not find an opening to attack. So she tried something else. "Tyrone! Reach out to your left and hold on!"

She waited. "What?" shouted Tyrone.

"Just do it!" She whipped the machete through the air, hurling it into a gnarled wooden root just ahead of the rampaging Timberwolf and onto Tyrone's left. He struggled to swing his arms to that side as his body tumbled about. His arm brushed the handle, slid against, and he clasped onto it with both fists. Wedged deep in the solid wood, the blade would not budge, and the Timberwolf yelped as it tumbled over its own front legs.

"Oh god, now what?" Tyrone was in terrible pain. His back was all scraped up to hell. His lower half was choked by an alien wooden growth. He had been tossed and turned, dragged along the dirt this way and that until he was disoriented. Now he was the lynchpin in a mindless tug-of-war between his own tired arms and this manic, diabolical creature. Just when he felt his fingers slipping, he was reminded of Jenny's presence. She came marching in, blasting that wooden hell beast to smithereens with her assault rifle. Once enough of the monster dismantled, Tyrone was able to break free of the remaining shards that encapsulated half of his body. Still shaking, he was helped to his feet by Jenny who retrieved her machete.

"Oh no." Jenny gaped at Amita's unmoving form, lying amidst strewn sticks and twigs.

Tyrone hobbled over, holding his aching arm. "Is she dead? I can't tell."

"Help me!" Artemis was still stuck statue-still to the tree in the Timberwolf's skeletal embrace.

Jenny didn't know what to do at first, so she thwacked one of the ribs with her machete. The Timberwolf screeched out in pain, but still it did not release its captive. Artemis didn't even speak, either, her fear plainly etched into her eyes. Jenny thwacked the

branch again with the machete, then again. The next time she struck, the Timberwolf retreated into the tree in the nick of time and her blade jammed into Artemis's torso. Jenny let out a gasp.

"What did you do?" Artemis asked, her feet back on the ground.

"Sorry." Jenny yanked the blade back out of Artemis's body armour.

Artemis steadied herself against the tree as quick as she could, then pushed away to join the others in leaning over Amita. "Is she dead? I couldn't see what happened."

Before Jenny could take a closer look, Amita sat up. "I am fine. Roughed up, but fine. I stabbed the creature in the skull with my machete. We should hurry before it reforms."

Jenny smiled then looked to Artemis. "She's right. Let's get going." Without further ado, the four of them jogged off through the redwoods.

"Man," said Artemis, "We gotta bring back some flamethrowers to torch this place."

5. Those Who Don't Work

Perspiration refers to the process by which organisms, in our example, people, exude water from tiny openings in their skin called pores, for the purpose of cooling off the body. It is said that dogs pant because they are unable to sweat, and because I am not a veterinarian, I have not verified this with any scientific study. There was not a cloud in the sky that day over the plantation in Florida where the humans toiled away as slaves under the cruel watch of their Equestrian masters, and so there was not a dry body in the marijuana fields. Every back, every knee, every finger was sore with the arduous, hourly work of tending those inhibiting plants, the pungent, sour odour of which began to infect the minds of the workers after several hours hovering around them. Paranoia and pacification colluded in harmony under the baking sun, keeping the enslaved in line.

Not far away, a pair of supervising ponies conversed loudly enough so that their thralls could hear them. The faded lavender unicorn mare had a bouffant hairdo of dark purple with a streak of aquamarine. Her cutey mark consisted of two curved diamond shapes flanked by swirls of what looked like toothpaste. She was the one speaking to a far older green pony with her mane in a white bun underneath a bowl-shaped army helmet. A corncob pipe jutted from her wrinkled lips. "So you see, Granny Smith, by shaving their hair off, these grungy bipeds are treated to a dash of equality. Every single one is as equal as the last. The men, the women, bald as peach fuzz, conforming to their role as slave. That is how you break their will."

Granny Smith scrutinized the labourers who were under the watch of various other ponies. "Eh, that's fine and dandy, Starlight Glimmer, but I still say a good ol' whippin' keeps their rears in gear. That and the propaganda posters. My granddaughter designed some of 'em, y'know." She looked up at the numerous banners that frocked the plantation, depicting images of the Apple family, particularly the late Applejack. "Late" is a word which here means "deceased" rather than "not on time", though I couldn't enlighten you as to why that is. Many of the posters depicted Applejack's fierce grins or watchful glares with quips embroidered on them reading such words of wisdom as "Those who don't work don't eat," or "Shirking work is doubleplusungood." A more succinct entrant featured the image of the similarly deceased Big McIntosh with the word "Work" at the bottom in large Impact font. Another variety featuring Granny Smith read, "If you have time to read this, you should be working."

"I don't know why you have those," Starlight Glimmer said. "Most humans can't even read anymore."

"Picture it," Granny Smith said. "Sweet Apple Acres. Fifty years ago. A beautiful young farm filly for the first time takes over the family orchard by herself, inheriting it from her parents killed in an accident with an industrial-grade pet grooming contraption. She's at a loss of how to care for a thousand and twelve apple trees, not counting harvesting the zap apple jam by her lonesome. It just so happens that that was the year the first Mexicolt immigrant family came to settle in Ponyville, so she set them to work. At first they demand two bits a day, but what can she do? She can't afford it on the dwindling profits of an insurmountable amount of work. So she rolls up the legs on her overalls, and she whips them into shape."

"How so?"

"Didn't you hear me? I just said I whipped them! Usually in the face. Especially the foals. They're too rambunctious."

For all Starlight Glimmer's boasting of the efficacy of demoralization, not every human had yet been assimilated. At that very moment, she and Granny Smith were called indoors by the raving refusal of one human to have his long, shaggy hairdo cut by a barber pony known as Sweeny Shears. The human in question was shaking his head to flail his mop of hair as though he was tumbling down a rocky cliff side. He kept shouting the word "No" over and over in a throat-scratching screech.

Sweeny Shears was at a loss. He tugged down his facial mask which he wore so he didn't accidentally inhale any human hair. "I can't work like this! He won't keep still."

"Give me those!" Starlight Glimmer snatched the scissors from Sweeny Shears's hooves. In one swift thrust she buried the snipper blades between the man's sternum and trachea. She wiggled it hard from side to side until they became stuck.

"No!" cried Sweeny Shears. "You're going to dull the blades!"

Starlight Glimmer licked the blood off the scissors once she wrenched them free. "Mm, tastes like copper."

Granny Smith said, "You know, we lose more slaves that way."

"And we'd run out if we still gelded them," Starlight reminded her.

While this sort of thing went on, the humans motivated themselves in their own way, singing lost ballads of obscured significance from the depths of the bygone era. The elderly, the women, even the children joined in their ironic lament, their chorus one of shared misery. Even those who did not know the words or the language attempted to join in, but there was one man whose heart remained too heavy to sing even out of sadness. Gazing into the sun for a moment to blot out the haunting memories that returned every now and again to taunt him was Nicholas Bronson.

THOSE WHO DON'T WORK

Tian had had a sandy vagina ever since Amita had been sent off on a mission, which was about an hour ago. "Sandy vagina" is a phrase which here means someone is experiencing constant irritation in a rather sensitive place, and if you put those two things together, it can naturally impede someone's otherwise sunny disposition. Tian Zhao was not known for his sunny disposition. As the head of the Golden Path, like the leader of any organization, his main duty was to tell other people what to do. This left him with nothing to do himself and a lot of free time while cooped up on the Red October.

His curiosity, coupled with his penchant for chewing out subordinates, led him to follow Neelix who was carrying a large metal tray with a metal domed lid through the bleak halls of the vessel. He did this in one of the elecarts, hunching low behind the wheel while his steady glare peered over the hood. The vehicle hummed quietly as it kept to a slow pace to avoid overrunning Neelix's walk. They passed by Panjit Gavaskar who asked Neelix, "Hey, whatcha got there?"

Neelix giggled. "It's a fricasseed mating pair of giant newts! But if you're hungry, in the canteen I'm rustling up some braised boa over minced baby leek."

"Those sound endangered," Panjit said. Neelix said nothing. He just smiled and carried on. If he heard Tian hot on his heels, fists clutching the steering mechanism until they were pale, he made no indication that he was aware.

Only when the pair had reached the brig did Tian enforce his presence, very nearly startling the hot tray out of Neelix's hands when he exited the elecart and approached. "Why are you bringing food to the brig if there are no longer any prisoners on the manifest?" Tian wanted to know.

"Oh! Boh! Doh! Well, a good question, and one I was wondering myself, too!" He stammered and tried to excuse himself, but Tian was having nothing to do with it.

Tian held out his hand. "Give me the keys, cook!"

Like a puss, Neelix handed the key to the maximum security cell right over. "Oh-oh! Better take my Flintstones chewable cyanide!" He cowered stupidly as he watched Tian shove his way inside. He expected a yelp or a shout, but nothing came, so he scurried off to go tattle.

What Tian saw etched itself into his mind and welled up like a silent, burning rage. This was, of course, the cell containing Tree Barker, the captive earth pony. He had been moping, half in slumber, on his plain Formica bench. Now he raised his head, half agog at the sight of the unfamiliar and angry man in a turban standing over him.

"You filthy Equestrian infidel." Tian clenched his fists, and then he unclenched them so he could clench them again. "You pony devils should all be boiled in molten cola then emasculated. Or maybe emasculated then boiled in molten cola. In the old days, I would have your beheading filmed for the general public."

"What are you doing, dude? Back away, man!" Tree tried to laugh off the impending assault, scrambling to a sitting position. There was nowhere to run. There was nothing to defend himself with. In a moment, Tian was upon him with his bare hands, hitting him, choking him, punching him, and throttling him. His rage was such that his mind could not put purpose to his desire to do the pony harm. The butt of his fists rained down against Tree's skull. Both hands seized the equine's neck, shaking him with fury, trying to shove and batter him against the wall.

The commotion raised by Neelix's hue and cry interrupted Dirk Smidgeon beginning another meeting with the conjoined Human Resistance forces. Dirk had been stalling by flirting with the Queen in their usual lovey-dovey manner. "Why was the soldier pinned down? Because he was under a tack!"

By the time Joseph Matskevich and Ajay Ghale arrived at the maximum security brig, Tree was bruised and disoriented. Even without being shaken by Tian, his head was lolling around his shoulders in a drowsy fashion. "Tian, stop!" Joseph's shout caused Tian to turn his head, but ultimately he ignored Joseph and backhanded Tree across the face.

Joseph and Ajay ran to subdue the Golden Path leader, each taking an arm and yanking him back. Tian seethed at Ajay. "You dare defy your commanding officer?"

"Trust me, I understand the desire to knock around a pony 'til he's senseless, but there's a perfectly rational explanation which Joseph here will be happy to give you."

"Gee, thanks."

Tian put up little fight in allowing himself to be pulled into the nearest cell and sat down on a bed. His smug face leered at Tree until their eye contact was broken as if to say, "I only stopped because they stopped me. I could've done a whole lot worse unchecked." Even forced to take a seat as Joseph and Ajay stood over him, he scowled at them like a balding principal scolding two students for collaborating on a derogatory comic regarding an obese classmate. "If it were a Korean prisoner, that I could forgive! They're merely puppets of the Equestrian Reich."

"Sir." Joseph began by trying to ladle in as much subordination as he could. "That pony happens to be a defector. The first and only defector from the Equestrian army. His information was crucial in stopping the sea ponies, and he is the only one willing to divulge any intel on Equestria."

Tian nearly spat. "When he handed over such information, you should have killed him."

"He hasn't given us the information yet," said Joseph. "He knows how to keep himself valuable."

"He is probably lying. You should kill him anyway. We've never needed pony prisoners in this war."

"We've locked him up in max sec. He's not doing any harm in there. If I can't trust you to keep silent about his presence, then I'm going to have to terminate the alliance between the Belarusian Resistance and the Golden Path right here, right now." Joseph was stone-faced. He wanted to wrangle his hat then but didn't.

"Whoa, man, that is a bit harsh, no?" Ajay asked.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, allowing each other the time to seethe within their own minds. Joseph allowed them only a brief respite before breaking the silence. "We have to discuss plans to defeat the untold millions of ponies that are out there. We can worry about the one in here when the time is prudent."

While everyone still expected trouble, Tian surprised them by standing up and straightening out his three-piece suit. "We will brief those plans. Come." He acted as though he was the one with the mission statement instead of Joseph.

Things had not completely settled down by the time they reached the briefing room, though they did feel less tense than before. Joseph kept an eye on Tian as he addressed the remainder of Burke Squad which had been dubbed Tango Squad for their next mission. "It's imperative I elaborate on the mission ahead for Tango Squad," Joseph said, getting a tad annoyed with the way he was talking these days.

"Once Jimmy Walsh returns and refuels, he'll escort Tango to Pepsicola, Florida. From there, they will make their way into Tampon, Florida, where an infamous pony plantation has enslaved countless members of the human race. Your mission, Tango Squad, is to infiltrate that plantation and liberate the humans there. And above all, kill the ponies.

"Now, I know this sounds like a lot, but I want you to try and make contact with any rebel factions that may exist in the Florida area. It won't be easy, and I won't lie; this mission will require patience and finesse. It may require espionage and going under deep cover. The lucky winners of this mission are Hurk Armstrong and Sabal Kareem."

Sabal Kareem was a forty year-old member of the Golden Path, though he hardly looked his age. He didn't really stand out from the other soldiers, though he did dare to ask, "Sir, just the two of us for a mission that sounds so dangerous?"

Joseph canted his head to one side, understanding Sabal's point. "Actually, I'd like the two of you to pick out a third member at your discretion."

"That won't be necessary." Tian straightened his back, though kept his arms crossed. "I shall go with them. As a true communist, the leader should be an equal to his soldiers, even to the point of joining them in battle."

Joseph stared hard at Tian with his best poker face, trying to size the man up. He couldn't see through what he felt must have been ulterior motives. Something didn't sit quite right. "Very well. Tian Zhao, you'll lead this mission. Hurk, as an American, I trust you'll provide intel of the region."

Sabal spoke up again. "Actually, sir, I was American-born as well. It's just that I only identify as Indian because when I became of age as a teenager, I emancipated myself from my well-meaning but ignorant foster parents to immigrate to India to follow the Buddhist way of life, as a proper communist." His eyes shifted sideways toward his leader, Tian.

Joseph acknowledged this with a nod. "Well, gents. Pack up your weapons and ACUs. You leave in just over an hour. Hopefully Alpha Squad will meet up with you in case anything goes awry."

Back at the ranch, or rather the plantation, the ponies were miffed, a word which here means "displeased". This was naturally bad news for the human slaves. They were lined up, keeping their heads low, as the leaders in charge paced back and forth in front of them. Starlight Glimmer was doling out the lecture as an impatient Granny Smith watched on. "We are deeply disappointed in you all, as any parent would be ashamed of her child. You all really ought to know better than to lie. You may be too dumb to realize this, but omission is a form of a lie. And now here you are, committing time theft as we have to berate you." She pointed a hoof at a poster of a smiling Applejack wearing bedroom eyes that read, "Time theft is a mortal sin." Starlight nodded emphatically. "Uh-huh. That's right. We really ought to have the pegasi carry up your children to the clouds to drop them from a great height to make you learn, but let it be said that Equestria is a merciful ruler of Earth."

The issue at hand which sparked this controversy (a word which here means "a pointless argument people profit from perpetuating rather than solving once and for all") was the destruction of many of the plantation's crops. Numerous marijuana plants appeared torn or fractured, even punctured here and there with gaping holes, as though several people had grown irate with their lot in life and taken to sabotaging their own toil with aimless violence.

A big-boned woman in a tattered floral dress and the remains of an Easter bonnet leaned over to her balding, demolished husband who could no longer keep upright for looking as though he was perspiring dirt. "Do stop wheezing, Richard, dear. It's impolite to hear people breathe, and we mustn't look as though we can't afford to pay attention."

Richard could taste blood on his breath. "As you say, Hyacinth."

"I'm going to count to three," warned Starlight Glimmer. "If the guilty party does not confess, they shall have to be punished. You know what the punishment is. One. Two. Five."

"It's 'three'," snapped Granny Smith.

"Three!" Starlight gazed over the crowd. They all kept their heads hung with sulky expressions on their samey faces. None of them spoke. None of them even looked worried; just resigned to their fate. Starlight rolled her eyes and sighed at this inconvenience. "Very *well*, then. Marching formation. You all know where we must go."

Everyone turned and lined up in three rows: Men, women, and children. They commenced their arduous march away from the plantation grounds in the company of the Equestrian guards. Starlight Glimmer led the way, while Granny Smith took up the rear, striking humans in the posterior with her cat o' nine tails. She would flay them right in the buttocks so they could not sit and rest their aching bones at the end of the day.

Starlight Glimmer kept to the side as the lines were formed, approaching two particular ponies who were here to oversee operations: Milano Mash and her son, Button Mash. Button Mash was distracted with playing a handheld Sony Xbox video game while his mother stood beside him, keeping one hoof on his shoulder as though worried he might wander off and get lost. Starlight smiled at them. "You came on a good day," she told them. "We get to show you how we deal with insurrection in Tampon."

"Hm. Seems a waste to keep any of them alive at all. Don't you think, my lovely son?" Milano said.

Button did not look up from his screen. "You what, mate?"

Nick was perhaps most glum out of anyone there. He kicked his feet through the dirt, tugging on his manacles without care of who was behind him. He just wanted this to be over with. He thought so anyway. He wasn't sure why he didn't just confess himself as the saboteur, even though that would have been a lie. He thought about it, but just couldn't come up with an answer that satisfied him. Nothing would ever satisfy him again.

His ruminations were interrupted by a scared voice speaking in French right behind him. A small contingency of prisoners had been convinced by Nick to speak in French so the ponies wouldn't understand them. This man, however, could only speak French, and Nick recognized his voice. The man was one of the "newer" slaves, though they hadn't had any new slaves join in a long, long time. His name was Pierre Docque, and Nick always knew him to be fretful. Sometimes it got them both in trouble, though never anything as severe as the customary punishment the ponies had in store. Nick wished the man would just cave in to the soul-crushing weariness of eternal servitude to cruel and soulless monsters rather than pester him. Right now, Pierre was trying to get his attention, asking who would be next to be punished and so forth. Nick pretended not to hear him over the chorus of "Frere Jacques" being sung by the slaves as they journeyed.

After a few more frantic bouts of stammering, Nick responded. "If you don't shut your trap, it *will* be us getting sacrificed." That stopped Pierre talking, though he continued to whimper a bit like a dog begging for chocolate.

The singing died down when the long march arrived outside their destination. None of the slaves had the heart for even this merriment forced from desperation beneath the dreaded sign that loomed over them all: "Sea Parks".

During the early years of the war, the pegasus Fluttershy aided Applejack in maintaining tyranny over the Americas. Statues of her vicious face still adorned the exterior of the marine biology complex. She had taken what was once a zoo centred on aquatic life and perverted it into a bastion of lethal torture. She was truly the cruellest of the pony generals, as evidenced by the way she would train ordinary wild animals to do her hellish bidding. The slaves were marched past the tanks where Fluttershy would throw them to the sharks for a feeding frenzy. The slaves were marched past the tanks where the dolphins would rape them to death. The slaves were marched past the kennels where Applejack would club seals for Rarity to make coats and mittens from their hide.

They were instead marched into a large open-air arena where a semi-circle of bleachers faced a massive pool. Hyacinth jabbed Richard in his aching spine with her garden gloves. "Move along, Richard, we want to peruse the executive seats for the execution." When all the slaves were seated, Starlight Glimmer played on a harmonica for a few measures until a curled, shiny black fin rose up from the water's surface, and then dived back under. Even the brow-beaten and cynical human slaves shifted and murmured tones of worry at the sight, which had to be summarily quelled by the crack of Granny Smith's whip. Once this teasing display was played out, Starlight again lapsed into pretty much the same speech she gave back at the ranch.

"Humans! You can only be kept safe by our order. Knowing this, knowing how we preserve justice on your behalf, will you still remain silent as to who among you is the saboteur?" She thought she'd keep the speech long and daunting, but by the time she had walked all the way out here, she remembered she'd have to walk all the way back, too, and didn't have the patience to re-tread her threats today. "Very well. It just so happens we know who committed this heinous crime against you all."

"Put your hand up, Richard," Hyacinth was saying. "It would do me a world of tragic prestige to be a war widow." Luckily for Richard, he was far too fatigued to lift so much as a finger.

One of the stallion guards turned to face her and spoke in a commanding monotone. "You. The Bucket woman. Be quiet."

Hyacinth winced under the glaring sun. "It's pronounced 'Bouquet'."

"Shut. Up!"

Starlight raised her right foreleg and swung her hoof in a slow, painstaking arc across her audience. She had no fingers, though, so it was difficult to know at whom she was pointing. She lingered for a moment on Nick, but savoured his sullen appearance too much. If only all humans looked unable to contain their mental anguish as he, she thought. Her hoof continued, passing right over him and Pierre. She almost passed the entire audience when she whipped her arm back the other way and settled on a skeletal woman in a flannel dress. "It was you!"

The malnourished woman shuddered out a dramatic "No!" She was soon seized from either side by two pony guards. They dragged her from her seat and down the steps. When she tried to get her feet on the cement of the aisle to walk by herself, they would shake her body so that she had to be dragged along on her ankles. She was nearly flung at Starlight Glimmer, who interrupted her in the middle of saying, "I didn't—"

"You're lying." Starlight was very glib about this declaration. She didn't even look the woman in the eye. The woman let out a sob not of distress but of frustration, though her emotions were clearly wrapped in both. She was a bold woman to glare at Starlight so viciously, as though she were silently vowing vengeance upon her condemner. Her flannel dress was torn from her, leaving her in

her check blouse and long, plain bloomers. She was then dragged all the way around the pool and up onto the stage opposite the bleachers.

The pair of ponies forced her onto her knees at the very edge of the stage overlooking the water. The woman sobbed and sputtered of course, but nothing could be said to oust her from this predicament. Granny Smith cracked her whip again and demanded that the slaves keep their eyes open to watch the spectacle. Starlight Glimmer waved one foreleg as she sped through some flippant judgment. "For being incapable of blending with unity and equality, you are hereby sentenced to die to death. Toss her in." She then once more took up playing on the harmonica until the massive sea creature's head breached the surface of the water.

It was an orca, more eloquently termed a "killer whale". It was big, shiny, and black and white. Its far, ugly eyes appeared to fixate on the prey set before it, and its jaws stretched as open as they could bear to show off a disgusting pink tongue and many sharp, short curved teeth. The accused struggled and muttered, but no words could form in horror of her own fate. The two ponies heaved her at the sea beast that lurched into place to snap her up heads-first. The slaves gasped at this despicable display of messy eating, and watched as the woman's flailing legs dipped deeper into the creature's mouth once, then twice. The orca then splashed back underwater, and the woman was never seen again.

The ride across Central America and over Florida was both long and tense. Hurk and Sabal took up some backgammon as best as they could for neither of them being familiar with the rules. Tian's antagonistic vibes even reached the perpetual optimist, Jimmy Walsh, who was not as acquainted with the dour man, but after maybe an hour of silence, he stuck in an eight-track tape for some easy-listening polka. When the tape had played twice and Hurk and Sabal tired of their game, they struck up a conversation with Jimmy. Having little to befriend each other with other than talking shop, their discussion of what they'd been doing for their respective armies over the past six years led to more personal discussions of how they'd joined up with the Human Resistance or Golden Path in the first place.

Sabal recapped his immigration into India where he joined the army in the hopes it would be the direct route to establish Buddhist-style communism into his country's government until he'd been absorbed into the Golden Path's collective. Hurk reminisced about his army days in Afghanistan when his government wanted to steal Saudi Arabia's oil, and he surprised the others with his age, since he looked quite young for being thirty. Jimmy even regaled them with how one by one, the members of his close-knit New Mexican community had been killed in the war, leaving him alone to raise his many younger siblings on his family's ranch. He was compelled to protect them, but had been convinced by his community to join the air force to fight the good fight. No matter what personal tragedies the trio shared, Tian refused to join in, sitting in scowling silence and staring at the wall.

Jimmy dropped them off on the barren outskirts of Pepsicola, promising to return with Alpha Squad within as few days as possible. Once he was little more than a speck in the sky, Tian took charge. "Alright, men. I'm taking charge. We'll make contact with the prisoners in Tampon and have them destroy the plantation. It will be so spectacular; Joseph Matskevich will eat that hat of his."

"Sounds like a plan, sir!" Hurk said.

"How will we train the humans to overthrow their pony oppressors?" asked Sabal.

"We won't need to be doing that. They live in such tormenting conditions they will gladly give their lives to explode the plantation."

This statement gave Hurk and Sabal cause to pause, looking at each other. This plan sounded a tad extreme to them, but what could they do? Tian was their leader. Hurk, not being too bright, decided to speak out against his superior. "Sir, won't that be hazardous to the slaves?"

"We are all slaves so long as the ponies exist," Sabal pointed out.

"I fully intend to show the Belarusians that I am far more effective than their child leader. If they only knew the extent of my experience in Afghanistan, they would know better than to mock me and cross me and violate my daughter."

Hurk and Sabal both showed concern on their faces, and Hurk was usually pretty easy-going when it came to working with the Golden Path, despite them being a foreign body made up of communists and Buddhists. "Sir, with all respect, I'm certain that in time they will grow to understand what we have to offer the Human Resistance. Plus I don't believe anyone's violated your daughter."

Tian shot a deadly stare at Hurk. Clearly his fury had been boiling up since that morning. "They should fear me. I have worked with the likes of the Taliban. If it were up to me, we would end this war in a week, if only the insipid resistance were willing to make any sort of sacrifice." He smiled and laughed once, renewing his pride in himself.

Sabal's mouth formed a little open o. "Uh, sir, did you say Taliban?"

"That I did. So you two better look sharp. Those pony infidels won't know what hit them." He turned and started to lead them further into Pepsicola.

Before he got a few steps, he was shot in the back by Hurk and Sabal. Hurk wore a tight frown, but both men shared a look of fear in their eyes. Tian fell forward, dead, like a suitcase of luggage had just tipped over. He had been shot several times over in the spine. Within a few seconds, he let out a raspy death rattle and expired.

Dread at what they'd done began to form into panic. "You killed him," Sabal said, eager to distance himself from the surreal sight.

"The Taliban were responsible for terrible terrorist acts before the event. That's a sacrifice we can't ever make if we want to retain our humanity." Typically staunch, Hurk's voice was shaky. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat. "Why did *you* shoot him?"

"The Taliban were responsible for the destruction of many Buddhist statues, and were enemies of Buddhism in favour of their own totalitarian religious extremism." Sabal managed to look Hurk in the eyes. Both men fidgeted, trying to relax and clasp their guns at the same time. Somehow, after explaining themselves, their eagerness to blame one another dissolved itself into a realization that they were in this crime together. It was a classic example of contempt breeding familiarity.

"I can't believe we just killed our boss," Sabal said as the pair dragged the body quite a ways to a decent-sized ditch. Without ceremony, they tossed Tian's corpse in, then tried to cover him with bushes they dug up and even a few rocks. When Tian could no longer be seen under the suspicious pile, they loitered for but a second before picking up the pace toward Pepsicola.

"What will we tell his daughter, Amita?" Hurk asked.

"Shit, I don't know," Sabal hissed, once again showing animosity for what they'd committed. "We've just killed perhaps one of the worst villains in pre-pony history, yet we can't prove what he said. We'll say he was killed by a pony ambush."

"What if she was working for him?"

"Buddha dammit, I don't know! Buddhamn!"

"I don't think they're liable to buy our story."

"I'd like to see you come up with a more convincing one then! Besides, he deserved it for acting da mickey."

Sabal was about to lapse into another tirade when Hurk shushed him. "Shut up. We're not alone." Both more than a little antsy for good reason, they kept their weapons drawn. They found themselves standing in a deserted intersection within Pepsicola's downtown, absent of human presence aside from themselves, although rife with mismatched packs of wild dogs inspecting every little thing for food.

The place resembled a ghost town. Tumbleweeds of litter blew across the street. The two men swivelled around, turning back to back. "What makes you think we're not alone?" Sabal asked.

Hurk hesitated, unsure of himself. "I saw something move in that window over there." He indicated a three-story building on the corner. The ground floor was a laundromat. They looked, but neither saw anything. Both secretly hoped the place was deserted. Their mission would have no chance of succeeding without help, but given what had transpired only a few minutes to an eternity ago, they wished they could go back to bed and start the day over.

Then a voice rang out through the air from a source unseen. "Speak, friend, and enter Pepsicola!" This was a commanding voice; not demanding, but inviting.

Again Hurk was having a hard time figuring out what the next move to make was. Sabal dared speak up. He wasn't any braver, but he was more on edge about their recent manslaughter. They may have offed someone who confessed to being a terrible and unforgiveable villain, but he just couldn't sit well with the fact that such a man had been masquerading as a leader of their branch of the resistance. "We're Tango Squad from the Golden Path! We fight for the Human Resistance! Show yourselves!"

There was no response, unless one counted a dog or two barking. The canid noise echoed off the buildings. Hurk and Sabal both looked at the suspicious window which soon was lost among so many other windows. They were surprised by the voice behind them.

"Long hath we awaited thine arrival, but nary did we believe the prophecy were true."

Hurk and Sabal turned about and found four people in bizarre modes of dress staring back at them. The likely candidate of the wizened voice was a particularly jarring figure adorned in robes and a long, pointed hat, both in a matching blue with many gold stars and moons. This person had a large, bushy white beard, but there was something unsettling about what little could be seen of the face. Sabal realized this person was not wrinkled and old, and something in his gut suggested that this bearded individual may not even have been a man. He realized this was because her chest stuck out a bit, which the flowing robes draped over rather than concealed. The voice was an obvious impersonation of a stereotypical elderly man.

The other three were just as bizarre if not as stimulating. Beside the wizard, on her left, stood a very tall man wearing a horned helmet and an even larger bushy red beard that did not match his brown hair. He was wearing some kind of armour that meshed hardened leather and metal into straps and studs, and he was carrying a battle-axe of all things. Fur lined the top and bottom edges of his armour, including his boots, but his arms and legs were for the most part bare. On his left was a woman with mauve, sparkly hair and strange prosthetic ridges on her forehead. That was the first thing they noticed about her. The other thing was her false pointed ears. Looking further down still, her attire resembled something off a junkyard Christmas tree. Her armour was made from fish netting and hubcaps with blinking lights powered by some unknown source. On her left was a downright anorexic man with a huge smile on his face and a pair of fake cat ears on his head. On his face he had drawn a pair of false whiskers. His shirt was leopard-print, and his pants were faded denim jeans with stripes drawn on them in permanent marker. He also wore a pair of fingered mittens that resembled paws, a pair of sneakers with fake claws attached to the front, and a collar with a bell adorned his neck.

The wizard introduced them all. "I am Frosbim the Wizard. My colleagues here are Breadbeard the Dwarven barbarian and L'chhp't the half-Klingon, half-Vulcan space rogue."

Hurk and Sabal introduced themselves with much reservation.

"Don't forget me!" the man in the cat ears said. "I'm a beast-man medic with some bardic expertise. I based my name off of my favourite fictional character, Basil Stag Hare, so I'm known as Nigel Rams Buns."

"Beast-men aren't standard races in any DnD edition," Frosbim said. "That character is much too complicated."

Nigel objected. "Not for Fate Core! It places a much greater emphasis on narrative rather than maths. All the television writers used to use a dumbed-down version of it."

"You're missing the point of it all: Basic advanced calculus." Frosbim then turned back to the two Tango Squad members. "But I digress. Join us, Sir Hurk Armstrong and Sabal of the lineage Kareem. I need food badly, and we must vacate these streets. The dogs have the hydrophoby."

Hurk and Sabal scowled at one another, both thinking the same thing but neither having the words to express what those thoughts were. Perhaps a bite to eat would better their antsy mood, and by now the hour was growing late. They followed the quartet into a Chinese buffet that wasn't too far away. In doing so, they noticed that Nigel also wore a synthetic tail attached to one of the belt loops in his pants. A Chinese buffet, as you may well know, is an establishment where you're charged to bring your own food back to your table, and the food isn't Chinese even though it's cooked almost exclusively by Chinese people and China is just a line drawn on a map surrounding people who sell lead products, poisoned dog food, and cheap electronics with spying software hidden in them.[20]

As soon as the six of them were sat down in a moderately crowded establishment, Sabal kept them from fetching their food. "Alright, what the hell is with the getups, and does anybody here have their own damn facial hair?"

"I do." Hurk patted his goatee. "It's not like these people have retail outlets, Kareem. They have to make do with what they've got."

Sabal could relent on that point, but still shook his head. "We need to team up with fighting men. Armed men. We're here to actually combat the ponies."

"We are of course trained in the punitive arts." Frosbim gestured to her companions, though only Breadbeard nodded.

"I'm a medic!" Nigel declared proudly.

"Come, come. You will feel better with some sustenance." Frosbim tried to allay them with a delicate hand gesture.

Hurk and Sabal joined the others in fetching plates of food, like a cross section of hot dog wrapped in sourdough, or shrimps slathered in mayonnaise and labelled "coconut shrimp". The two kept close together to speak in hushed whispers. "Can you believe this?" Sabal asked. "These people have lived on the fringes a little too long. They don't have any real armour or weapons. How in Buddha's name can they help us?"

---

[20] Stupid or unethical, take your pick.

Hurk frowned in thought. "They should know the area. They should at least have the intel to get us to Tampon."

Sabal almost didn't relent again, but part of him didn't want to work as closely with the Floridian rebels as fellow combatants. He imagined if Tian were here, he would whip some conscripts into shape. The only problem is that would have been at the deliberate and senseless cost of human lives, the same tactics that the Iron Wolves Corporation had used in Cuba.

They returned to the table with their mishmash of food and took notice Nigel had nothing in front of him. "Aren't you eating?" Sabal asked, trying to make nice. He kept flip-flopping between whether he wanted an ally right now or not, and if he did, did he really want *these* people to fill that role.

"Oh, nothing for me, thanks." Nigel cheerily patted his vapid stomach. "I have to keep my figure for the gentleman callers. I just hope they arrive before I turn twenty-six and no gay man will ever want to touch me. Until that time, I'll just be having the dust and maybe an aqueous martini. Without the olive, of course."

"Right. So, let's talk operations. What have you done so far about the plantation?" Sabal looked toward Hurk who was stuffing his face like a chipmunk and chewing slowly and noisily. "Chewing" is a word which here means "masticating".

Frosbim swallowed a mouthful of cheese pizza. "We dare not tread near that accursed place. Year after year they would cull our numbers to enslave. Our fighting fit would do battle with their slavers while others hid, but as of late they have been querulously quiet."

Breadbeard let out a belch and continued to gorge on General Cao Cao's chicken. "In the early years of the war, they struck down all our most powerful and longest ranged weapons. Now a minefield separates us both and the only danger comes from the odd, occasional raiding party."

L'chhp't had a very bored expression on her face. "We used to raid them, but that minefield renders our progress impossible. When the military abandoned us, they took off with their remaining munitions and locked their bases up tight."

"That is not to say we haven't formulated plans," Frosbim said, raising a tiny cup of tea. "We have a plan to cross-pollenate their crops with avocado, which is poisonous to the ponies. We even have the avocado."

"Really? I was wondering what you nerds had in mind. I was expecting you to cast the magics to make the ponies fall down." Hurk laughed and snorted. No one else laughed. "I suppose otherwise you would've cast a spell to burn the plantation down."

Frosbim was unamused, but hid any discontent behind her false beard, instead mustering her expert self-control. "That is not how magic works. One does not simply wish conditions into existence."

"Yeah," said L'chhp't. "You wanna burn whole cities from afar; you get a satellite weapon in orbit to shoot a laser."

Frosbim swirled her cup of tea in her hand and gazed into the translucent orange liquid. "Magic takes intense concentration on a target within one's sights. It takes aim and trajectory. You must focus in your mind some indirect method of accomplishing some abstract goal. You're asking nature to bend to your will; begging for some immediate circumstance would be asking too much. You'd have an easier time of killing somebody by pointing a gun at them."

"Okay, well, clearly your plans are bat-shit insane and not grounded in reality," Sabal said, trying to sound helpful. Hurk crammed another whole sugar-coated bun in his mouth. "Early tomorrow morning, we should take a look at that minefield. It's imperative we get across. Do you have anyone who can help us?"

Frosbim gestured to the various other occupants of the restaurant. "All here have suffered great cause to wish justice against our equine oppressors."

Sabal looked around to the various men and women lounging around the restaurant, each one more different than the last. Hurk couldn't help likening them to a ghetto of hobos. Many of them were talking to one another in groups of two to four, or playing cards or board games with one another. Some were solemnly dining on their food as though it was really some fanciful fare, and though not everybody was interacting, it was apparent they were thankful for one another's company. Not a single one did not look brow-beaten and weary from the war, and yet both Hurk and Sabal recognized clear signs that these people were happy to be alive, and that being alive was enough to merit friendship amongst once another. Neither survivor of Tango Squad said anything, eating their tako and unari sushi and sipping their spicy hot and sour soup. The wasabi was especially pungent, making it all the more difficult to avoid tearing up. As the evening turned to night and cast the outside world in a pall of sombre darkness, the Floridian rebels melded into an appropriate chorus of song. The surface of their camaraderie did not befit the lamenting tones of their singing, and neither Hurk nor Sabal was comforted by its sad tune, though it did remind them of the importance of their mission.

There were those only a few dozen miles away who did not sing, but carried an essence of the tune in their forlorn hearts. These were, of course, the slaves of the pony plantation. It could be said that the only reason they were granted beds was because bunk beds saved on space and conditions were cramped as it was. Nick lay on his side on the bunk below Pierre who was saying his prayers in a hushed whisper. He must've dozed off while wishing he'd be quiet, because the next thing he remembered was Pierre's voice calling out to him from the darkness above.

"When do you suppose your Resistance will come to rescue us?" Pierre asked in French.

Nick groaned. "You have asked me that question for the past two-hundred and twenty-eight days since you've arrived here. Delta Squad will get here when they get here. It's not that easy to fight the ponies."

"Mouffette told me the ponies said that the Human Resistance had been defeated, and only slaves like us are left."

Nick was too tired even to roll his eyes. "I told you already. Blatant pony propaganda. The Human Resistance will come for us. Why do I need to tell you these things every night?"

Pierre was silent for a moment. Nick started feeling bad for him until he spoke again. "Tell me about Delta Squad again. Please?"

Nick let out a sigh. He tried to open his eyes, but couldn't. "We have to be up in six hours. Get to sleep."

"Please?"

Nick exhaled again. He knew without looking that other slaves would be listening to him with rapt attention. "We were stationed in Moscow, the heart of the Resistance, and our leader was the very leader of that Resistance. Together we survived disasters, hardship, and countless battles against Equestria's fiercest generals. We were the ones to liberate Berlin. Our squad defeated Twilight Sparkle. We were there in Hainan when the first dragons appeared. We witnessed the destruction of New York with our own eyes."

Nick wished he'd opened his eyes so the horrors of war wouldn't rush through his mind like white-water rapids. They snapped open as though waking from a nightmare when the face of Becky Williams filled his mind's eye. Even looking into the moonlit room around him, he couldn't blink away her image. She was smiling at him. She was smiling even as her face was tainted by mud and opened by the bullet holes that had slain her in Cuba. Nick's voice broke.

"Did I ever tell you about the time we survived a fall out of an airplane?" He struggled through his choking words. "There we were, miles up in the air when the pony nation attacked. Most people were killed or sucked out of the plane, but our squad managed to clamber into this Humvee. We would've been crushed if we hadn't landed in a lake. It's a little hard to believe it to hear myself talk about it, but it's true."

Many slaves fell asleep to Nick's bedtime stories. He thought he was asleep too until a few minutes later, Pierre spoke up again. "How did you end up in Cuba?"

Nick had to think about his answer. "The last mission I was in, Delta Squad was separated. I was sent to Cuba with Becky Williams, sister of the famous Human Resistance leader." Now his voice was barely above a whisper. He rubbed at where he was missing a finger on his injured hand. Swallowing the lump in his throat, he found courage somewhere within himself. "She's still waiting for me out there, somewhere. For all she knows, I could be anywhere in the world, so she's out there, fighting the good fight, until every pony between her and me lies dead." His eyes darted around in the inky blackness. "Now we really gotta get some sleep, okay? Tomorrow's almost here."

The next morning, Hurk found Sabal downing his third mug of coffee. Neither had slept very well at all, and either was surprised to find they had gotten as much sleep as they had. They were alone in the wee hours of the dawn, so Sabal said, "We need to win this. It's the only way. The only way to cover up Tian's…" His eyes watched the exits to the kitchen they were in. He didn't finish what he was going to say.

"I know," Hurk said.

"Well how are we going to do that?"

Hurk shrugged. "Let's do what we can do and work from there."

They met with Frosbim's quartet of rebels in the out of doors beside a hovercraft, which is a strange sort of vehicle that's powered by giant fans. "Are we raring to go?" Breadbeard asked.

Hurk and Sabal only nodded in silence. As the group started to board the hovercraft, Tango Squad was distracted by the voice of a young child behind them. He was a sullen-looking kid, perhaps a teenager, with a messy afro and his jeans almost pulled down to his ankles. "Are you going to check out the pony plantation?" he asked in a decidedly aggressive voice.

"That we are," Hurk said. Sabal gave him a strange look. Hurk apologized. "I guess Frosbim's dialect is catching."

"Can I come with you?" the kid asked.

"What's your name?" Sabal asked.

"Huey Freeman," he said.

Sabal smiled and nodded. "No, kid. No, you can't." He and Hurk turned away to pay attention as L'chhp't explained the mechanics of the hovercraft.

"I am a retired Leftist terrorist. I have the skills you need to get this job done." Huey did not care that he was interrupting someone's conversation. Perhaps he was brought up without parents, like so many war orphans.

"I'll handle this." Hurk turned around with a big grin on his stupid face. "Is that so, kid? That's pretty impressive! Are all your soldiers green and really short with their legs bridged together?"

Huey's scowl still did not change. "Don't patronize me, you honky eighties reject. I have over three-hundred confirmed kills. I can kill you in over seven hundred ways, and that's just with my bare hands."

Hurk's smile fell, but that was not fear in his eyes. It was annoyance. He asked a question that, although it is oftentimes the very right question, it so seldom receives an answer. "What in the hell is the problem with you?"

Sabal, pissed off, interjected. "Am-scray, punk. We have grown-up stuff to do, and you're not invited. How old are you anyway, ten?"

"Fine, be like that," said Huey. "Take me so I can become a slave of the ponies, like you want me to be."

Sabal shook his head and rolled his eyes, but Hurk wasn't quite finished yet. "Now you listen to me, you little tiny-faced shit. Go run along home to whatever roach-ridden stink-hole you call a bedroom. I didn't join the Golden Path to be threatened by some redneck, anachronistic emo kid who ought to be keeping his edge lord scribbles of crappy attempts at Japanimation to himself. Capisce?"

Huey's face did not change, but that did shut him up, and he wandered off in some direction to leave the rebels in peace. The Floridians had no explanation for Tango Squad, but they had finished packing and in a few minutes were off. The ride was long and harrowing, and soon they forgot the awkward tension of their departure as Hurk cracked stupid jokes about the crocodiles they saw littering the swampy landscape. Tango Squad noticed from the squalor and desolation the damage the Equestrian invasion had caused to this region of the Earth, and they hoped for the future when, united under the banner of the Golden Path's ideals, they could reconstruct and repopulate. Hurk and Sabal exchanged knowing glances with one another, understanding that despite the tragedy that had occurred with Tian, they still wanted what was best for the survival of the human race. Part of them was glad to leave that corpse far behind them, but at the same time they were nervous that their shame might be discovered in their absence, the way one graduates from a public high school. With these worries in tow, they still somehow managed to catch up on some sleep in the hours they took traveling to Tampon.

They felt moderately rested by the time they were crouched in some drylands, overlooking the supposed minefield surrounding the plantation at a vast distance. This was a small blessing as the mines were camouflaged through and through. Frosbim, in so many words and more, explained that the rebels had built a knee-high fence to indicate where the minefield was believed to begin. The barking of wild dogs interrupted much of their dialogue, but nobody felt like speaking for a while, as though the mines were sound-sensitive in addition to pressure-sensitive.

Breadbeard broke the silence. "By the seven silver rings of Magipax!" he said, using a word which here means nothing at all, not to mention anywhere else. "I vow that we shall cross this infernal field of explodatory death!"

"I wish we'd brought a metal detector," Sabal said, lamenting this lack of foresight.

"That's what I said," said L'chhp't.

"This future device of which thou speaks would indeed be desired, but we have not so much as been able to improvise such a device," Frosbim said.

"You must have them for sale in these parts, yes? You have so much coastline, and that means beaches," said Sabal.

"The military confiscated most of what the ponies did not destroy, and after all that, the looters believed the plantation to be a lost cause." Breadbeard turned his head over his shoulder to yell at a small pack of baying dachshunds. "Will you shut up?"

When the uncomfortable air had cleared in the wake of the shouting, Frosbim continued. "The mines seem to be so finely tuned that even chucking rocks on top of them doesn't set them off."

"Oh! Oh, oh, oh oh oh! Can't you just, like, tunnel underneath them?" Hurk asked.

L`chhp't clicked her tongue and shook her head. "You can't tunnel under mines. One little shift of dirt will set them off."

The word mine has at least three meanings. The first meaning is a vast network of tunnels used for digging precious minerals from the depths of the earth. This is not what Tango Squad was discussing with the Floridian rebels. The second meaning of the word mine refers to an explosive device buried underground which explodes when trodden on. They are typically planted in an otherwise unsuspicious field to trap intruders, and make a keen tactic for keeping solicitors at bay. The group gathered outside the minefield were recapping this information to themselves as they desperately thought of a way past this puzzle.

As they hashed out possible solutions, wracking their brains out of desperation, Nigel changed the tack of the conversation. "Excuse me." He pointed one finger up and donned an apologetic smile. "But why couldn't the Human Resistance spare some more aerial vehicles to drop in on the plantation in force?"

Hurk and Sabal looked at one another. True, they could not attest to the exact reasoning behind Joseph's mission, but they had heard the gossip in the canteen. "We don't exactly have those resources to spare," Sabal said. "Our air force has never been able to recover from the pegasi's culling. They were always able to skirt basic radar and relied on kamikaze tactics to bring down planes in mid-flight."

"Plus I guess they wanted better intel. You Americans haven't exactly been making hourly reports to the eastern hemisphere," Hurk added.

"Okay, fair enough." Nigel shrugged.

For the most part, Hurk had been silent as the others continued plotting how to penetrate the plantation. He opened up a bag of ration jerky and was tearing it into little pieces. Sabal noticed this after a while. "What are you doing? Don't you know how fucking overpriced that stuff is?"

Hurk just kept picking away.

"Hey, I've an idea. Why don't we try to contact the prisoners by doing bird calls?" asked Nigel.

"Hey, you know what's more exciting than birdcalls?" L'chhp't asked.

"What?"

"Anything! Except golf."

Hurk grabbed a fistful of shredded jerky and hurled it back from whence they came. The variegated scraps fell in a long, straight line leading to a pack of unkempt dogs. Now, I should warn you that if you happen to be a human being, you should promptly put down this leather-bound tome immediately and hide it back among the bookshelf in your living room, burlesque house, or library of congress immediately and back away without drawing too much attention. The next sequence should shock or offend you have you any ounce of self-respect. The commissioner of this project was adamant about specifying its inclusion, and it is under protest that it is outlined here for the purpose of historical accuracy.

The mismatched collective of woof-woofs and bow-wows devoured their slovenly way towards where the humans were reclining. They were only slightly less uncouth than the average Wal-Mart shopper (or employee), snapping and snarling at one another as they vacuumed up every little scrap through their crooked snouts. "Alright, out of the way," advised Breadbeard, not that any present needed it. Frosbim muttered something about "the hydrophoby" as the group watched the dogs. Nigel beamed at them happily, and they all watched as Hurk jammed more shredded bits of jerky into his greasy fist.

The dogs yapped aggressively, wagging their tails. Hurk tossed another fistful of jerky, but this time in a line leading into the minefield. Nigel's jaw dropped. "Wha—you can't do that! They'll be killed! That's inhumane!" His whole body shook with horror. The dogs had already bounded over the knee-high fence.

"All wild dogs got rabies," Hurk said.

The pooches snuffled along the dirt ground in search of meat. The first explosion rang out. Amidst the din, there was a sound something like a yipe. A Pitbull tore clean into bits, not unlike the jerky. The explosion rent its body in two directions; a sizeable portion rocketed upwards and slightly to the right, along with the spinning, emptying contents of its skull. The rest of it skidded along the ground to the other side, its legs whirling through the air away from one another. The tail plopped to the ground a little ways in front of the humans.

The other three dogs yelped in fright and dashed off in various directions, but there would be no escaping the ringing in their ears, nor the ordure of their companion that showered down on them from above. A moment later, a Dalmatian found another mine and exploded head over heels forward, its guts blown open and its spine severed so its body was broken in twain. This sent a nearby basset hound rolling sideways. It hurried to its feet and galloped not even a full yard before it, too, trod on a mine and its entire back half was torn asunder in the ensuing blast. A dachshund had made it quite far out into the minefield until it also went kablooey, and was utterly lost when the smoke had cleared.

The grisly scene was like something from one of your Japanese animes. Hurk was stoic, though most of the others winced as the projectile entrails threatened to hit them. Nigel's face was beyond aghast. His was a portrait of pure, unbridled terror, and his eyes were wet with tears as he was on the verge of crying like a little baby. "I can't believe you just did that!" He somehow managed to get the words out amidst his breaking voice and choked sobs. Soon his words broke down altogether into an anguished howl. "I've never—oh my god!" He retched several times over, threatening to vomit up his breakfast.

Everyone but Hurk turned to gawk at Nigel's soul-rending distress. Hurk started feeling in his pocket for more jerky. "That's war, kid. You gotta make sacrifices. I think we'll need at least four more packs of dogs, provided they can follow this same headway."

Nigel's eyes darted back and forth, not only trying to avoid looking at the abominable scene laid out before him, but also losing all sense of where he was. The reality of the situation had not quite reached him yet. He stammered. "I need to go. I can't be a part of this anymore, you guys."

No one objected to his departure as he began the long, long hike presumably back toward Pepsicola. Even the three remaining Floridian rebels turned away and observed the progress in front of them. "Four more packs, you say?" Frosbim stroked her beard. "Do we still have that instrument of canine affinity?"

"We left it with Nigel because we couldn't find a use for it," L'chhp't said.

"Oh, bother."

"That doesn't matter," Hurk said. "We can still lure them all in with enough bait. Hot dog, hot diggety dog!"

Things were momentarily more peaceful at the plantation. "Button Mash, darling, wake up. I made you your favourite." Milano pressed a kiss on her son's temple, stirring him out of bed. Then she kissed the corner of his lips.

Button Mash groaned, holding a foreleg over his eyes and tugging the sheets up over his head with the other. "Five more minutes, Mom."

"Of course, dear heart." Milano smiled and stood there, breathing into her son's ear.

He opened his eyes after a moment, perturbed to find her standing there over him. "Alright, alright, I'm up, I'm up." He dragged himself out of bed, and his mother graciously served him a heaping pile of Doritos pancakes with Mountain Dew syrup. He scarfed them down so quickly he ruined his appetite of the traditional Equestrian entree of a roast human child which Milano was plucking at with a knife and fork. They were in the midst of dining when they heard a cacophony of sorts they couldn't quite identify. Button hazarded a guess anyway. "Was that a fibronite Dakota-class subterranean explosive device?" he asked, remembering one of his countless precious video games where the camera was situated behind a hoof holding a gun. They both hurried outside, leaving the table as it was.

Once again the slaves of the Tampon plantation were lined up in many great rows, their heads bowed in remorseful attention, because once again the crops had been found that morning with newly chewed holes, and once again the humans knew of no explanation. "Since this is the second time this has happened," Granny Smith was saying, "I shall have to beat two of your two-year-olds with the cat-o-nine-tails nine times."

"I warned you not to let it come to this," Starlight Glimmer said to the humans.

"Oh, sure, make me out to be the villain," Granny Smith muttered to her.

"What is all that racket?" Milano Mash asked.

"No racket; I was just going to use this whip." Granny Smith had misunderstood.

"No, I mean I heard some kind of loud noise," Milano said. Somehow, none of the other ponies had been paying attention to the far-off explosion. They didn't even bother to poll the slaves, the few who did hear it having put it right out of their minds. They no longer recognized hope when it made its presence known.

Granny Smith and Starlight Glimmer listened, but they did not hear the distant thundering Milano and Button had. They heard another noise something akin to a hum, like a very soft, low-pitched ringing in the ears. The four equines exchanged quizzical looks with one another, trying to figure out what it could be. "Is one of them singing?" Starlight asked.

"Naw, I think one of them's crying!" said Granny Smith. "I'll give you somethin' to cry about!" She selected one of the humans at random.

Nick felt his insides turn icy cold all the way down to his bladder as she approached him. *This is it*, he thought. *My time has finally come.* Granny Smith's hoof shoved him out of the way, and she dragged Pierre Docque out into the open. That frozen feeling now burned hot within Nick, keeping him held where he stood as if he was pressed up against some mime's invisible wall. Pierre kept sobbing over and over in French, "Please, I don't want to die," but even if the ponies could understand him, they wouldn't have given a fuck. They were sadistic, inhumane monsters.

"Ugh, speak English!" Starlight Glimmer gave Pierre a kick in the testicles. Though the ponies themselves deciphered Russian to be understood by the humans, "speak English" is a phrase which is uttered when someone is too ignorant to undergo the numerous years of arduous education it takes to learn an entire language. English is chosen because of course it is the language of racism.

Nick could feel the impetus within him to lash out, but his body refused to move. He watched Pierre with the same dread as his fellow humans. He had forgotten himself in that moment, somehow betraying the entire nihilist apathy to which he'd been conditioned over the course of the past year. A strange sense of calm overcame him as he witnessed Pierre's whole idiom change. Fear still sat upon the man's face, wrinkled and screwed up in agony as it was, but now resignation was unmistakable there. Weight had once more returned to Nick's chest and features as he realized Pierre had all of a sudden come to terms with his own impending demise. He tried not to look his French friend in the eyes as the latter spoke to him. "Please, Mr Nick. Let me go. Let me go so that you may live. You need to return to your Becky."

Nick's whole body trembled so hard, he thought he might be having a seizure. So many conflicted messages filled his head that he lost all sense of where he was and what he was doing. It was as if his brain had shut down, paralyzing him with indecision. *You can't let him die over a pointless lie. If you do anything, you'll be killed too. You owe it to him to live. You'll never see Becky Williams again.* He didn't know where his fists had come from, but he was yelling and charging forward, brandishing his bare hands as weapons. He stopped short when a shot rang out.

Pierre slumped forward onto his knees, and then dropped onto his face, dead. Button Mash held a smoking THX-1138 assault rifle. He swung the weapon against his shoulder and munched on a green apple in his other hoof he had procured from his breakfast table. "Boom, headshot," he said, his mouth bulging with food. Milano Mash forced a laugh at his exceedingly witty bon mot.

"I guess we'll forego the terrible two-year-olds and execute these two instead," said Starlight Glimmer. "I think a beheading will demonstrate the gravity of your situation, don't you?" she asked as if her audience were inclined to answer.

Nick didn't know what to do now. He tried to think fast as the ponies seized him and forced him onto his knees. He tried to force his mind past all the reasons he shouldn't do anything that came to him. He beseeched his fellow humans in French, saying to them, "Rebel! Fight! I don't want my death to be meaningless. Let me die so that you all might live free!"

"God dammit, what *is* that noise?" asked Starlight Glimmer who had not yet found some sharp implement with which to cut off Nick's head. She heard the humming again, and now this time everyone else heard it too. The sound was so insistent, so ominous, that not even the forlorn human slaves could ignore it.

"Look!" Starlight Glimmer pointed a hoof toward the sky, using a word which here means, "Point your eyeballs in the indicated direction." It took a while for everyone else to see what she saw, but in turn they were all looking at a strange mass of dark spots flickering across the pale blue sky. The speckled cloud glittered like a rainbow as it headed their way like a herd of spooked buffalo. Killer ponies and sombre slaves alike marvelled at the spectacle, which was a mistake, because in a few fleet seconds, a rushing din was upon them.

Nobody—and nopony, for that matter—knew what hit them at first. There was much shouting as a whirlwind of unidentifiable particles collided with them, battering them and brushing over them. Most knew not what the danger was until Nick

caught sight of a man trying to look with his right eye to where his left eye once was. In its place was a circular tunnel through which one could see to the other side where the back of his head should have been. Something then hovered right in front of Nick's face. It appeared to be a green little ball of fluff with dragonfly wings, bright, multifaceted eyes, and a demented smile. It whipped away out of sight as suddenly as it had appeared. Nick dropped onto his belly and looked around for some escape, but there was none. Everywhere people and ponies were panicking, trying to beat away the voracious insects, and a phrase began to stick in Nick's mind when he realized the ponies were shouting it: "Parasprites!" He didn't know what those were, but he didn't need to. He needed to flee.

Milano Mash was of the same inclination. "Button! Stick close to me!" she screamed. "We've got to get out of here now!"

"But Mom, they're so challenging to shoot!" Button Mash was the calmest of the mob, picking off Parasprites without even using a scope on his rifle. With one shot, he took out three Parasprites that had happened to line up in a row. "Oh baby, a triple!" His next shot was ruined by his mother seizing him by the shoulders and hurrying out of sight with him.

"No! Don't you run away from us, you craven cowards! Stay and fight!" Starlight Glimmer yelled after them. Milano could hear her, but she chose to ignore her, all so she could evacuate her darling son. Starlight huffed. There were more important things at stake than chasing after two deserters. She tried shouting at the slaves over the deafening buzzing. "Alright, you plebeians! Get to the sheds!"

Only a few humans understood Starlight in the chaos, and they tried to beckon as many of their brethren as they could. When this small group followed the mare to one of the slave sheds, Starlight slammed the doors shut. They huddled together in the midst of the room, listening to the hail-like pattering of the Parasprites beating bodily against every wall and window. The whizzing sound took over as their pounding abated then one of the slaves pointed in alarm at the corners of the ramshackle building. Starlight saw that she was not pointing out one of the many clacking crabs that skittered along the dirt floor, but rather the wooden support beams being chewed through by the virulent vermin. "Oh, sweet Celestia," Starlight cursed shortly before the walls and ceiling caved in on them all.

Milano meanwhile batted at the whizzing pests with a foreleg. Her defence was ineffectual, but her son cleared the air with a few choice shots from his rifle. There was nothing Granny Smith could do to restore order, and Nick huddled as flat as he could onto the dirt, trying to figure out a direction in which to run.

"Ponies sighted at eleven o'clock!" L'chhp't shouted.

"Roger," said Hurk. "What should we do until then?"

Sabal squinted at the sight of the ponies and humans who, from a distance, appeared to be dancing go-go. "What the hell are they doing? You dorks had better hold back. This is a job for the Golden Path!"

"On the contrary, it is a job for the whole human race! And elven races, too. I cast magic missile!" said Frosbim.

"Yeah, right," said Sabal. Then a screaming rocket whizzed past from behind him and blew a large crater in the midst of some pony guards. "What the hell?" He whirled around on his heel, almost toppling over, and saw that Frosbim had procured a rocket launcher, presumably tucked under her wizard's robe.

The flurry of Parasprites hurtled away from the fiery onslaught, giving the pony scum a moment's reprieve to acknowledge they were under attack by two forces. "Bucking manure!" one stallion shouted. "Let's get those bundles of sticks!"

What ensued next was what ensues every time a human meets a pony; what happens when a predator stalks its oppressed prey when the prey is willing to fight back for justice. A colossal battle ensued with the front guard to the plantation. Projectiles flew like migratory flocks of killer birds. The humans saw the benefit of cover behind some sandbags that lined the edge of the minefield, and though they had to be wary of the slaves behind the ponies, the ponies themselves were out in the open and besieged by ravenous parasitic insects. Beside him, Sabal could hear L'chhp't saying "Zap!" every time she fired her pistol. Hurk was swatting at what he believed to be a mosquito buzzing around his face until he saw the deranged, colourful entity pecking at the side of his neck. The Parasprites had reached Tango Squad and were attacking them just as they attacked slave and pony alike.

"Shit! What are those things?" Sabal asked.

"It's a bug hunt, man! I hope somebody brought a flamethrower," said Hurk.

"Fireball!" Frosbim hurled a Molotov cocktail as hard as she could. It shattered upon the ground, lighting up a pool of flames between them and the ponies. Much of the Parasprites in the vicinity hovered in swift, hopping motions over the fire as though enacting some pagan dance to unholy gods.

Among the slaves, Hyacinth was swatting in vain at the pestering Parasprites flitting about her. "Richard, dear, they're eating my hat! Oh!"

Richard had toppled over onto the ground and was rocking back and forth on his posterior. "They've bitten my bottom!"

"Richard! That's not a nice part of the body!"

"I'm coming, Elizabeth!"

"Don't be absurd, dear; you know she and my family have blended in with French Canada."

"Let us advance! Follow my lead!" Breadbeard led a brave charge across the grounds. Through the murky smoke ahead came a volley of shots aimed for Breadbeard's gut, a favourite target of ponies who liked the anguished cries of humans bleeding out. Thank goodness Breadbeard had been wearing Armour. "God damn! They're right there!" He brandished his massive battle-axe, holding the blade like a shield to soak up the bullets with ricochet. He checked himself, and though his armour had protected him, it had been chewed up quite a bit by the gunfire. "Not good!"

Sabal noticed the frequency with which the Floridian rebels would communicate with one another. It was a trait he had to admire. He could even believe there was a little magic involved with the way Frosbim handled loading another rocket with such practice into what should have been a two-person weapon. The self-styled wizard blasted apart a small group of ponies that had attempted to ward them off, and the humans' incursion could continue, but that wasn't even the last of the miracles to occur that day.

Grabbing a rifle from a fallen Equestrian, Nick charged up from behind on a pegasus and battered her about the skull with the weapon's butt, stunning her. His eyes met those of Tango Squad and the Floridian rebels then he turned about and tossed his rifle to a fellow slave who had been standing there agog. The man caught the gun and gazed at it in awe like a caveman who'd just been handed a cell phone. He must have never imagined this day would come, that after harrowing years of demeaning servitude to an evil oppressor he would be granted the very means of his emancipation. The effect went viral. Slaves ignored the ravenous Parasprites to seize weapons of their defence and finally take up arms against their cruel masters. Even when the first of them was gunned down in cold blood, they continued to fight as they should do. Even when a Parasprite burrowed itself like a drill through a man's spine, paralyzing him, he continued to shoot off round after round to injure as many ponies as he could before he himself was killed. Everything was as it should be.

A woman ran flailing up toward their rescuers. "We have to get to the ponies' mansion!" she shouted. "It's the most fortified building on the plantation!" Before anyone could ask what direction that was in (though a cursory glance would make it obvious), she ran off in some madcap direction.

War, Hurk thought. *War never changes.*

The swarm had recovered and was heading this way, shedding off the miniature fireballs that were Parasprites who'd become engulfed in Frosbim's fire. The infestation had grown so intense that even the fighting between human and pony had to be put on hold. "Everybody! This way!" Hurk waved his arm and screamed at any human who could hear him. They had to hope for the best. He dabbed at a stinging on his cheek and realized that a significant portion of his skin had been torn away and was bleeding; he'd scarcely even noticed any sort of a tap there with the Parasprites. Sabal was swatting at several of the miniscule buggers that were chewing away at his fatigues. A good bunch of slaves banded together with Tango Squad and the rebels and hurried in a desperate dash toward the plantation mansion. Even a few desperate ponies had accompanied them, and all were banging on the heavy double doors to be let in. When they realized they were taking more time trying to force the entrance open than if they'd just unlocked it, one of the Equestrians produced a key and did just that. Once all those present on the porch had pushed inside the foyer, they worked together to slam the doors shut and bar them. When that was done, the human rescuers wasted no time in turning on the ponies and slaying them on the spot.

L'chhp't addressed the slaves. "Listen up. In the basement, you'll find a hidden crawlspace behind some loose stones under the stairs. This house used to be on the Underground Railroad during the days the U.S. was refusing to give up abducting and enslaving Africans. Anybody not armed and willing to fight should go there to seek safety. We'll check the doors and windows and secure the premises." The contingency of human slaves nodded and exited down the cellar stairs.

"My god, it's like Rosa Parks is smiling down on us from Heaven," someone said.

"That was Harriet Tubman, moron. Rosa Parks was the woman who ate an entire city bus."

"I think you're thinking of Michel Lotito." As is the trend when people ought to be focusing on their work, they continued their insufferable argument instead.

Upstairs, the consummate professionals searched the interior while taking note of their injuries. The Parasprites could be likened to piranhas of the air; most wounds they never noticed until they saw them. Breadbeard was missing the tip of his left index finger, and Frosbim's sleeves were stained with blood from underneath.

The group exited the parlour and entered a grandiose dining room. They were greeted by a shot to L'chhp't's forehead. The round was of American design, and so exploded within her head and tore off the back half of her skull. She slipped and fell to the floor where she bled out into a pile of goo. Granny Smith had been waiting for them.

"You stupid cunt!" Frosbim shouted at the elderly equine. She wanted to shout more, but only a pitiful whine came out. There were no more words capable of conveying her anguish.

They were all about to fire upon the elderly mare when she dropped her gun to the floor. Her audience soon became captivated by her unnerving speech. "You slaveszzz belong back in your kennelszzz. This home used to belong to my familyzzz, but you wretched pukeszzz killed them all. A great family, the Appleszzz."

Nick spat. "Good riddance to bad rubbish. I just want you to know, I was a part of Delta Squad. I was there myself when Applejack and Big McIntosh died. It was a glorious victory for the Human Resistance that night, but today shall be even greater."

Granny Smith responded by vomiting forth a horde of Parasprites from her mouth. Her right eye popped out of its socket and more Parasprites spilled from there. Then she convulsed wildly and her head burst open like a split hive, letting loose still more of the hideous insects.

"Fireball!" everyone shouted at Frosbim, who was on the verge of tears. She whipped another Molotov cocktail out from under her robe, sending everyone else diving out of the room. She smashed the explosive down on the massive lacquered oak table, and several dozen Parasprites screeched out as they were roasted. Frosbim collapsed from the blast onto the floor, and Breadbeard dared to drag her out of the room and around the kitchen wall.

Down below, the slaves huddled together like they were one frightened family in their panic room. Even through the wood and stone they could hear the incessant buzzing from upstairs and outside. There was nothing to do but wait out the storm, so wait they did.

Then the silence came. Some of them didn't even notice when the sound dissipated. They dared to venture back forth from their cramped little inhumane hiding space, and together they tiptoed up the stairs again.

Tango Squad, Nick, and Breadbeard were there, blocking the hallway into the dining room. The liberated slave in front could just see past their shoulders where their dead green slave master slumped forward over the table, and where a weeping Frosbim sat on the floor, holding the damaged corpse of her long-time companion. "It's never a good day to die," Frosbim whispered.

"You're safe now," Hurk said. "Those bug thingies just zipped off away. It appears every last pony here is dead."

The humans congregated back outside with Tango Squad and Nick leading the way. They happened upon the collapsed shack as they surveyed the plantation. Already several dirtied slaves were helping their surviving comrades crawl out from under the wreckage. A groan and a hoof stretched out below the edge of the roof as Starlight Glimmer began to come to. When the humans noticed this, a pang of fear overcame them, and the nearest few leaped upon the felled roof which they weighed down with their bodies. They pressed and pressed harder until Starlight gasped, gurgled, and died, crushed to death.

With that business settled, Nick stopped by Pierre’s sorry corpse. “His name was Pierre Docque,” he told Sabal. He furrowed his brow. “That’s all I know. Don’t even know if he had a family. For all his talking, he never said. All those questions he asked me, I never asked any of my own.”

The clean-up process took the rest of the night, and at Nick's behest, the crops were set ablaze for fear the drug-addicted Parasprites would return. All in all, counting those who had died and those who had succumbed to their wounds, fifty-eight slaves had survived the liberation of Tampon. Two-hundred and thirty-nine human souls lay dead, and over the course of the plantation's operation under Equestrian control, two-thousand and ninety-four had been executed or driven to suicide or died in work-related accidents. The survivors agreed to burn the bodies with the fields, as it seemed the appropriate send-off. That night, they raided the well-stocked larders of the plantation and made do with the fancy bedspread. Many had nightmares, but many still found sleep they hadn't had in the longest time. None complained about the short rest that morning, because none were willing to spend any more time than they had to in that dreadful hell.

The most grievously wounded of the slaves were fit into the Floridian rebels' hovercraft, but the rest would have to walk. Frosbim opted to lead the ex-slaves toward Pepsicola in the company of Tango Squad, and Breadbeard wished her all the well-being in the world, promising to come back as soon as he could. In the meantime, the remaining humans marched, singing a dirge for their fallen families and comrades.

Sabal and Hurk exchanged glances. They still had not found their answer for their sudden execution of Tian Zhao. They had no opportunity to discuss it, but neither was willing to let the truth come out. Whatever the case, if it was found out, they had to remind themselves that the greater good was served. Terrible villains had been slain that day, and invaluable human lives had been spared.

Sabal marched close to Nick. “We’re sure surprised to find you here, Mr Bronson. We were here to liberate the plantation. You were presumed dead in Cuba last year. Bet you’re glad to be coming with us, right? Must’ve been tough if even a trained marine couldn’t break out of there.”

Nick exhaled through his nose. “It’s like falling out of a tall tree and finding relief in a splinter.”

Sabal didn’t know what he meant.

Also spared were their aching legs when the cavalry arrived. A fleet of trucks came to a halt before them after only a few hours of walking. Several human soldiers piled out of their jeeps and Humvees, accompanying an older man with white hair, a moustache and goatee, and a resplendent white suit with a walking stick and string tie. Frosbim was surprised to announce it was the Human Resistance leader of the Kentucky faction of American rebels.

"Indeed I am," said Colonel Harland Sanders in an old-fashioned southern U.S. accent. "I just want to congratulate you on your daring rescue. I only wish my army and I coulda got here sooner." He shook hands with Hurk and Sabal, and especially saluted Nick for being a member of the famous Delta Squad. Nick still couldn't swell with pride, but a tiny part of him was happy that others were inspired. Delta Squad felt like a lifetime ago. The name sounded almost unfamiliar to him. The liberated humans were only too overjoyed to know they would be defended from here on out and joined with Colonel Sanders in a rousing chorus of the laureate Randy Newman's undying ballad, "The Major General's Song".

6. The Shining, or Scientific Progress Goes “Boink”

Neelix was lying in the infirmary with one bare, hairy foot propped up on the end of the bed. "Dr Rafe, my toe's been speaking to me and is threatening to leave me any day now. You've got to do something!"

Dr Heartwell was sitting in a chair at the foot of the bed, his face screwed up in befuddled agony. "Mr Neelix, I've told you before that psychotropic drugs are not seasonings. Stop taking them out of my pharmacy and into your galley. How the hell do you get at them, anyway? They're locked up!"

Neelix started giggling not unlike a moron. "When we were young, we used to make fake phone calls to the police and tell them our butter melted."

Rafe stood up with a heavy sigh and was thankful when Joseph and Ajay entered the infirmary together. "What can I do for you gentlemen?" he asked, all too eager to ignore his patients. He grinned his shiny teeth at them.

Joseph got straight to the point. "We need you to come with us under the strictest confidence. What we're going to show you must not be breathed to anyone else."

Neelix mumbled toward his stomach. "My old ship's captain now works in a prison for dumb whores." He then let out three long, deep belches.

Ajay pointed. "What in the hell is the matter with him?"

"Nothing a good sterilization can't cure." Rafe smiled and gestured for Joseph to take point. "Lead on, gentlemen."

Joseph reiterated the need for secrecy for emphasis along the way to the brig and held a brief conversation with Ajay on the Golden Path. "So I was wondering, who's leader while Tian's away?"

"Um, well, Tian is, but I guess for administrative purposes, everyone seems to be listening to me. I guess that's because I have your ear," Ajay said.

"Fine by me. Working with the liaison to the Golden Path and its leader makes things simpler."

The three arrived at the highest security cell door in the brig. Rafe patted his little black bag of medical tools as Joseph worked to open the door and, for the third time, repeated the importance of confidentiality. When Rafe saw what was within, he drew back. "My god."

The earth stallion Tree Barker was half lying on his side, half sitting up, clutching at his windpipe and heaving. His eyes were half-lidded, and he didn't seem to acknowledge his visitors. "A little over an hour ago, he was attacked. Throttled, choked. We want your medical opinion," Joseph explained. Tree's eyes caught sight of the pistol on Joseph's belt and went wide.

"Um, okay." Rafe was hesitant to approach the pony. He whipped out his stethoscope and sought out Tree's heartbeat and lungs. Tree mumbled something. "What did he say?" Rafe asked.

"It hurts," Tree whined, hugging himself.

"Where does it hurt?" Rafe asked, not really caring.

Tree whined harder. "In my organs."

Rafe stood and addressed Joseph and Ajay. "Gentlemen, I need to get this patient into the cat scan."

"We have a cat scan?" Ajay asked. After a pause, he asked another question. "Wait, what's a cat scan?"

"It's basically a big, clunky, expensive x-ray machine," Rafe said. "We've got a Phillips-brand machine back in the infirmary."

Joseph sighed. "Alright, get the blanket over his face."

"Maybe we can dangle him over a ledge later," Ajay joked.

Tree was stuffed into the back of an elecart and covered with a sheet alongside Rafe. Joseph drove while Ajay was crammed into the passenger seat. They passed by a Belarusian solder and a Golden Path soldier as Tree loudly tried to clear his injured throat. "Ooh, ahh," Ajay said in a wholly unconvincing mock groan. "Don't eat the beef stroganoff. It's shit." Beef stroganoff is indeed an unpalatable mound of incomplete bland. You'd be much better off with a nice plate of pasta puttanesca.

One medical exam later bore bad news. "I got bad news, I'm afraid," said Rafe. "It would appear the patient is dying. What a shame, huh? I don't think he even has six months to a year."

"It will be a shame, Doctor, if his information on Equestria is crucial to turning this war around once and for all," Joseph said.

"Maybe the Red Hammer Platoon has advanced medical facilities along with all the research in engineering you said they were doing. You said we're heading there next, right?" Ajay asked.

Joseph paused for thought. "I'm not sure yet I want to bring him along until we've been there. The less risk we take exposing him, the safer he'll remain. Doctor, could you keep an eye on his progress in the brig? It seems Ajay and I have a visit to pay."

Joseph and Ajay found Dirk with the queen in the lunch line in the canteen. "Would you like the beef stroganoff, or the spam?" Neelix asked them. "I make the spam weekly."

Dirk and the queen frowned profusely. "We'll just grab a plastic container of tapioca," he said, and both nodded. Before Joseph could get two words out to him, Dirk hobbled faster to his table. "Walk and talk with me, Joe!" he said, letting his inner capitalist out again. All four took a seat, and Dirk began scooping tapioca into his mouth with his index finger.

"As you know, we'll be reaching the laboratories of the Red Hammer Platoon soon," said Joseph.

"Ah, yeah. Lemme give you the access key." Dirk reached into his shirt pocket, then his pants pocket for a nudie pen, and wrote down some alphanumeric figures onto a napkin. "They've been in seclusion for a while now, and they'll still be expecting the Russians."

Ajay smirked. "Yeah, that's gonna make things awkward, isn't it?"

Joseph opened his mouth then realized he had nothing to say to that. He changed tack. "Our mission, if we choose to accept it, will be to pay a visit to the Red Hammer Platoon and explain the situation to them, while gathering intel on their operations thus far. Officially, we'll be looking into getting the Red October airborne, and above all, kill the ponies."

"Right, sure, whatever," said Ajay. "Just you and me, huh? So where the hell is this Red Hammer Platoon?"

Joseph cracked a gentle smile. "The last safe place on Earth."

THE SHINING, OR SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS GOES BOINK

A "cold open" is a term referring to the practice in televised media when a show would open onto its plot before introducing what show it was. This became considerably confusing toward the end of television, particularly in the decade or so leading up to the war with Equestria, when television shows lacked originality right down to their very premises, and viewers had to wait until just before the next commercial break to recognize what programme they were watching. A cold open is not to be confused with the moment Joseph and Ajay stepped out from the Red October and into the frigid, sub-zero air of the Antarctic. Both were dressed in full fatigues with arctic camou and heavy furred parkas so that they were barely recognizable under their hoods and goggles.

Willing to do anything to take their mind off the blistering cold, they struck up a conversation as they sailed up to the ice and struck upon solid ground. "So did you really just elect to come here yourself because of that pony defector?" Ajay asked.

"I suppose what Tian said about a leader fighting amongst his people struck me as profound," Joseph said.

"Yeah, but that's why we train thousands of grunts. War's a risky business. We need as many chances as we can get. I mean, a proper leader's not a leader because he's better than anyone else. He just needs to coordinate so much information to orchestrate the war effort and make his soldiers' jobs more focused."

Joseph tried to shrug, but not only was it too cold to move much, his heavy attire restricted his shoulders. Both he and Ajay were still able to jump in surprise when a figure emerged from the billowing snow at them as if materializing from nothing. He was a tall, gaunt figure of an older man, also dressed in as much warm attire and as many strange, feathered skins as he could bundle himself in. His somewhat cool bow tie was visible. He had protruding cheek bones and a wild, stern gaze in his eyes, and his mood was borderline frantic. "Hello! Yes, hello! Hello!" He was shouting as if arguing with someone at the other end of a telephone who'd rudely left him on hold even though they'd called him. He also shivered terribly as he kept his hands under his armpits, and spoke quickly so that some of his sentences combined together. "Nice to see some civilization for a change! I was wondering if you could get me off this godforsaken iceberg!"

Joseph and Ajay tried to look at one another, but they couldn't see much. "Uh, yeah," Joseph said. "I'm Joseph Matskevich of the Belarusian Resistance, and this is Ajay Ghale of the Golden Path. We're actually on a mission here though. Could you tell us where Lenin Base is?"

"Pah! Lenin Base? Lenin Base!" The man was positively irate. He turned away and trudged a few steps through the snow before facing them again. "You kids know how I got here? I came here in early 2012 to get some shots of Antarctica for an anniversary special of my television show, *Bill Nye the Science Guy*. Yeah, I'm Bill Nye! Did I mention I had a TV show? Right after Alex Mack, right before Sabrina the Teenage Witch."

"What the hell's he ranting about?" Joseph asked Ajay without lowering his voice too much. The wind buffering wouldn't allow it.

"No clue. 2012 though, you think he's been stuck here since before the ponies invaded?" Ajay asked.

Bill Nye squinted at them, lowering and raising his bushy eyebrows as he shot them several strange, furious glances. "Sure, I can show you Lenin Base. Right at the damn South Pole, but you'll be lucky the assholes answer their door. I been stuck here who the hell knows how long. It's cold as shit, none of the research stations are open, there's nothing to eat but fucking penguins, and I have to crap in a hole in the ground! Sure, I can show the gosh damn way."

Joseph and Ajay stared a moment longer as Bill tried turning around in the snow. Ajay leaned toward Joseph. "He's not that Nigel Tomm guy, is he?"

"No, no, I think he's that guy that used to get trolled by Creationists."

"What are Creationists?" Ajay asked.

Bill turned around, his mouth open in awe. "You don't know how long I've been waiting to hear someone say that." After a beat, he beckoned them to follow. "Come along, come along. We're off to see the Lenin. The wonderful Lenin of snow."

The walk to the base was slow going because of the knee-high snow, the frigid temperatures (which Bill assured them was in the hundreds if one measured in Kelvin), and the fact the man who'd been abandoned alone on the continent for six years would not shut up explaining any little scientific factoid that crossed their path and had nothing to do with getting them to their destination any faster. What didn't help was there were so many questions, and every time he described something, it brought about further questions,

and sometimes his mood was very bitter and he didn't see fit to explain the questions and instead offered some makeshift reply such as, "How the fuck should I know, kid? A wormhole did it."

"We're not kids," Joseph explained to deaf ears.

Ajay was unapologetic about egging the self-styled scientist on to get his mind off the insufferable freezing cold. First he asked how the hell Bill had survived, which was returned with a question offering which of many aspects Ajay had in mind. These threads he pulled on, and queries such as where Bill slept all this time resulted in a lengthy diatribe on how igloos functioned to encapsulate heat or some such. Bill had some infuriating habits of talking very, very quickly and for reasons beyond Ajay's or Joseph's reckoning, inserting strange sound effects with his mouth to emphasize some physical or chemical process.

Joseph at once realized that his own mood was as antagonized as he would expect from Ajay rather than himself, but he could not pinpoint what it was that set him off. Hoping to lighten his own mood, yet unable to stow the barbed aspects of his vernacular, he asked Bill, "So what sciences did you study? Sociology? Psychology?"

When Bill stopped in his tracks to fix Joseph with a discerning stare, the other two stopped as well. "You were a college student, huh?" Bill asked.

"Yeah." Joseph's voice was defensive.

"Huh. That's what I thought." Bill resumed their icy march.

In time, a shape emerged from the desolate backdrop of snowy dunes and peaks, providing the only feature the bleak landscape had to offer for miles around. No one pointed it out until it was halfway away from the horizon and could be made out as distinct more readily. Bill waved an arm at it. "Well there it is, by the way. Lenin base."

"It looks rather small," Ajay said.

They got a little closer. "It looks like a head," said Joseph.

They came even closer than that. "Is that the head of Sigmund Freud?" Ajay asked.

"No, that's Vladimir Lenin," Joseph said with some surprise.

Finally they came upon the gigantic stone head of Vladimir Lenin. "I gotta say, that's the second-biggest head of Vladimir Lenin I've ever seen," Joseph said.

Ajay walked around the enormous bust to inspect it. "All due respect to the Russians, but why in the flaming hell did they build this thing?"

"They kinda got a little stupid during their cultural purge in the cold war and never really recovered," Joseph said. "It is more than a little masturbatory, isn't it? But then, they've never really understood the concept of subtlety."

Bill Nye was ignoring them. He strolled in back of the head and banged angrily on a pair of doors situated there. "Yoo-hoo! Open sesame! Candy gram for Mongo!" There was approximately a second where the three of them were utterly still and silent, then Bill slapped his knees. "Welp, they're not home, let's go."

"Let me," said Joseph, a little annoyed as he whipped out the napkin Dirk had given him. He found a little keypad hidden behind a panel on the door and punched in the code. This was hard with gloves on his fingers.

"I've spent weeks in front of this door trying to get somebody's attention," Bill said. "Wanna know how many possible combinations that keypad has?"

"No, thank you," said Joseph as the door buzzed to signify it was unlocking. He grabbed the handle and tugged on it, but it didn't open.

"Did it not work?" asked Bill, who was now on the edge of his seat for the first time since he had met the two Human Resistance members.

"No, I think it's a push door. Yep." Joseph managed to shove the door inwards with some strength, and for the first time, the trio gazed into the dark interior of Lenin base.

The group found themselves in a small, box-shaped room. "Okay, so now what?" Ajay asked.

"Must be an elevator. Let's see if we can't switch it on." Noticing a call button on the obvious wall panel, Joseph pressed it. "Hello? This is the Belarusian Resistance leader, Joseph Matskevich. Can we come in?"

A Russian voice crackled through on the intercom. "Hello? Who is this?"

Joseph frowned even though the voice on the other end couldn`t see him. "I just told you. This is Joseph Matskevich of Belarus."

"Huh. Okay. Did you enter your access code?"

"Yeah, we just did that. That's how we got into the elevator."

There was an infuriating pause as though the unseen voice had to think hard about the base he presumably worked for. "Okay, just wait a moment." Two moments later, the elevator started up, and descended at a snail's pace. Then it sped up. Then it slowed down again. The speed kept shifting, making for a very nerve-wracking ride. The three men soon lost track of how far they'd gone down, but it wasn't *too* too long before they came to a stop. There was another interminable pause before the doors slid open.

Outside was a contingency of men and women wearing lab coats and safety goggles, all pointing strange gun-like weapons at the three visitors. The guns looked colourful and spherical above the handles but with barrels that came to a sharp point and had parallel circular disks around them. "Wait! Wait, don't shoot!" said a Russian man who may have been the voice on the other end of the radio. He dispersed the armed persons and tugged on the lapels of his lab coat. Underneath he wore a grey t-shirt with an onion printed on it. On his bald forehead he had a pair of sporty sunglasses colloquially known as "douchebag sunglasses". I am not going to explain what the word "douchebag" here means. He had stubble all over his chin and mouth, and his head was shaved bald in that insecure masculine way that makes one look like a skinhead or like they're impersonating a chemotherapy patient. He had a round, doughy complexion, and slurred his consonants hard.

"Hallo, I am Dr Gadjickt, lead scientific superwisor for Human Resistance." He brushed at some kind of food stain on his lab coat, egg whites or lemon juice or something. "Come, come, let me show you gadjickts we have inwented and deweloped here in my laboratory where safety is number one priority." Dr Gadjickt then firmly placed his shades over his eyes. "Oh, now is too dark in here." So he took them off again.

At that moment, a man with very muscular legs barrelled his way through the small crowd. His comrades let out whoops and short yells of pain as he brushed them aside with strange contraptions of mechanical arms that replaced what he must have lost in the war. The results were composited by an assortment of different tools and gadgets that resembled little more than a hopeless mishmash to the outsiders, but in actuality provided the man with greater utility than ever before. His shoulders were comprised of soda can lids that prevented spills. Various appliances extended down the full length of a man's arms, but provided him with far more joints than elbows could provide. His left hand was a lemon squeezer. His right hand was an eggshell breaker. Joseph and Ajay would have stared longer, but that would have been rude.

"I'm Duncan Gilles, and I'm in charge of paramilitary security on this base. I'm also the second-in-command of the Red Hammer Platoon," said the man with mechanical arms and a burly Scottish accent.

"Oh, No-Legs, it is you," Dr Gadjickt said. He introduced the three visitors, explaining that "No-Legs" was Duncan's nickname. "Why do not you come with us to tour the base?"

No-Legs harrumphed then pointed a tongue scraper at Joseph's eye. "Tongue scraper" is two words which here refer to a device used for causing you to retch and is certainly not the merit of someone who ties her hair up in a bow before working. "You two better not wander off."

"What about me?" Bill asked. Some people looked at him, but nobody said anything.

"So how is Artemis doing?" No-Legs asked as they travelled the halls and stairwells of Lenin Base. "I thought she'd be with you."

"You mean Alessandra Galanos?" Joseph asked. "She's currently off on a mission."

"You may have noticed laser gun when you came in," Dr Gadjickt said. "Is new inwention, model L4-Z3R. Runs off double A batteries. Stores more ammo than most projectile weaponry, though it takes a bit more to kill something. It's a bit harder than just pointing a gun at someone and pulling trigger. Does start fire good, though. I love fire. My mother was fire, you know." That's sort of what it sounded like he said to Joseph at any rate.

Dr Gadjickt then pushed open a door to a lab where household objects could be seen hovering in the air while scientists in lab coats jotted down figures onto their clipboards. "Now this is excellent. Seven different gadjickts to levitate objects to help carry them. We have magnets, fans, fizzy lifting drinks, etcetera." He then shut the door before any of them went inside.

Behind a second door was a much neater lab, replete with computers, both the variety of Apple Mac laptops with stickers on them, and giant reel-to-reel terminals with blinking, sometimes beeping, lights. In the centre of the room were many shells of what looked like miniature stealth planes, weapons with many wires sticking out of them, and metallic boxes with wheels affixed to the bottom. “Materials are scarce, but our prize research all pours into robotics. Once we build and establish a drone network, we won’t even need soldiers anymore,” No-Legs said.

“Gee, now I feel obsolete,” Ajay said. Joseph felt a similar hollowness in his chest and arms. Obsolescence is a word which here refers to when capitalist manufacturers deliberately design products to break or otherwise require replacing after a certain period of time, forcing the consumers who become dependent upon them for surviving in a shifting technocracy to pay to replace them after a while.

No-Legs pointed a small collection of nesting measuring spoons at Ajay and Joseph. "For the sake of international security, you must forget everything you saw here."

"Come, come, you will want to see this." Dr Gadjickt beckoned his tour into what appeared to be a small storage closet. There wasn't room for all of them inside, even if it hadn't been cluttered up to the ceiling with old junk and dust. "Is all old junk of mine we invented here." There were a lot of cherry pitters and the like. He grabbed a nearly-flat, round object that resembled a speaker phone from an office with a lens on the top centre. "This was the holocomm. We actually had them out as far back as 2013, but we never found much use for them. Big thumbs up from me." He tossed it back onto a stack, blowing around some dust in the process. Bill Nye even sneezed.

"Bless you," Joseph said automatically.

Bill stopped him, his eyes bulging out. "Don't you ever say that to me again."

"Oh. Is best part of tour. Is cafeteria." Dr Gadjickt did indeed lead the party into a cafeteria. "We have state-of-the-art facilities. The chairs vibrate to aid in digestion, and the tables include Bunsen burners for easy fire. The dry ice is, of course, for atmosphere. Do try our individually-wrapped French fries." He indicated long tables with fake wood patterns on them and attached seats that were little more than round platforms. Bill Nye, who up until now had been boring the pants off Ajay with scientific explanations on how various technologies worked, was the first to barge in between members of the group to grab some grub. Joseph and Ajay had to admit that they, too, were a mite peckish.

"MREs are truly the best cuisine that food has to offer. The coffee is not the greatest, I admit. Oh, by the way, we are actually working on special coffee that if you do not drink it, you explode. Hello, Steve!" Dr Gadjickt waved to the man behind the serving counter. "MRE" is an acronym which here refers to military ration meals. You’re invited to declare your own filler words for it.

Steve had very veiny arms and a somewhat aggressive tone of voice no matter what he said. "We've got some more Italian MREs in this week. They're so airy and pleasant, they're literally perfect. The chocolate had maggots in it, but I brushed them off."

Dr Gadjickt opened up one MRE and poured in water to the self-heating meal pouch. He demonstrated this to Joseph and Ajay even though they already knew how MREs worked. The good doctor was like a kid in a candy Shoppe. "This MRE is fantastic. It even tastes better than the real thing. Thumbs up from me," he said. After watching each of his matches burn, he pestered Joseph and Ajay for theirs. All in all, there wasn't getting much conversation out of him over the meal, and they had to wait until they were under way again.

In the meantime, Ajay was eating from a pouch of meatball marinara in which the sauce was way too sweeter than it is supposed to be. "So what the heck is the Red Hammer Platoon, exactly? Even the Golden Path doesn't have much information on them."

"Top secret research and development." Dr Gadjickt was staring too closely at a lit flame and in serious danger of burning himself. He also had a mouth full of food.

"Well, not only that," Joseph said. He was eating what was supposedly a chicken fajita, but it lacked a fajita. "It stemmed from engineering experiments to re-enable veterans who lost the use of their limbs. Prosthetics and things of that nature. You'll find a lot of soldiers who were amputees or things like that, but now they have special implants, in some cases more superior than the original article."

"Oh, like Betty Coughlan?" Ajay asked.

Joseph had to recollect for a second. "Precisely. Like the inventor of the rocket chair." He looked about for a minute while taking a long sip from a bottle of green he'd mixed with powder from the MRE.

A soldier carrying an MRE on a metal tray stopped by. He had macho stubble on his head and a square jaw that stuck out so he had an under bite. He wasn't particularly ugly or handsome. He did have pretty pale skin like the others in Lenin base, probably from staying indoors in a cold environment for so long. "Is this seat taken? This one's heater works nicer."

Joseph managed a tired smile. "No, no, sit. My name's Joseph Matskevich of the Belarusian Resistance. I was just saying how we ought to get to know our Red Hammer allies better."

"I'm Jamaal Blackmoore." He parked his rear end and started digging into his MRE of goopy carbonara. He had an especially assertive voice. "I'm in the military, and I do needlework, because it's a very useful skill to have in the military. If you don't like it, we can settle it right here and now."

Joseph blinked and tried not to lose his smile. "Huh." He didn't spend the rest of their lunch break trying to bond with anybody. When Dr Gadjickt resumed their tour, he didn't say much, but he was preoccupied with pondering the development of human technology, wondering how much had been lost since the event of the pony invasion, how much had been rediscovered, and how much had only been learned because of the struggles humanity had faced. Perhaps they'd be a lot further along by now had Equestria never invaded. Perhaps when the war was over, they could make up for lost time by finding everyday applications from the wages of war. Even though starting over from scratch would have been preferable to being hunted like prey, Joseph could not abstain from the selfish notion that humanity deserved something for the suffering they had gone through. He was distracted with trying to rationalize if there could be no justice without doing better than breaking even when he finally snapped back into reality.

"And this here is my laboratory where safety is number one priority." Dr Gadjickt donned his pair of sporty sunglasses. It should perhaps be noted that some practitioners of science do not consider sunglasses to suffice for safety goggles. The opposing school of thought generally maintains that bureaucracy such as that is "square". It should also be noted that the sunglasses fell right off Dr Gadjickt's face and clattered onto the floor. He bent down to pick them up from under a table which he bumped his balding head on.

Joseph hadn't fully noticed the room they were in yet, and he chided himself once again on being so preoccupied since his father's death. The laboratory was filled with various objects, predominantly bags of dry ice, butane torches, knives, a desk and a tripod, other more common tools one might find in a suburban garage, and there was a large red tool chest with one drawer left open to reveal a slew of credit-card shaped multi-tools. Looking at the arrangement gave off the distinct impression that whoever the reckless organization belonged to knew where everything was, if only for the most part.

"The major development isn't really all that scientific," Dr Gadjickt admitted, "but it is right through this door here, and something I'm sure you'll find very interesting. It has nothing to do with pitting cherries, and it doesn't fit in your wallet, but maybe it'll be useful for the war effort."

"Which war effort?" Bill Nye asked. Everyone had forgotten he was still there.

"Um, he's not cleared for classified information, is he?" Dr Gadjickt asked.

"We just found him in the snow because you people wouldn't let him in," Ajay said.

"Yeah, yeah, I get the picture. I'll stay out here," Bill said. "All I want is to get off this barren ice shelf before global warming melts it."

The other four men shrugged at one another, then proceeded into the next lab. This was a far roomier chamber, lined with all manner of conduits running along the wall for electricity, plumbing, and whatnot. Hazard tape clearly marked off many areas to keep clear from, and power tools of all varieties were stowed out as if in use. The most prominent feature was difficult not to see; two massive metallic beasts of bipedal design stood in a pair of matching alcoves to the far corner, strewn with wires and obscured by chests of utilities and computers. An older man in a crinkled grey lab coat over a pair of overalls with a welder's mask affixed above his forehead was bent over a laptop screen with a steaming mug of tea and some plain-looking biscuits. Another man was in the room, crouching behind a tool chest as if to sort through it, but it was those enormous robotic suits that gripped Joseph and Ajay's attention, even as Dr Gadjickt greeted the man in the lab coat.

"Mr Franz Bandelt, is good to see you today!"

Franz shot a discourteous stare Dr Gadjickt's way as he sipped what should have been scalding hot tea. "You know I don't like visitors viewing my unfinished work," he said with much reserve as he set the saucer and cup down on the edge of a tool chest. "Up 'til now, I figured you were respecting my wishes more than the fact we never *get* visitors out here."

Dr Gadjickt did not acknowledge his concerns in such a way that would make it easy to tell whether or not he was genuine about not intending to ignore him. "It is good to see you are working on the Silverbacks again."

"They're called the Goliaths. The Silverbacks are outdated trash designed by a raging egotist. And you know he must have been conceited if I can tell that from his work alone. Arrogant and lazy." Franz took another sip of tea, picked up the biscuit, but set it back down again without biting into it. He looked as though he was standing around doing nothing, but he was really thinking about his work. Thinking is awkward like that.

"That's intriguing. I did not know that about the Silverbacks," Dr Gadjickt said. "Usually you do not talk much unless you need more self-sealing stembolts."

"We haven't had company to talk to before, and I just don't talk to you." Franz finally took a light nibble from his biscuit with a grimace then addressed Joseph. "You're not American, are you? You look American."

"Uh, no. I'm Belarusian." Joseph could feel himself looking annoyed. He introduced himself by name. "I'm leading the Human Resistance."

"Oh, good. I fought against the Americans in the Vietnam war." Franz once more gazed at the Goliaths. "I fought the system which birthed fascism. Now I intend to beat it to death with as much force as I can design." Changing tack, he asked, "Hey, isn't Artemis with you?"

Again, Joseph had to answer, "Sorry, she's on assignment."

The stooped man stood up. "Alright, I've finished."

Joseph and Ajay let out whoops of alarm at the sight of him. No-Legs chuckled. It took them a moment further to realize just what they were seeing. The gofer's head was on backwards. Gofer is a word which here refers to an assistant who is typically sent to fetch things, being told to "go for this" or "go for that". Hence, "gofer". Scars encircled the gofer's neck. The back of his head, with its dishevelled hair, was facing above the front of his chest. His face was jutting at an unfit angle out in front. Everyone ogled the gofer's horrific state of appearance, even those who were used to it savoured a perverse obsession, but Joseph was punctured by a worming sensation that this face was familiar to him somehow. After all, he had set his own long-term game plan into motion, and had memorized the faces of those six men he wished he could reunite. He did not imagine he could ever have reunited this member of Delta Squad. Joseph even reached to the photograph he kept in his wallet to double-check. "Logan Walker?"

That was when the lights turned dark red in the blink of an eye.

"Okay, what the hell happened?" Ajay asked.

"Backup generators," said Frank. "What the hell's going on?"

No-Legs snatched up the walkie on his belt. "Yo, guys, what's the haps up there?"

The others could overhear the voice that responded. "No idea! There was some kind of sound from up above, then the power shut down. We're off to investigate right away."

"Alright, we'll join you." No-Legs stowed his walkie, then beckoned to the others with a self-heating ice cream scoop. "You don't mind coming with me, do you? It's against policy to leave you alone."

"If you don't mind leading the way some more," Joseph said.

"I was the star quarterback for the Edinburgh Hearts back in '06. Just follow my lead."

"Does the card reader on the stairwell have a manual override?" Joseph asked. "How does that keep secure exactly?"

No-Legs stopped in his tracks and frowned. "No, it doesn’t have a manual override. We had to retrofit the old punch card system for an up-to-date electronic reader. We'll have to take the lift lorry loo."

"The lift? Are you bonkers? If the card reader doesn't work, the lift's not gonna," Ajay said.

No-Legs leaned over, exasperated. "We're going to climb up the lift. The car won't be difficult to get through."

"You staying down here?" Dr Gadjickt asked Frank and Logan.

"It's okay," Frank said. "We have the self-destruct down here. If we don't hear from you in a day or two, we'll give it a press."

"Hey, hold on," said Joseph. "I got a few questions for Logan."

"You'll have plenty of time for that later," No-Legs insisted. Logan said nothing as Joseph was ushered out of the room in a hurry. The sudden darkness had convinced him there were more pressing matters afoot.

They passed through Dr Gadjickt's lab where he equipped them with a climbing tether among the other inexplicable bric-a-brac he hoarded, then the four of them made their way to the lift doors. No-Legs seized the centre break with one of those long-reach grabbers, and with the aid of the other three men, they pried the outer doors apart manually. They moved into the lift chamber, looking upwards as No-Legs checked the utensils on his arms. He smiled at a can opener but thought better of it. Joseph was thankful there were wall lights leading up the shaft, but he still couldn't quite make out any details that far up.

"Alright, lads, I'll take point. There's a rung ladder up that wall. I'll be using suction cups, of course. It's a long way up, so hang on tight and don't let go." No-Legs pointed this out to them. Ajay could feel the pressure in his shoulders already and disguised his groan as a sigh. Joseph suggested they all stretch first, but only he was willing to prepare. No-Legs went first, Ajay went second, then Joseph took up the rear behind Dr Gadjickt. Not even a minute passed before the gravity of their arduous climb set in, and they knew there would be no point in turning back around.

A good while passed before Dr Gadjickt broke the silence. "You know, I've been mountain climbing with my buddies before. Have you ever been mountain climbing?"

"Actually, let's just not talk for a while," Ajay said.

"Ajay," Joseph said in a warning tone.

"Just enjoy the silence."

"Ajay."

Ajay grumbled. "There are shit tons of mountains in Kyrat. They're fucking cold and the air is thin." Under his breath, he added, "Like your hairline."

They climbed in silence again, until Joseph coughed. "I'm bored. Let's take our minds off the height and talk about something else."

"So how'd you lose your arms?" Ajay asked No-Legs.

"Ajay!" Joseph shouted.

"It's alright," No-Legs said with a growl. "You said you're with Belarus, right? Would you happen to know a Chloe Gilles?"

Joseph shook his head. "Can't say that I do."

"Did *she* tear your arms off?" asked Ajay.

"She's my kid sister. Y'see, I lost my arms in Berlin, fighting Twilight Sparkle," No-Legs explained.

"Aw jeez," said Joseph.

"What?" asked Ajay.

"Four weeks after Rainbow Dash escaped German custody, Scotland was invaded," said Joseph.

"That's right," No-Legs replied. "There was nothing I could do to find her. I keep hoping she's alive out there somewhere, but at the time, I didn't have the arms to do it. I was in hospital in Minsk for PTSD. They shipped me down here to receive artificial arms."

"Man, that's such a sad story," Ajay said sarcastically.

"Shut up, Ajay!" Joseph shouted.

A couple of stories above, the Red Hammer Platoon was forming into squadrons in a hurry. Commander Shepard was just finishing up a check of equipment when Tony Vercetti raised his hand to ask a question. "Commander, is it true you had a sex change operation? 'Cause I don't know whether to call you sir or ma'am."

Shepard looked annoyed. "I am a male to female transsexual, but you may refer to me as a man because my genes indicate what I was born as. I just find it easier to get what one wants when one's a woman. Now are you ready and tough enough to do what has to be done, marine?"

"Oh, I'm tough enough!" Tony said. "My older brother used to be in jail. You better believe I'm tough enough!" When all was said and done, he and Jamaal joined the rest of their squad in heading up through Lenin Base.

Soon Commander Shepard came upon a corridor where the red emergency lights were flickering on and off. The end of the hall shouldn't have been that far away, but it was cast in total darkness. Shepard was certain he saw a shape down that way, though. "Alright, I can see something down there, but that's no biggie. When there's something strange in your base, who're you going to call? Us, that's who, 'cause we're the Red Hammer Platoon." He smiled after this little pep talk, then shouted all macho-like down the hallway. "State your rank and designation!"

There was a swirling convocation of cyan light, sparkling like a pogonip and illuminating for the briefest of moments that which they all feared. A unicorn was glowering at them all from the darkness as the light coalesced into the horn on her head. In a long burst of indescribable energy, with a streaming, electrical sound unlike anything they'd ever heard before, a ray of cyan light careened through the darkness just shy of a bullet's speed and blew open through Tony's torso. There was a steaming, circular window where his rib cage used to be. Tony collapsed dead onto the metallic floor in a massive puddle of his own blood. Shepard's voice cracked as he called the retreat.

What had started out an excited albeit relaxed trip out of boredom to find the breaker box had become a panicked breach of years' worth of security. Unpractised soldiers now realized how rusty they had gotten being locked up in this frozen nowhere. Down at the main breaker, a man named Demi in a vest with an eye patch and a do-rag scratched at his chin and dinged a small wrench against the frame of the electrical box. A do-rag is a flimsy excuse for a head ornament that resembles an old-fashioned diaper. Demi tried to raise Shepard on the walkie. "Yeah, I'm stumped. As far as I can tell, all the breakers are on. They should be functional. You want I should break it?"

Shepard didn't have time to think through the dilemma while on his feet. "We have hostile intruders!" he shouted through the walkie, spouting some rigmarole military code to the effect of scrambling what few soldiers he had. "Defend the eggheads! Let them take a look at it! Everyone else, get to the mess and start flipping tables for cover! We don't yet know how many there are!"

Doors were sealed here and there so as to lead the ponies directly into the proposed slaughter. The cafeteria remained open to welcome them with an entrée of hot lead. Any other dead ends not securing precious cutting-edge technology were left available as well, such as the interrogation chamber. That they remembered protocol with so little practice was a testament to the Red Hammer Platoon's abilities.

Shepard still had other plans. "Jamaal, come with me. The security cameras are backed up on the same grid as the lights, so we're gonna try and get a look at our invaders and guide the grunts. You're gonna be my other pair of eyes, and my other gun should we run into trouble on the way." As a matter of fact, they didn't run into any trouble along the way, and after a few tense corners, they had found their way into the security room. There were already a couple of Platoon members in there.

"Commander, you're going to want to check this out," the man with blonde, messy hair said.

The woman with short, straight brown hair scanned the numerous screens before her then tapped on one in particular. "There, see? It's very hard to see in the red light. Okay, they should have moved down to this camera. There they are."

Both security officers scooted their wheeled chairs aside so Shepard could lean over the desk. What he saw displeased him. "Do we get sound on this?" he asked, but the security officers shook their heads. The four of them could only watch in silence as a winged pony with a horn stalked with pride into view and thrust open her feathered wings in a dastardly display. "Oh god." Shepard placed a hand to his mouth. "That must be the one called Queen Celestia. The whore of Babylon is back." He went quiet again as two more ponies stalked into view, both of them unicorns. One had a shield for a cutey mark, and the other was wearing some kind of magician's hat and cape. The winged, horned pony appeared to speak to the hat-wearing unicorn. The screen flickered when a wavy sort of aura enveloped the latter's horn, and a similar aura began swirling around the former's throat.

A hideous Equestrian voice rang out through the entire base. "All of your base now belongs to us, the ponies. You have no chance to survive, so make your time now to find peace with your false gods. I am the alicorn Princess Mi Amore Cadenza. Trixie here possesses a rare magical artefact known as the alicorn amulet, a relic so strong that even here on Earth, where there is no magical field, its wearer may cast spells. With this, you will know untold realms of torture if you do not surrender. If you do, you may die peacefully. Furthermore, to achieve this, we have struck a deal with Discord, the most powerful being on your planet. So you see, once again, Equestria is stronger than ever, united with the sole purpose of driving your race to extinction." Then the aura around her throat disappeared, and her voice ceased broadcasting.

"Should you really have told them all that, my ever-loving jelly bean?" the unicorn with the shield marking asked. His name was Shining Armour.

"We have nothing to fear," Trixie said. "There is no way they can get this off of me. My shield magic will be impervious to their bullets."

Princess Cadance, the common name of Princess Mi Amore Cadenza, trotted onwards. "Come, my fluffy kitten of snuggles of love," she beckoned Shining. "Let us not forget the real reason we came here."

"Of course, Schnoogie-Woogie." Shining smiled at her, and the three ponies marched off camera.

"God dammit!" Shepard said. "I cannot believe there's another one of them pony princesses! Every time we think we've won, another one of them blasted piles of puke seeps up out of the woodwork."

"Sir, they're headed off again," said one of the security guards. "What will you do while we sit in here watching the cameras the entire time?"

Shepard studied the monitors then radioed in to the squadrons waiting in the cafeteria. "They are headed your way, repeat, they are headed your way."

"There's only three of them," Jamaal said. "How can three ponies be a threat?"

"Never underestimate a pony," Shepard said. Wise words that would sadly not aid those soldiers in the cafeteria.

Cadance and Shining Armour trotted into the cafeteria right behind Trixie. "Everyone in this room is now dead," the blue unicorn said like an emo web cartoonist. The response was unanimous: Gunfire. Thousands upon thousands of bullets deafened the room as they shot out from behind scores of tables. Each one sought out its targets, aiming to slay the three ponies and be done with the invasion in an instant.

It was not to be. A flash of light glinted on Trixie's horn, and a translucent sphere of cerulean light pushed outward, catching every single bullet in mid-air. Multiple soldiers peeked out from behind the tables out of curiosity, but curiosity killed the cat. Her shield looked like a dome-shaped etch-a-sketch with bullets for iron filings. Her shield burst outward, flinging each bullet away as fast as they had come, striking those who dared to stick their heads out from cover.

Still the brave humans of the Red Hammer Platoon fired. They had no idea the shield was blocking their attacks. They were aware their bullets weren’t getting through, but people can be stubborn at the best of times when figuring out new things. This was anything but the best of times, and they were about to get even worse. The glow from Trixie's horn extended several feet outwards in a long blade, producing fluttery twinkling sounds difficult to liken to anything else. She swung her head down sharply and the magical blade slashed clean through several tables, including several soldiers hiding behind them. The furniture scrunched inward and toppled over on top of people. Several soldiers were wailing at the loss of arms, legs, or worse. Only a few had only lost a prosthetic, while some had been unevenly bisected. One woman had been lying on her side to get a good angle, and she was desperately attempting to stick her lower half back to her torso before she quickly expired.

This was a slaughter. Trixie had plenty of tricks up her sleeve, snapping circular seats off of the tables and whipping them at soldiers left and right. They weren't quite thin or sharp enough to lop anyone's head off, but she could snap a neck or two with them, bash in a few teeth, or concuss people. The violence was as detestable as it always was, and at one point Trixie telekinetically seized someone's automatic rifle and sprayed bullets left and right. Soldiers scrambled to crawl or wheel themselves back under cover. One man tried to reattach his friend's head and got caught in the open.

Pretty soon, the only soldiers left alive had retreated, fallen back to help guard the scientists and brilliant minds they were meant to protect. At least a couple had cowardly fled for their own lives, though there was no escape while the base was under lockdown. When the three little ponies realized there was no one standing in their way, they resumed their procession through the base.

"Sir," said the dark-haired woman at the security console, "They're splitting up."

"What?" Shepard asked, despite hearing her just fine. He shushed her repeating herself and studied the monitors frantically. "They don't know this base. Alright! Check it out. Two of them just went into the interrogation chamber! This is perfect! Seal them in, seal them in!"

The blonde-haired man got his thumb squished under Shepard's on the toggle to close and lock the interrogation room. Shepard gleefully gestured to Jamaal to follow him to the other half of the interrogation room, which had the transparent side of the window between the two rooms. The ponies were stuck in the side with the reflective glass. "Keep an eye for that dipshit with the

telekinesis," Shepard said. "Man, I cannot believe this shit. Can you believe this shit? The ponies got freakin' magical powers. Today's the day we die."

Jamaal cocked his gun. "Go down fighting, Bro-mmander!"

When the pair arrived at the interrogation chamber, Jamaal attempted a slow clap. "Well, well, well. Congratulations on being stupider than a fourth grader. How's it feel to get caught in our trap?"

Shepard shot him a look of both annoyance and embarrassment. "What are you doing? Don't do that. Besides, they can't hear you yet, let alone see you." That shut Jamaal up, and Shepard leaned over a table right before the one-way window. On it was an intercom, but he didn't press its button. He just stared at the two ponies for the moment, watching as they appeared to be arguing. "Look at them. Disgusting. They make me gag worse than silverfish." Shepard shuddered. He was about to push the button to greet his captives when he was through seething with disgust, but in the nick of time got a better idea. He held a finger to his lips to signal to Jamaal to keep his trap shut, and held the intercom button down to eavesdrop on the pair.

"All I'm saying, my little ever-lovin' jellybean, is that we could've been a bit more precautious about invading a human base such as this," Shining Armour was saying.

"And what I've already explained to you, my honey-bunny ducky-downy sweetie chicken pie, is that the more numbers we have, the more vulnerable we are to that wretched thing that should've been destroyed years ago," said Princess Cadance.

"You're absolutely right, of course, my precious pinchy poodle. One of them *is* more dangerous than a whole army of scrumptious humans. It's just that I'd take any precaution to protect my special bitty waffle dripping with syrupy love."

Shepard was going to be sick. "When you two sick monkeys are done, I'd like to read you your last rites." Both ponies looked about for the source of the voice. Shepard allowed himself a little chuckle. "Now tell us how in the hell you found our top secret base™."

Cadance spoke up. "Equestria will conquer Earth. It is inevitable we would explore every conceivable span of this globe. Apart from that, we've been tracking something. Something far more dangerous than any of you vile, murderous humans. Far more dangerous than even our best-trained Equestrian assassin."

She was quiet for a long moment, so Shepard said, "Yeah? And? What is that?" with much impatience in his voice.

The pony princess smiled at drawing him into her dramatic flair, more or less. "We called them Changelings. Supposedly Queen Celestia's chosen six, with the Equestrian army at their flanks, were meant to have wiped out every last one of them following their attempted siege of Canterlot." She looked to Shining. "On the day of our wedding. Remember, dearest dear heart?"

Shining smiled at his wretched partner. "I could never forget, schmoopy-doo."

"They were extinct. Every last one of them. That was the moment at which the gods made themselves known to us alicorns. They deemed us ready to take on the threat that had remained secret for so long."

Jamaal grimaced. "You're really losing me here. What in the hell are you babbling about? There's no such thing as god." Shepard tried to shush him, wanting to cuss him out for being an idiot and interrupting.

"Your first invader, of course," Cadance continued. "The first human to invade Equestria. We were confused at first. Nopony alive had ever seen a human before, except for the Princess sisters. Confused and only speaking your ineloquent pig-tongue, he lashed out at us and shot one of our kind. Murdered him stone dead. I believe the victim's name was Turtleneck. An earth pony who made the nicest sweaters, apart from them itching a bit."

"You're losing me too," Shepard complained. "No recorded human has ever been to Equestria. Ever."

"This is true," Cadance said. "True after him, that is. Even as prisoners, we would not filthy our lands with your ilk. Princess Celestia, who was only known as a princess at the time, turned him into stone, but still Equestrians were shocked at his despicable crime. So we smashed him into bits."

"The incident was covered up," Shining Armour said. "Only myself and the royal family were permitted to speak of it, and only to one another. From then on, Equestria entered a new era—an entire new paradigm—of war. That was after the Changeling attack, of course. We thought the incident was isolated until then, but ponies wouldn't stop speaking of that which was censored. So we hunted every last Changeling down for our protection. And then, as my beautiful, gorgeous wifey-poo said, the gods visited the alicorns."

"Yeah, and then what?" Shepard asked. He felt the story was complete bullshit, but somehow he couldn't help but be intrigued. Where in the heck were they going with this unbelievable charade?

"I did not come here to tell you all about the war you started," Cadance said. "Changelings are able to change their appearance into any roughly-pony-sized creature they've encountered. They're a stealthy, conniving bunch of insects, but an Equestria at war was capable of wiping them out in record time. And oh, it was bitter, but we don't have the luxuries of magic here on Earth. Well, except for Trixie. She will be sure to eradicate every last one of you, along with the lone Changeling that Discord spawned from the magic he stole from us with the gods' blessing. He's the one who's been setting monsters loose across Earth. A messy and chaotic tactic, to be sure."

Shepard felt himself drooling at the long soliloquy. "That was a very elaborate and confusing speech, but now it's time for you to die."

"Come in here and try it," Shining Armour dared him. "We'd love to meet you cowards face-to-face."

"Oh, we won't need to do that." Shepard then gave Jamaal the signal. Jamaal went over to a lever on the wall and yanked it down. The ponies finally dropped their bravado when dry ice vapour began pouring in through the ventilation to suffocate them. They leapt at the walls, trying to reach the vents, trying to break the mirror, to ram down the door, but there was nothing they could do. The couple were trapped. They swore and cursed and threatened, but it was all they could do. The eventuality was that they gave up.

Plunked on the ground facing each other, gasping for breath, better than they deserve, the ponies tried to comfort one another in their hideous way. "I guess now our foal will never be born," Cadance said to Shining Armour.

"A foal? I didn't know we were having a foal." He smiled even though their unborn child would die with them.

Cadance smiled at what must have been putrid thoughts of them raising their vomitous offspring to hate and kill humankind. "I even picked out a name for them."

"What is it?" Shining asked as though they both would live through this when they would not.

"Flurry Heart." Cadance coughed. They both turned silent now, but had not yet expired. They had reached out their hooves to touch, but now dragged their faces closer together.

"Ew, gross!" Jamaal said. "They're kissing! That's rancid!"

Shepard let out a long sigh through his nose. "It's okay. They're both dead now."

"What are we going to do about this Changeling?"

"Hm?"

"I said, what are we going to do about this Changeling, Commander?"

"Oh, that? That was bullshit. Just lies told to try and scare us. Still, I can't believe it was that easy to finish these two off. It's the twat they call Trixie that's gonna be the real problem. Let's go."

There was a loud, metallic rattling overhead of the group climbing the lift shaft. "Ut. Hold on," No-Legs said. "We've reached the lift car."

The sounds of carnage did not reach the elevator shaft, but the group down there were well aware something was wrong. They had reached the bottom of the lift car by this time as No-Legs had announced, and Ajay was griping about how they would get past the encompassing obstacle. No-Legs had a time of it with his artificial limbs, trying to get some salad tongs around the handle to the underside panel. "This base had been abandoned when we decided to occupy it," No-Legs explained. "We haven't seen much action, so a lot of it hasn't gotten used. That's why everything's still stuck tight." After a few tries of tugging, he realized it was a push door.

Joseph couldn't see how very well past No-Legs' butt, but No-Legs had hoisted himself up into the rickety metal lift car in just a couple of seconds. Joseph himself felt a bit more hesitant on account of the fact he had entered roughly zero lifts through their underside via a ladder in his lifetime, and knew that survival was an issue of caution. Still, he showed some gumption, a word which here means "daring to do something considered risky", a phrase which here means "daring", to clamber up as high as he dared then try and seize the bottom of the lift. No-Legs was quick to correct the leader of the Human Resistance that he should grab the handle on the exterior of the door which had been locked into place for better leverage, and that proved a much easier method. Ajay heard this of course, and was able to do it right the first time to flaunt his smugness at Joseph. At the same time, Dr Gadjickt let out a cry as he had

been forgotten below and almost yanked off the ladder by the cable still connecting the four. No-Legs helped Dr Gadjickt into the lift, and the hard part was over. They shut the bottom door, and No-Legs used the telescopic portions of his arms to reach the upper one. A folding ladder enabled them access to the cage-like top of the lift, and their climb resumed.

There is an old adage, a phrase which here means "tired cliché", that goes, "What goes up must come down." Certainly there may be exceptions, but to generalize, objects such as balloons, birds, babies and bowling balls will often drop back down to earth when hurled. This is due to multiple possible phenomena: Gravity is the most popular, but the Creationists would have called it "intelligent falling". The third phenomenon is "bad luck". Luck isn't an actual phenomenon, but a conceptual one referring to the uneven distribution of success and failure throughout existence beyond sane measures of effort.

When the group had reached the tippy-tippy top of the lift shaft, No-Legs pried open the outer cage doors with his artificial arms and climbed up from the ladder and onto his feet. "Hold up, lads. Someone's there." He was greeted by the figure of Bill Nye who stared at him goggle-eyed. "I forgot about you. Is this where you've wandered off to?"

Bill Nye answered by drawing an L4-53R and blasting No-Legs in the gut with a protracted burst. It was a favourite spot to aim at. No-Legs emitted a horrific bellow then toppled backwards. His body missed the rim completely and headed for the long stretch of inky void below.

Pardon me, but there was a knock at the door and this war reporter must vacate through the window via this dumbwaiter.

It has been a week since this war reporter has last sat down to record the dire and dutiful events of this wearisome war, and the collaboration of notes are in somewhat disarray. One is used to making do without a decoder and spyglass, but at this point, one would do little help. Where did we leave off? Ah, yes.

Tom reaffixed the Iron Wolves Corporation patch to where it had been torn off from him by Edward and Henry. Edward looked back at him with a smug downwards smile and said, "Watch out for friendly fire, Taylor-Randall!" before Mr Trump called for them again to meet his fourth wife, Ivanka. He thought to himself that no matter what army he worked for, there were bound to be jerks not taking a life-threatening situation seriously and trying to demoralize him.

Wait, that can't be right. That's not where we left off. Oh, what a hell of a week.

When No-Legs' corpse fell through the elevator shaft, his weight on the cable yanked Joseph's body clean off the ladder. Ajay noticed Joseph fall away and had to grip onto the rungs with all the strength in his arms to keep from getting torn off with him. Joseph's body collided with Ajay and Dr Gadjickt, the latter who said, "Ow! Watch it!" Now there were two bodies suspended in mid-air that Ajay and Dr Gadjickt had to support, and both were doing so with some strain.

Ajay could hear the fabric in his ACUs tearing. "I've got to unclip the strap before they take me with them!"

"No, don't!" Joseph's voice was a grating yell. "You'll kill us both!"

"No-Legs is dead!" Dr Gadjickt shouted. "I can see him! He's been hit with an L4-53R laser!"

Joseph shuddered as he strained to catch his breath. "I'll unclip my strap! If you do yours, it'll kill me!"

"We're too close to the top!" Ajay said. "I can almost see over it!"

Joseph let out an exasperated growl. His hand fumbled around under his upper back. Once he found the carabiner, he pressed all over it, taking a few seconds before he found the right end of the latch. A great weight was dropped from his shoulders as No-Legs' corpse plummeted into the dim light. He was no longer visible by the time they heard the clang of metal somewhere below. From there, Joseph struggled to grasp onto the ladder for upwards of half a minute before Dr Gadjickt finally reached up to help his twisting body to turn in the correct direction. There wasn't much space allowed between Ajay and the self-professed doctor, so Ajay begrudged to slide to one side and allow Joseph up half of the narrow emergency ladder.

The three men, grasping for breath and more panicked than they'd been the entire climb, managed to pull themselves up onto solid ground and unbuckle themselves from each other. "What happened?" Joseph asked. "Who could have shot him? There's nobody up here."

Commander Shepard's thumb jammed the walkie-talkie broadcast button for the eighth time, shouting for someone, anyone, to report. It was then that the choked voice of a soldier came through. "Too late, sah. The pony has broken through. We're all...we're done for."

Shepard was not happy about this news, no, not one bit. "Dammit, what the hell went down in there?" He did not wait for an answer. He stood there, fuming and wracking his brain.

"Sir, couldn't we call for ally backup?" Jamaal asked.

"It's a *secret* base," Shepard said. He marched in the direction of the security office again.

"What about the Human Resistance? Joseph or whatever his name was?"

"We have to find them, first. If their people are still out there, only their leader can command them." Shepard stopped. "The scientists are in trouble. Jamaal, I need you to head back to security. Keep in contact with me for any developments on the monitors. If you see those two guys from the Resistance, find them and get them someplace safe."

Shepard knew where the brainiacs ought to be. They had been sent to the base's engineering room to try and fix whatever was wrong with the power. The engineering room was where much of the base's infrastructural systems were controlled from, including but not limited to electrical power, heating, ventilation, plumbing and so forth. It was also a fairly secure room, ordinarily, but they were not up against an ordinary foe. When he rounded the hallway, he was stunned by the sight of a soldier's leg on the floor sticking through the door. Had the pony already been here? Had they been attacked? He cocked his gun as quietly as he could and approached. What he saw was worse than a felled soldier: There was nothing at all. There was just a severed leg lying on the tile floor.

"Sir? Do you want the good news or the bad news first?" Jamaal asked over the walkie.

"This is not a day for good news!" Shepard shouted.

"I've found the scientists in the cafeteria. The pony's got them."

In the next second, that fact became apparent to Shepard. Trixie's voice was once again broadcasting throughout the base. "Trixie has your eggheads, humans. They will die slowly if you do not acquiesce to Trixie’s demands. Otherwise they may die quickly. The Great and Merciful Trixie demands your attention.

"Somewhere in this base is a Changeling, a vile insectoid pony that can steal the appearance of anypony it's seen. It could probably even pose as one of you. If you do not aid me in destroying this creature, it could very well spell the end of *both* our races. It is cunning, and it is wicked. If you fear us ponies, you have not seen anything yet."

Joseph shook his head by the top of the elevator shaft. "Why did it have to be ponies?" He noticed Ajay creeping away. "Where are you going? I need you to look after the doctor here. We should go together and find the Red Hammer Platoon's leader."

"Uh, no!" Ajay shouted before running off into the darkness.

"God dammit, what the hell are you thinking?" Joseph stretched out his arms then let them slap his hips in frustration. Trusting Ajay to take care of himself, Joseph wished he could've had another pair of eyes to protect Dr Gadjickt as they both set out in search of a Red Hammer Platoon member.

"You are going to help the other scientists, right?" Dr Gadjickt asked.

"The smart thing would be to get some help and figure out the situation first," Joseph said. Dr Gadjickt concurred, and, knowing the layout of the base like the back of his hand, led Joseph through the dim redness to the security office Shepard had left Jamaal in moments ago. "Oh, it's you," Joseph said when the two had met again.

"I would've come get you, but you came to me first," Jamaal said.

Dr Gadjickt started pointing out security monitors to Joseph, finding that Trixie had gathered the brain trust in the cafeteria. "Brain trust" is a phrase which here means "repository of intelligence". Joseph pointed at a particular monitor himself. "Why's that one off?"

"That one is top secret ultra-mega maximum hyper security," Dr Gadjickt said. "And oh no! The ponies have messed up my lavoratory, where hygiene is number one priority!"

Joseph drew his gun. "Dr Gadjickt, are you going to be safe here in the security room?"

Dr Gadjickt nodded thoughtfully. "Is secure."

Joseph pointed at Jamaal. "I need you to come with me. We've got to save those scientists."

"If I have to." Jamaal too cocked his gun for action.

Shepard arrived at the cafeteria ahead of them, threatening to steal their thunder. "Freeze in the name of the Red Hammer Platoon!"

"Are you alone?" asked Trixie who was not surprised by his entrance. "You humans don't listen very well. Trixie asked you to bring the Changeling to her."

"I am prepared to negotiate for the lives of the hostages," Shepard lied.

"Negotiate what? That Changeling is as much a danger to—" Trixie was interrupted as Shepard let off a shot. Her shield deflected it easily to where it landed at the foot of a scientist. Trixie rolled her eyes. "Maybe you'd listen better if you couldn't talk so much!" Her horn was once again enshrouded in light. Shepard could feel his nose and mouth sealing over with blank flesh! He almost dropped his gun as his other hand trembled to feel this new skin, these new nerves that had closed up his orifices. He could now only make frightened, unintelligible mumbles and push at where his lips had once been with his tongue. That wasn't even the worst of it. In a few moments, Shepard was beginning to run out of air. He was suffocating, and Trixie was watching him with cruel boredom. In a few minutes, he was feeling dizzy to the point where he dropped to his knees. He couldn't even gasp for breath. All he could do was eke out tiny, piteous moans. His vision blurred as he collapsed onto his side before the light blue pony. Not much longer after, he passed out. Nobody was able to help him, and he was left to expire.

Trixie shook her head and groaned from exasperation. "It takes so long to do things the human way!"

It didn't take Joseph long to run into Ajay again. "Ajay! Where the hell did you run off to?"

"We can't go in the cafeteria," Ajay said. "A pony's in there, and she just killed in a way I've never seen before."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"We're up against something we can't stop."

That same voice spoke out from behind Joseph. "Joseph? Who the hell are you talking to, man?" To Joseph's eyes and ears, this other man was Ajay Ghale as well.

"What the hell?" Joseph stared from one Ajay to the other. They looked identical, even to their pouty, self-righteous resting expressions. He tried to think of something else to say, anything else, but "What the hell?" is a phrase which here means, "How are there two identical people here if they're neither twins nor triplets?" He was at a loss for other words, which let this correspondent tell you, can be a very frustrating position to be in.

"I'm the real Ajay," both Ajays said in unison, a word which here means "at the same time." "Don't listen to him!"

Something clicked inside Joseph's head. Something the pony had said. Changeling. The word was known to him from pre-event television as a creature which could change its appearance using special effects, typically to trap the protagonist in situations exactly like this one. Then the writer would have the protagonist kill one of them and arbitrarily declare the living one was the original, creating something of a plot hole, a phrase this reporter is not sure what it means but will be sure to look up later. "Alright now, this is simple," Joseph bluffed, a word which here means "to blave". "I just have to ask a question to both of you, and whoever gets it right gets to live. But a shapeshifter might be able to copy thoughts and memories. After all, he copied the other guy's clothes. But emotion? If the imposter understood emotions, he would join with us rather than deceive us. So all I have to do is ask something only the real Ajay would believe."

"That doesn't make any sense," Jamaal complained.

The Ajay behind Joseph said, "We haven't got time for this!"

The one in front sighed, "Just do it already. Ask me whatever."

Joseph cocked his gun. "Why are we going to Kyrat?"

The Ajay in front said, "To stop the evil ponies once and for all!"

Joseph made his decision. He fired at the Ajay that had answered then blew the smoke from the nozzle. "Wrong answer."

Ajay sauntered up from behind Joseph and stared at awe at his double. There was a big, dark hole in the centre of his forehead. His eyes were glassy and empty. "God damn. You're one cold motherfucker," he said of Joseph. "I'm glad you're on my side." Joseph rolled his eyes, and the three headed off for the cafeteria.

Trixie held the remainder of the cafeteria's occupants in the grip of fear. It was the Equestrians' favourite grip on account of them having hooves. "What'll we do?" one scientist, a meteorologist, said to another, a physicist. "She's killing men left and right using means that defy cause and effect. It goes against every fundamental principle of science!"

"Nonsense," said a mammologist. "Magic is nothing but a sufficiently advanced form of science."

"Trixie will show you how advanced it is!" Trixie said. With a zap of technicolour energies, she forced the mammologist's penis to expel his smaller intestines. It was lengthy, and it was painful. In fact, he was still in the process of dying when Joseph's group reached the room. "You better have brought Trixie the Changeling this time," Trixie told them. "She's getting bored of killing humans. Can you believe it? She finally has her magical powers back after six years, and she's getting bored of them."

"I am the head of the Human Resistance," Joseph said.

"Ah, yes, Daniel."

"No, Joseph. The Changeling is dead, as are your two cohorts. I killed the Changeling myself."

"Trixie doesn't suppose you brought proof of this, have you? Perhaps its blood, to check for Equestrian markers?" Trixie asked.

"No, but if that would satisfy you, we could. Frankly, nothing would satisfy us short of your death."

"Anything you can do, Trixie can do better. Did you not just see that man she killed? Or that man? Or all those?" Trixie pointed out some of the various humans she killed, even going so far as to telekinetically lift portions of them for highlighting. "Face facts. Your weapons are useless against Trixie's magic. You and your resistance are doomed."

"Never!" a voice rang out.

"Who's that?" a neurologist asked an astronomer. "And what sort of scientist is he?"

"I'm Bill Nye. I'm an engineer." Bill Nye turned to grimace at the neurologist.

"An engineer? That's more a glorified electrician than an actual scientist," said the astronomer.

"Never mind that," Bill said, turning to face Trixie. "Magic isn't real. It has no power over science, the true phenomenon we should all have faith in!"

"You're a very bold, if anachronistic, man," Trixie said. "Magic has proven time and again to outlast science. It is timeless. You, however, are not." Her horn glowed once again, projecting a dazzling beam at Bill's chest.

But nothing happened. "What in Tartarus?" Trixie tried firing off another spell. Again, there was no effect.

Bill tried to contain his self-assured smile. "See? I told you. Magic has no power over the enlightened mind." He tapped two fingers against his temple.

Trixie snorted and whinnied, scraping a front hoof across the linoleum. "Trixie can still stab you to death, egghead!" She lowered her head, and the scientists all scooted backwards as one to put some distance from her.

"And we can still shoot you!" Joseph wasted little time in raising his gun and firing. Ajay and Jamaal followed suit. Once again, the bullets pinged against Trixie's force field, ricocheting outward. A scientist screamed for Joseph and his allies to dive out of the way, and smartly they did. They found cover behind broken tables.

"The hell? She has some kind of shield! *That's* not very scientific!" Jamaal complained.

The physicist raised a finger. "Actually, force fields are a thing. The earth itself is a natural electromagnet, whose barrier deflects space debris..."

Joseph and Jamaal spent an entire clip each trying to break through Trixie's barrier, but nothing doing, a phrase which here means, "It didn't work in the slightest." Ajay had to shout. "This isn't working! We've got to come up with something else!"

That was the cue for "something else" to arrive. Tromping loudly amidst whirring gizmos and clacking gyros, a metal suit of armour crammed its way through the cafeteria doors. Joseph recognized it as one of the Goliaths from down below. He also noticed a long, heavy-duty cable trailing from its back along the floor. "Franz?"

"Logan Walker, sir. I decided I couldn't sit and wait to blow the base up."

"Wait, your head's on backwards. Can you see outta that thing?"

"My face is forward. It's a little uncomfortable, but I can manage."

Trixie did not give a crap about this new development. A long ethereal laser once again extended from her horn. Logan aimed the right arm of the Goliath at her, and fired from a high-intensity, heavy artillery assault rifle, the kind used to demolish houses of suspected traitors. This time the nag's shield showed signs of stress, shining white around where the enormous shells were colliding. Her bubble was caving inwards, until it shattered under the duress. Logan did not stop firing for one second, as no one should when faced with a pony. He kept spraying Trixie with bullets until she was naught but a smear on the wall and her alicorn amulet was a twisted scrap of slag.

When the ringing in everyone's ears as a result of the deafening noise had cleared away, there was little pause before rejoicing. Everyone stood and let out a whoop and a cheer, followed by an awkward silence as they gazed upon the bodies of the dead. Three ponies had resulted in this carnage. Three ponies alone had nearly wiped out the entire Red Hammer Platoon. There were survivors, yes, even amongst the wounded, but it was still a harrowing experience and an awful indicator of how vulnerable they were.

When Joseph's turn to report to the infirmary came, he brought up the news. "This is under the strictest confidence," he told the medical doctor. "I have an injured pony that I've successfully imprisoned for information. I need you to ensure he'll survive."

The doctor adjusted her glasses. Her name was Dr Porky. It said so on her ID tag. She looked shocked at first, but soon pulled herself together. "My god! Of course. We here at Lenin Base are no stranger to more unorthodox measures of research and development. There's just one problem. We're under lockdown because the replacement commander believes there may still be another Changeling out there."

Joseph had given his debriefing about the two Ajays, and everyone was under the persuasion that the ponies had been too fanatical about finding this enemy for its presence to have been a ruse. "I admit I don't know much about medical science, but I did bring a blood sample of my pony prisoner. Do you think it could be used for a comparison?"

Dr Porky again adjusted her glasses. "That could be done. There must be countless markers differentiating the Equestrians from the humans. It'll just be a couple of hours."

Joseph spent that time observing the damage that had been done and the way the Red Hammer Platoon operated. He offered his help here and there, though they assured him they could handle themselves. Ajay complained impatiently about the lockdown, and Franz Bandelt returned to work on his Goliath almost as if nothing had happened.

Joseph stole the opportunity to speak with Logan. He still found the backwards head thing a little weird. It can often be difficult for the human mind to counteract the instinct of noticing differences from a common norm. Joseph had made the unconscious decision long ago not to impugn people with disabilities by rejecting these impulses when they came up. "You think they'll let you out of here?" he asked.

"Well, yes, I'm allowed to leave, but I have nowhere to go. This is my home now," Logan said. It was still weird speaking with him when he had to face behind himself.

"Let me tell you that I have Colin Dwell on board the Red October. I can imagine he'd be dying to see you again."

Logan balked. "You mean Irish? That bugger's alive?" He took a moment to think. "He wouldn't want to see me like this. I can't go."

Joseph shook his head and started molesting his hat as usual. "No, I can't accept that. You guys haven't seen each other in, what, one, two years? Besides, he's been through some heck himself, I'll tell you what. Guy has awful burns all over his body. And frankly, I need you two. I need you two to help me win this war."

Logan was quiet for a longer while. "I'll come. I guess I owe it to my friend."

Dr Porky emerged from behind Joseph, mildly startling him. "Excuse me, I have to test your blood now."

"What? Oh, alright." Joseph held his arm out without a thought. "I just realized this was my suggestion. Still, leave no stone unturned." He gave a chuckle.

Dr Porky smiled. "It's a shame we can't perform an operation to turn Mr Walker's head back around. Medical science isn't advanced enough to allow us to readjust the changes that have been made to his neck bones and oesophagus and what have you." She

replaced the needle she had used to draw Logan's blood then stepped over to prick Ajay as he was eating some pasta puttanesca out of an MRE packet.

Dr Porky cried out. "You're a pony! The vial turned blue! This man's an Equestrian!"

Ajay stood and glared. Everyone else within earshot also got up. Joseph's heart skipped a beat of panic. An electric green glow spiralled down Ajay's body, and in his place was a hideous monstrosity even worse than the ponies humanity had come to fear. The pony was shiny and black like an insect's carapace. It had holes in its legs, holes in its dragonfly-like wings, and psychotic, segmented teal eyes. It hissed, spitting and taking flight off the ground.

Too bad it had been surrounded by Red Hammer Platoon soldiers. They fired on the Changeling from almost every angle, splattering it dead like a bug on a windshield. The last Changeling was dead.

So was Joseph's sense of security. If Ajay had been a Changeling, then the other Ajay must have been real. He had made a grave mistake. His legs wobbled under himself like lime gelatine. He felt queasy. He could feel himself becoming clammy and sweaty. *No. No, no,* he thought. He just kept thinking that word, over and over again, forgetting everything about where he was, and even losing all sense of feeling in his body until he fell over. He was staring at the floor, but it felt as though it was both too close and too far away at the same time. He became dimly aware of Logan asking, "You alright there, mate?"

Joseph couldn't deal at the moment. He needed to find himself. He sputtered something about the bathroom, which he instinctively raced to, opening doors as he went until he found it. He slammed and locked the door behind himself, letting out a sob that pained his throat. He stumbled to the toilet and emptied his bladder, still shaking as though he'd suffered some calamitous head wound.

It is a grim thing, making a terrible, irreversible mistake. Life is a fragile thing. Not just people's lives, but the values they hold dear. Too easily can they be shattered into infinitesimal pieces, even by a perfectly honest mistake. Joseph rued his very being, curling up on the floor of that bathroom and hitting the tile floor until his fist hurt and his knuckles bled.

He couldn't stay in there forever. Eventually he had to come out. A knock on the door was paired with the voice of Franz Bandelt. "Matskevich. You in there? There's something important to show you."

Joseph wondered who else knew what he had done yet. He opened the bathroom door (unlocking it first, obviously). He said nothing and listened to Franz speak. "We have a member of the Red Hammer Platoon we think would be crucial to the Human Resistance. His name's Mohammad Kareem."

"Mohammad's been working on a unique project for us. Top secret." Franz led a shattered Joseph through the base until they came to a massive shuttered door. "He came to us from the University of Sana. We found the horn of a unicorn named Time Turner which had special properties. Well, I'll let him tell you all about it. Aw, heck, I can't wait. It's time travel."

Another word went through Joseph's mind: "What?"

The shuttered door rose open revealing a massive, empty cargo bay. A middle-eastern man with tired eyes and exotic clothes turned his head to them in surprise then approached. He had neat-looking scrappy black hair and beautiful blue eyes like might be described in a cheap romance novel as "limpid pools". "What's happened?"

"Mohammad, we have need of you."

Mohammad interrupted Franz with a hand. "Please, call me Jinn."

Franz didn't balk at being corrected. "Jinn, we want you to go back in time to prevent the tragedy that befell our base."

"Please," Joseph begged. "You have to do this. Terrible mistakes have been made. They must be corrected." He looked from Jinn to Franz, worried that they might be pulling a joke on him.

But Jinn wasn't joking. "I can do you one better," he said. "I can prevent this whole war from ever happening."

7. The War Begins

Jinn brushed his hair back and readjusted the complicated headset he wore. It looked like a circular strip of metal with many wires stapled down, and more wires trailed down to a small wrist-mounted console. "About a year ago, we captured a pony named Time Turner. I performed various experiments on him to study unicorn physiology. After he succumbed, I used the nerve contained within his horn to create this device."

Franz Bandelt let out a grunt. "Okay, so I had some help," Jinn admitted. Franz let out another grunt. "Okay, a lot of help."

Joseph sniffed loudly. "So you're holed up in this huge warehouse inside Lenin Base for this?"

"Sort of. It's not just to keep this dangerous technology safe. It's also to test it out. You see, it allows me to travel back in time fifteen minutes. If you check behind these various cubicles, you'll find copies of me traveling back in time repeatedly. Don't know where I'm going yet." Jinn gestured behind himself. "It can get awkward for the uninitiated to walk in here on a bunch of apparent clones. I also can't touch my past self. I also have to keep explaining myself if I go further back in time than I have before." Here he rolled his eyes in annoyance.

Franz nodded. "Jinn here's our most ambitious scientific pursuit yet. Temporal mechanics are tricky and go above most people's heads. Even mine, I admit, and I'm a damn genius. My whole family is. My father invented dolls that he wanted to use to assassinate Hitler, but they went with that pigeon guy instead."

Joseph pointed at Jinn with both fingers. "Uh, sorry, we were talking about him time traveling, right?"

"Whoa, hold on there," Jinn said. "Use my pronouns. Ji, jin, jinself. Once I acquired this ability, I nicknamed myself Jinn. I've been obsessed with mysticism ever since I was a kid." Ji grinned.

"Uh, sorry." Joseph was still feeling a tad distraught over Ajay's tragedy and discrediting towards the notion of time travel. Still, he deemed to ask the question. "How come I don't see a lot more of you?"

Jinn shrugged. "Not sure. I'm thinking maybe I don't need to anymore. Or can't." Ji nodded jin head sideways.

"Yeah, but we're still here. Doesn't that mean you didn't succeed?" Joseph asked.

"I think perhaps we won't notice it, but I have to do it first before things will change. We haven't reached a conclusion on that yet." Jinn grinned again, sticking jin hands into jin pockets and rocking on jin heels. "Any more questions, or am I ready to get going?"

"Let me come with you," Joseph said.

"Ah, sorry." Jinn wagged a finger. "The wrist uplink controls this headset which has to read my brainwaves to transport a single contiguous organism. Not sure yet why my clothes come with me, but I can't explain why my hair does, either. We've tried piggybacking. It didn't work."

"So I've got to rely on some guy I've just met to save the world. I don't know how in the hell you're gonna stop this war."

"Warning people? But hey, that's life. Sometimes you gotta put your faith in a total stranger. Not everybody can know their leader." Jinn slipped jin hand out of jin pocket and tapped on the wrist uplink. "Welp. Here's hoping I don't mutate into a green banana." Ji slipped away under the cover of a cubicle, activated the time travel device, and disappeared from sight with a zap.

THE WAR BEGINS

Moving in fifteen-minute intervals, Jinn had to travel through time 210,379 and a half times to go back six years (ji rounded the half up). Ji was also sure ji'd lost count a couple of times, but thankfully jin chronometer (jin watch) kept track of how many minutes ji'd gone back. Ji had also become severely motion sick having to jump to jin left every time so that ji didn't end up materializing fused through a wall on account of the rotation of the earth. The rotation around the sun moved the Earth roughly 16,750 miles every fifteen minutes, but somehow he didn’t end up deep in space. He had a theory that some technojargon he didn’t understand yet was contained within the Earth’s lower atmosphere, or maybe the unicorn’s magic only allowed him to displace laterally. Ji had to stop to take a couple bathroom breaks and grab a soda to quench jin thirst, but in the end ji made it to 2012, feeling like ji'd run around in circles about 2,191 times. Ji felt like he'd run over forty miles, but ji wasn't too exhausted to feel a pang of panic in jin stomach.

Ji was alone. The Russians had abandoned the base by 2012, and the Red Hammer Platoon hadn't even been formed yet. Ji was glad he had brought rations with jin, but that didn't stop jin from worrying what would have happened had ji forgot and had to wait out the arrival of the Platoon. That would've made for some awkward explanations. Again. Ji had to open the shutter to the warehouse manually and trek the entire way up to the top of Lenin Base. There was a failsafe to open the coded door from the inside, but ji didn't know the code to get back in, so ji left it open just in case. On the way to do that, ji checked if the Russians had left behind any military rations, but ji was out of luck.

Antarctica was timeless. Ever the bed of endless winter, ji trudged knee-deep in the snow. Ji kept telling jinself ji just had to head straight to eventually reach the coastline, but the trek was long, dull, freezing, and lonely. Ji checked jin navigational equipment every so often and made jin way without landmarks to where ji'd made the eight-hundred kilometre crossing of Drake Passage to Cape Horn. At the coast, Jinn had another moment of panic. Ji almost thought ji'd forgotten jin inflatable raft. "I'm getting way too jumpy for not even having left the continent yet," ji said aloud to jinself just to hear a human voice.

The seas were rough, but ji wasn't some lazy western suburbanite, and the Red Hammer Platoon had provided jin with enough tech to make the journey easier. Ji was glad to lighten jin load by unpacking and using it all, and the telescopic, foldable sail made jin breaks less of a waste. Once ji hit civilization, ji confirmed the date with a newspaper, hoping that it wasn't old, and it was a hop, skip and a jump across the Atlantic to Russia. The phrase, "hop, skip and a jump" refers to when traveling from one place to another is a cinch. It would be inadvisable to attempt hopping, skipping and jumping across an ocean.

Ji had missed the pony invasion by a week. Like Dirk Smidgeon's wartime propaganda had said, the Equestrians started their way north through the Americas where their activities were less traceable. They were already greasing the wheels of Mexico and the United States as the first-ever extradimensional ambassadors to the planet Earth. Jinn felt weird, watching everyone around jin react so dramatically to the existence of the ponies when ji'd spent six bloody years of war fighting against them. The people were scared of these impossible alien beings, but they had yet to learn true fear.

Jinn's stomach was knotted as he waited a month for Russia to mobilize. Ji thought things were crazy when Vladimir Putin was denounced by his own people for accepting the ponies after all they'd done in Southeast Asia. Events turned even more surreal, at least for the civilians around jin, when Russia formed the Human Resistance and sought out unifying the world under the Russian language which the ponies mysteriously spoke. Jinn had wondered about that, but still ji had not discovered the answer. Ji also regretted that ji could not uphold jin promise to stop the war as it started, but so many records had been demolished ji needed to watch things transpire to get a better idea of how things went down.

The ponies had invaded in full force. Whole factions snuck through South America which nobody ever talked about before. Ji could always go back and try again, but ji wouldn't be able to muster a collaborative force potent enough to fight them off. Ji also lamented that ji couldn't just duplicate Time Turner's horn by finding it again, because that would have caused a paradox in the origin of jin own time travel device. That was the theory, anyway.

Pretty soon, the Williams family ascended to leadership over the Human Resistance, because Peter Williams had held a high-ranking military position in the United Kingdom, and partly, no doubt, because of his anti-Putin sentiments. Ji thought ji should wait until James Williams had been nominated as the leader of the Human Resistance due to his tactical knowhow and natural combat ability before ji made jin move. Ji got a faint buzz, seeing these historical figures in person for the first time, as opposed to hearing about them over the radio. Ji was able to guess who Peter, James, Becky and Daniel were at humanity's celebration founding its resistance.

Jinn had been wondering when or if ji'd get a chance to speak with James when James had asserted to his father he wished to mingle among the people for whom he was fighting to defend. James came down off that balcony of the building that would soon become the headquarters of the Human Resistance and later be destroyed. Jinn knew that ji had yet to earn jin credentials in the war. Jin past self had not yet experienced the horrors of Yemen's invasion by the Iron Wolves Corporation, nor the pegasi obliterating the majority of the Middle East with their horrific sandstorms. Jinn would have to remain low key the entire time. "Low key" is a phrase which here means "inconspicuous".

"You are Jonathan Williams?" Jinn asked when ji had crept up behind James.

James turned around. His brow was furrowed, but he wore a smile. "Uh, James Williams. Can't you get that right? John is my friend, John Horridge. He's somewhere around here." James whirled around in a cursory search with a laugh. He was, to Jinn, the epitome of the poster boy soldier. A "poster boy" refers to someone who can be perceived as an exemplary, if not ideal, model for something.

This was it, Jinn thought. Ji was going to change history. "Listen to me. Disaster awaits in Berlin."

"Yeah, I know. That's where those neo-Nazi pony bastards are holed up. Don't worry. I've got your back." James patted Jinn's shoulder. Ji would ordinarily have been annoyed when somebody patronized jin like this, but somehow ji felt reassured. It was a different time. The human race was banding together. Nobody was wont to patronize anybody. Or maybe this was that "charisma" stuff ji'd often heard about?

Still, Jinn could not shake jin rising dread, and ji could not abandon jin mission. Not when ji'd come this far. Ji didn't spend several nights in igloos and sleep on rough oceans and stay in seedy hotels and receive awful service from surly flight attendants to give up now. Ji seized James by the shoulders. "I'm serious. Twilight Sparkle will eat you alive. You have to think up something else!

Let's see. Dammit, the ponies already disarmed North America's nuclear warheads, and Putin sold out his country. We can't just ask Cuba for theirs."

"Whoa, man, you're talking about irradiating a major city. We wanna save the Earth, not go down with it." James was still managing to smile despite being visibly weirded out with his crooked eyebrows and faltering smirk. "Did you say 'eat'?"

Jinn was surprised by James's rebuttal. Had the early days of the war really been this optimistic? In jin time, humanity's sacrifices were already too great. Ji gave James a shake, mostly to keep jinself in the game. People were beginning to stare, and Jinn thought ji could see Daniel some ways away looking concerned. "I mean it. You're going to die there and then. You've got to change whatever it is you're planning to do. A straight rush for the capitol building will never succeed!"

James's cheery demeanour had been spent. He gave Jinn a commanding shove to break free of jin. "You know, if you don't have any faith in humanity, I don't know why you showed up here in the first place." With that, he started to walk away. Nothing would stop him, and the bouncers would stop Jinn if ji persisted. They were already closing in to eject jin. Begrudgingly, and keeping an eye over jin shoulder, ji allowed the bouncers to escort jin out, though not before letting him smuggle a few frogs' legs out inside a bundle of napkins in his pocket.

James took one last glance in Jinn's direction as he was approached by Daniel, but could no longer see the stranger. "What was that all about? Someone drunk?" Daniel asked.

James chuckled. "Nothing, little bro. Nobody I recognize. This bizarre war just has some people pretty freaked out is all. So who's this Canadian pen pal you mentioned is coming to Moscow?"

Once ji was out of eyeshot of the partygoers, Jinn activated jin time travel device at least several dozen times. Ji really wished ji could travel in larger increments, or just straight to when ji wanted to arrive, but then ji guessed apart from being unable to work that kink out, ji might end up somewhere far from the Earth. That would suck for jin way worse than having to go back and remember to replace a bunch of neutral, non-connotative pronouns with absolutely made-up terms.

Stalking James the day before wasn't too difficult. He had something of a paparazzi, a word which here means "criminals invading a person's privacy with a particularly rape-y vibe, usually to suspiciously fabricate forced interest in said person." This made tracking the man, the myth, and the legend down somewhat easier, and every time ji lost him, Jinn would turn back time another quarter hour. Eventually ji caught up with him at a seedy establishment known as the Ivory Inn.

The acoustics didn't lend much privacy to people's conversations. Someone Jinn didn't recognize was just finishing up a rap poem. A woman named Laura Vickers greeted jin, asking if ji'd like a table, to which ji lied that ji was meeting James, though ji didn't mention him by name. Ji led jinself over to his table where he was speaking with his friend, John Horridge. "Yeah, I don't like to come here 'cause my kid brother's usually in here with his friends, and I prefer small gatherings where I can't get recognized these days."

"You should live it up, James. Use your position to your advantage." John waved to get Jinn's attention. "You know who this guy is? Nothing less than the leader of the damned Human Resistance. You wanna buy him a beer, buddy?"

"Don't mind if I do." Jinn had come equipped with currency in just such situations. Ji hadn't come up with a new line of dialogue to change James's fate while following him, but hoped ji could improvise something in the conversation. Ji was glad they didn't ask jin name. Maybe a few drinks would render them more susceptible to suggestion somehow.

"Come on, John. You know that isn't the communist way," James said.

John laughed. "I thought you were more interested in fighting ponies than politics anyway."

"Saving people." James smiled. "Not fighting ponies. It has to be about human lives first." He turned to Jinn. "I bet you're wanting to hear some war stories, huh?"

"Tell him about the time in Belfast when you brought the daisies," John said. Jinn wanted to correct his improper use of pronoun, but realized that in so explaining, ji would have to reveal ji was from the future. Ji knew they would not believe that. Ji knew they were not mind readers who could just sense the truth from jin, no matter how unbelievable. That would be unreasonable.

"Have you ever been as far as Berlin?" Jinn interrupted.

"Uh, no. No." James set down his drink with a smack of his lips. "The Human Resistance has never made it as far as that yet. You might be thinking of the Elbsand-something Advance. There are rumours there are still refugees trapped in those mountains."

"Isn't it true the ponies eat people?" Jinn tried. Ji knew ji was acting desperate. Ji really hoped ji wouldn't come across as suspicious as a Floridian real estate agency that fired one of its workers just because she was being harassed by a stranger's phone calls. After all, ji knew ji had things to hide, and even a fraudulent claim might lead to some difficult questions over other matters.

James and John exchanged an uncomfortable, quiet cough then John crossed his arms and placed his elbows on the table. "You wanna hear a real rumour? Some people say that we've known about the killer ponies since even before they invaded Earth. That before all forms of media were eradicated by them, there were prophets as far back as 2009 who had known about them."

James waved his hand with a dismissive laugh. "Very, very few people actually subscribe to that wild claim."

"It's true, though! Out of Canada. They were going to broadcast warnings about them over television."

"I'll believe that when I see it," James said, and just like that, Jinn had jin answer, or at least ji thought ji had. Four more years, ji thought, estimating that a show entered into production a year in advance of when it aired, especially when they had yet to hire a cast and crew. The prospect of more time traveling with jin device didn't appeal to jin, especially when his device was scalding against his wrist, but ji had come this far, and ji was not about to give up.

Jinn patted James on the hand as ji stood. "Please be careful out there. Do not take any unnecessary risks. The Resistance needs to hold on to people like you if it is to prosper, John."

"Uh, James." James pointed to John. "He's John." Jinn wondered why in the heck ji made that mistake. Ji forgot about it as ji left the Ivory Inn, rounded the building's exterior for the nearest alleyway, and checked jin wrist uplink. It would probably be easier to get into Canada before the war had started. Growing impatient, ji jammed on the device, and it shot jin back through about an hour and forty-five minutes' worth of fifteen-minute intervals before halting back to normal.

"Whoa, what the hell's the deal?" Ji swatted the wrist uplink for a touch of percussive maintenance. When ji did, a funny thing happened. Not “haha” funny. Something collided against Jinn that felt like a Mack truck, a phrase which here means "freight truck". Ji saw stars dance in front of jin eyes, and a big blue pillar of colour. When ji came to, ji flew sideways into the wall of a building with a hard thunk to jin upper back. Ji stood, checking jinself for injuries, but could find none. The pain was weird. It didn't feel like pain as ji was used to, and ji had known pain growing up the way ji did. Ji felt kind of fuzzy all over. Ji stumbled out from the alleyway where a rude pedestrian who couldn't mind his own damn business remarked that Jinn must've drank a little too much. Rubbing jin weary eyes, Jinn took a look at jin chronometer.

"Toronto, Canada, on Earth, 2008 CE. The CE stands for 'common era'." Doctor Hooves examined a monitor depicting the interior of a festive albeit small office building. Drawings and doodles on sticky notes adhered to cubicle exteriors and corkboards.

"Won't somebody notice our time ship?" Derpy Hooves asked.

"Part of its advanced technology includes a repellent for being noticed. Plus, if I take a quick look 'round..." Doctor Hooves pulled the monitor around a large central, circular console. "It would appear we're adjacent to some oversized props of some sort. This is an office related to the television industry. That always helps. We certainly don't want humankind discovering our ship, let alone other Equestrians."

"So why did we come here?" Derpy asked in her Minneighsotan accent. "You told me it was dangerous to meddle in time so close to significant events."

"True. Very true. One small error on our part could profoundly affect the war against the humans, as much as end it altogether. In order to do the latter, we want to collect as much information as we can gather." Doc whipped the monitor back around to observe a water cooler moment.

"The word is out that this war was ordered by a higher power even than the royal family," Derpy said. "You know. The gods."

"My dear, I am a scientist. I don't believe in gods, though I've met many self-proclaimed ones before. I don't partake in battles and bloodshed if I can help it." He pushed the monitor away and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I aim to find out about these gods, and the rumours of 'prophets' sounds like a good place to start. How would the humans know about us? Our kind left their world in their ancient prehistory." He leapt down a short set of stairs and rooted around under the central platform for a cardboard box. "That's why tonight we're going to place these spying devices around."

"We can only see inside the room we're in with that monitor?"

"There was a time you could collect all sorts of information for miles around, but I had it disabled when I ended up on trial for uncovering a dire conspiracy." He pulled out the box and shook it around so that the contents would rattle. "Now we just wait for nightfall."

Derpy was still full of questions. She may have been clumsy and had a lazy-eye, but this didn't mean she didn't possess a killer cunning. "How did you know to come to this time?"

"I just kept going back year by year, monitoring telecommunication broadcasts for any mentions of ponies or Equestria. Curiously enough, that led to an animated programme, and at this place and time they would have discussed filming it. We may be in for a long wait."

The most extensive research has revealed very little, but that building was the Canadian office for a certain television network specializing in programming geared towards the very young, often with merchandizing franchises designed to manipulate children into manipulating their parents into spending money to feed the capitalist regime. That evening, the brunt of the working stiffs left behind their collating and paper jams and Internet usage on company time. The lights were shut off, leaving the building in darkness save for the waning light of the setting sun, but the two ponies were waiting for the moon's luminous pallor. Pieced together from what was presumably Derpy Hooves's diary, their conversation as they waited probably went something like the following.

"Doc, why do you suppose things got this way?" Derpy asked.

"Hm? What way?" Doctor Hooves was tinkering with some kind of machinery inside their time travel vessel, not pulling his head up to look at his companion.

"Oh, I don't know how to say it. Like, everypony went off on their own missions. Before, we would just unleash a bunch of grunts to do the job. Before we were fighting the humans directly." She slouched onto her back, waving a hoof through the air as she gazed up at the ceiling.

"Discord really cut us off. We were dependent upon moving troops from Equestria. Now that Trixie's appointed herself our leader in the absence of the Mane Six, she's taken on a very cautious attitude. Which is funny, because that's not really like her, but I guess without magic, she's just like us earth ponies." Doctor Hooves laid his eyes on Derpy. "We mustn't be caught. Our presence here could adversely affect the war. Never underestimate causality."

Once night fell, the door to their vessel creaked open. Doctor Hooves poked his head out, checking both ways before his exit. He beckoned Derpy to follow him, and she hobbled out on her crutches.

The night watchman could have been just a little more observant. You see, the advent of the security camera revolutionized the security guard industry. No longer did they require alertness and vigilance, when they could sit behind security cameras, cramming their faces with cheap crullers and jerking off to public sex offenders trying to catch a quickie in the fitting room. Little information was known, and even less was desired, as to Mike Schmidt's pounding off rituals, but he was the type to chat up the custodian on his work hours. Sitting around by yourself in an office building all night could be rather dull when the day guy was likely to review what you'd witnessed to corroborate. That meant no rides through the halls on the office chairs.

"So you're telling me that the last guy was this big fatso named Paul Blart?" Mike asked.

"Yeah," the janitor said. "Said he was moving onto larger buildings."

"Huh. Me, I wanted a smaller assignment. They had me watching this shitty Chuck E. Cheese knock-off in Minnesota. I ever tell you about the time I met the host of this TV show about bad movies?"

The janitor shook his head, not really listening. He was watching the security monitors.

"Sometimes I like to make fun of the people on the screens when I get bored. But yeah, I met one of the hosts. Not the sleepy one. The guy that hoarded all the funnier movies for himself. Told him I grew up watching his show and *Star Trek*. He said I was a 'grade-A nerd,' so I told him, 'Way to insult your target demographic there, buddy. Like you're one to talk when you teamed up with an angry Internet website administrator.' So the guy, older than I expected, calls me a furry. I say, 'That's nice coming from a grown man who wore a bunny costume and talked to puppets for five and a half years.'" Mike laughed with a mouthful of cruller and shook his head. "Heroes, man. Never meet 'em."

"I made that mistake once," the janitor said.

"Oh yeah? What happened?" Mike brushed crumbs off his fingers.

"I'm not sure yet."

"You never told me how you got this job."

"You could say I've been waiting thirty years for it. I scoured the Internet for information that led me to this place."

"Applied online, huh? Well hey; you can call me by my nickname, Mike."

The janitor snapped his attention back onto Mike. "My nickname's Jinn, but nobody's called me that for decades." Yes, for those of you who hadn't already guessed even before he'd shown up, the janitor was really Jinn in disguise. Ji'd been in disguise as a man, when ji really self-identified as a djinn. "I'm gonna stretch my legs, head to the vending machine for a Coffee Crisp bar."

"If you need caffeine, I got permission to use the coffee machine at night. Not that I need it. I barely get any sleep nights anymore."

The reason Jinn had slipped out of the security office was not the real excuse. "Excuse" is a word which here, and just about everywhere else, means "explanation for why things are they way they are and how that pertains to you" although cause and effect is not an especially popular subject with some people, particularly with religious extremists. These sorts of people like to say, "There are no excuses," because they dislike the aspect of excuses where it would be socially orthodox to grant leeway to someone who has befallen some misfortune. However, for these people, there is no excuse such as "I'm sorry, I contracted HIV," or "I'm sorry, my children are dead." They would rather live in a world where statements like those have no commas.

No, the real reason Jinn stepped out wasn't to get away from the fact Mike Schmidt wasn't renowned for his conversational skills, but because ji had noticed something on the screens. Something ji couldn't drag a pre-invasion civilian into. Something the now-grey-haired Mohammad Kareem had spent the last thirty years hiding from everyone. It was only a shadow in the darkness, since lighting an empty office building overnight was a waste of money, but the cameras here had some semblance of picking apart subtle variances even in low light. Jinn knew the ponies had arrived. Ji was not surprised they should somehow be involved. Nobody ever knew for sure, as far as ji knew, the more specific details of how the ponies first came to Earth, nor when they made their first move.

Thin though the carpeting was, it muffled Jinn's footsteps. Ji pushed jin squeaky cart of janitorial supplies down the hall to the maintenance closet where ji casually flicked off the breaker to the security panel. Ji knew the sudden power loss would erase the recent backlog as well as prevent further recording until the system rebooted, and ji did not want to risk any evidence of an Equestrian incursion, let alone questions ji'd be expected to answer for. Success without any human ever having to know anything about the terrible ponies would be an added bonus. Retrieving jin gun from where it was hidden on the underside of the cart's top shelf, ji struck out into the office proper in search of the fascist devils.

One question struck jin mind: How had the ponies gotten inside without tripping the door alarms? Ji knew the device armed itself automatically after a certain time, but ji also knew those ponies were seditious saboteurs. Ji had no qualms about ending the life of a pony. Such feelings were only natural. To realize ji had just placed jinself in the midst of a darkened office building in the middle of the night with a pony on the loose, jin skin turned to goose bumps and ji had a dreadful thought.

Jinn leapt on the spot. A loud screeching sound blared out from nearby, as though something was stabbing out at jin from the darkness. It took jin a while to realize it was just a printer receiving a fax from someone prepping his or her or jin work for the next day.

Ji was scared. Despite Jinn's marine training as a teen, the hairs were sticking up along the back of jin neck. Had the past three decades aged jin worse than ji thought? Had ji spent too much time before that locked away in a lab conducting research? Perhaps ji had never been as used to them as a threat as ji was the Iron Wolves Corporation which had raided jin childhood home in Yemen and bombed jin family's farm before the pegasi decimated the Middle East in one fell swoop. If associates of this war recorder's had been in that office that night, they probably would have offered advice about getting scared later as impractical as their penchant for namedropping dead laureates who passed on before they were ever born. One does not delay emotions, let alone the most primal of them all. One simply masks what chooses to be felt by them.

Jinn thought ji heard the dull thudding of hooves upon a carpet. Ji whirled about in that direction, teetering on the soles of jin feet to try and move jinself. Ji spurred jinself onward somehow. Ji must have felt alone in that moment, being the only existing member of the Human Resistance on the planet. Even as someone abandoned and ostracized by one's past associates, this war recorder cannot fathom the leap from isolation to the reality of knowing one was absolutely alone. Even if some of Jinn's associates were out there, alive that day in 2008, relating to jin predicament, to jin point of view, would be impossible for the next four years. How ji had not been driven mad in that time is astonishing. Human beings are intrinsically social animals, requiring positive validating interaction to sustain mental well-being. The carrot of promise had been held over Jinn's head for a long, long time.

Jinn considered a distraction. Some gesture to call the pony out. Ji knew of course that spooking jin enemy could just as easily provoke them into fleeing, but there was a chance catering to the Equestrian's innate bloodthirsty nature would draw them out and lure them into jin trap. Either way, ji would undoubtedly emit noise from squeaky hinges when ji had to check in on conference rooms. Those doors were locked, though, ji reminded jinself. Or they were supposed to be. Humans were fallible, a word which here

means "not infallible". Ji was certain amidst jin busy thoughts that ji hadn't heard a door open or close, and many of the ones ji came across were shut tight.

Many of the private offices had even been kept under lock and key such that Jinn had never been granted authority to clean them, perhaps to guard the intellectual properties being developed behind closed doors, away from public scrutiny. Nobody would know of what would be beamed into their televisions until a program was already greenlit and all that effort had already been spent to produce it. Jinn had spent a great deal of time watching television in hopes of gathering information for the days to come, and ji learned that the media was getting away with more and more every year, and they consistently blamed the general public for it. The Internet hadn't been any better, and now the media controlled that, too. Sometimes Jinn thought the humans might destroy themselves before the ponies ever got their mangy hooves on the world.

Jinn's finger twitched on the trigger when ji took aim at a pair of enormous cartoon eyes. Ji realized before firing that it was just a poster of some stupid mascot, but jin heart still leapt in jin chest. It was still doing somersaults by the time ji left that room and made jin way past some cubicles. That was when ji heard the door creak down the adjacent hallway ji'd just come from. Ji slid between some cubicles, thinking a pony might be heading jin way. Ji felt a presence over jin shoulder, turned around, and felt something hard and painful slam into jin face with a ring. Ji distinctly didn't remember blacking out.

That ringing continued, and ji woke up to the sound of ringing. Ji also awoke to the scalding sensation of hot coffee being spilled on jin. "Whoops! I'm sorry," said a secretary with a Quebecois accent. "You really shouldn't be sleeping there, y'know."

Once Jinn had finished writing in pain and dabbing jin face with jin work shirt, ji pushed jinself to jin hands and knees. The ringing hadn't stopped. it was the ringing of phones. It was morning the next day. Ji hadn't stopped the ponies. Ji considered traveling back through time, confirming ji still possessed his device to do so. Wait. Where was jin gun? Being found with a gun, even unconscious, was probably taboo. This wasn't the United States, after all. Pretending to still be gathering jin bearings, ji searched all around the floor, spotting jin weapon under somebody's desk. A man playing Minesweeper was very annoyed to have Jinn crawling under his desk, though he did apologize to jin. Stowing jin piece before standing, jin bumped jin head on the underside of the desk to concerned remarks and stood up.

"What was he doing under there?" the secretary asked.

"Ji, actually," Jinn corrected her.

"What?"

Ji explained. "I identify as a djinn, so my pronouns are ji, jin, and jinself. Think of it like a transgender thing and don't discriminate."

The woman did not look amused. "For the record, transgendered people don't go around making up pronouns and commanding people to use them. The LGBT community is made up of sensible and level-headed people who aren't prone to such irrational and petty demands." She walked away rather than continuing the conversation, which is sometimes all a person can do.

Again ji contemplated time travel, but ji wanted to know if anything was different. Why had the pony come here last night? Maybe if ji found that out, ji would know what to look for. Ji should have been listening, not seeing. Ji was not trying to overhear anything, but that word jarred in jin ears. That word that would haunt the human race in four years for at least the next six. "The pony meeting is in conference room three in five minutes," someone had said. Pony meeting? Jinn didn't like the sound of that, but ji knew a way ji could find out all it was about.

Posing as a window cleaner (which, technically, was one of his duties), Jinn discretely cracked open several windows and drew the venetian blinds, keeping them open so as to let the light through. Then ji went outside, popping a Timbit on the way, knowing ji would not be allowed in the room during a conference. Instead, ji would be right outside the windows, cleaning them or trimming the hedges as ji eavesdropped. The conspicuous consumption of capitalism would work against itself. At this time of day, the sun would be on the opposite side of the building, allowing Jinn to see inside with ease, especially as ji had left the lights on within. Inside was a table with chairs, some whiteboards and corkboards, an overhead projector on the ceiling, and snacks provided in the form of ginger ale and bowls of poutine.

Before too long, several women, most of them blonde, and a few men walked in the room. One of the men in a suit and tie spoke first. "Good morning, ladies. You've been called here today because you're voice actors, because you couldn't make it on camera. We're looking to cast each of you in Hasbro's latest televised media for the *My Little Pony* franchise, founded circa 1981."

1981? Jinn thought. *Aw, hell, I ain't time travelin' back that far again!*

"I'll now turn the table over to Laurent to introduce you all," the suit said. "Suit" is a word which here means "person dressed up in a three-piece suit and a tie like a total tool."

"Uh, it's Lauren, actually," said a cheery-looking woman with unmistakably dyed red hair. She stood while the others sat.

"Ooh, so this will be an animated series targeted at young girls? I'm so eager to really broaden my acting range!" said a smiling blond woman who resembled Xena's sidekick.

"Oh, I assure you this will be a role to remember," Lauren promised.

"Truth be told, most actors don't remember their roles," said a woman with long, curly orange hair.

At that moment, another blond woman burst into the room. "Sorry I'm late, I was stuck behind a fighter pilot in a pregnant roller-skate. Don't mind me, I'll catch up. I'm one of the voice actresses. I'll sandbag and let you five by five."

"Okay then." Lauren looked around at them. "First I suppose I should share with you some of my artwork from my DeviantArt page." There were uncomfortable glances around the room.

"I know it's unorthodox, but she really does have professional qualifications too, so don't judge her too strongly on..." The suit let out a sigh. "Playing on the Internet like a prole."

As she turned around to pin some pages up on a corkboard, her husband said in a giddy tone, "Oh boy, I can't wait. If this succeeds, this could be the year I get to renew my Powerpuffs! Look, I drew some new panty shots of the little girls."

"Later, honey. Success is on the line." She gave him a patronizing smile and turned around. Jinn couldn't get a good look at the corkboard from this angle, but they appeared to be drawings of ponies. Ji shuddered. "Meet the latest generation of My Little Ponies. The Earth Ponies have a strong bond with nature. Pegasi fly and control the weather. Unicorns are wise and have magic. Oh, and this here's my OC. She's an alicorn. 'OC' is a term which here means 'original character.' Do not steal." There were more awkward glances.

"What's her handle?" the late woman asked.

"Firefly. A pony's cutie mark is an indication of her innate and unyielding talent. Hers is of course a quill and ink to represent writing. Just like me."

"So you'll be head writer?" the woman with curly red hair asked. "I'm glad to meet someone I can trust about the show right out of the box."

"Oh, I'll only be writing at most two and a half episodes," Lauren explained. She donned a dreamy, far-off look. "Then I'll seize a cushy backseat consultant position and be credited as the show's creator during its entire run."

"So like, what do they do?" the first blond woman to speak asked.

"Glad you asked! I love talking about my creations. This will be a departure from the previous three generations of tea parties and girlish stereotypes."

One of the suits leaned over into visual range to interrupt. "Though we do have a tea party play set in production already in commemoration of the show's launch."

Lauren continued, trying to ignore the corporate puppet. "Instead, they'll go on daring adventures inspired by world mythologies and interacting with parallels of diverse culture—"

The suit again leaned. "—With slice of life lessons geared towards our choice demographic of female children."

"One day, a unicorn and her pet dragon are commanded by Queen Celestia—"

"—Princess. Princesses test better."

"To learn that life is far more complex—"

"—Simple!"

"Than at first glance. She learns about the harmony of diverse friendship—"

"—With those adhering to similar cultural mores as yourself.—"

"—And discovering the values of education, hard work, comedy, bravery, compassion and creativity.—"

"—Cleaning, family, baking, duty, manners and fashion."

The first blonde woman spoke up first. "Like I always say, employment is better than unemployment! Unless it's because you can afford unemployment. When do we start?"

Lauren was glad for the change in subject. "I predict we can have a two-minute short out in about a year, then we enter production and sit on the media hype until fall of 2010. It's been a little touch and go this year what with the writer's strike to get the pretend Internet money, but I haven't let that impugn the integrity of my creativity."

One of the plainclothes men sat up. "Once we get the Macromedia Flash assets polished, we can crank these babies out in like half an hour, just like those South Park guys have been doing since the late 90s now and will undoubtedly continue to do long after their bastard children have been killed by police or become unmarried parents themselves."

“Which one’s *South Park* again?” the first blonde asked.

“I dunno. Once you’ve seen one adult cartoon, you’ve seen ‘em all,” said the late woman. “Late” is a word which here means “not on time” rather than “deceased”.

"So which one of us will be playing the lead role?" asked the red-haired woman.

"Oh, we're hoping to get Tara you-know-who," said Lauren.

The three voice actors murmured a bit. The late woman leaned forward. "You mean the woman who was kissing pigeons on *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*?"

The other blonde woman appeared concerned. "The one who called people the f-word on Adult Swim?" "Adult Swim" is a phrase which once referred to late-night television for emo children with bad parents, a sense of humour they didn't get, and a cigarette addiction.

"The one who's already been cast in enough things, thank you very much?" the red-haired woman asked.

Lauren nodded happily. "Yep. She's the one. We can even get her on speakerphone. She refuses to leave California to consort with the rest of you." She leaned over to press a button on an odd-looking office device.

A voice came through. "Good afternoon! I'm so glad to accept the nomination for best lead actress in an animated role."

"Uh, Tara, the show hasn't aired yet," Lauren said.

"Oh."

Jinn had heard enough. The ponies had obviously gotten to the humans already. Ji'd missed jin chance. Ji would have to time travel back to last night and try again, at the risk of encountering jinself. Or, ji could see if the ponies had something else in mind for tonight. Ji had a feeling that whatever they had plotted would be something bigger. Something ji should be able to detect. But what? At the very least, tonight ji might be able to figure out what it was they did if they'd already flown the coop, a phrase which here means "gone away like some fowl from where they were being kept."

The second night fell. Doctor Hooves and Derpy Hooves had not yet departed the building, as evidenced by the concealed presence of their temporal vessel. "It's time we collected those devices. We don't want to leave any trace of our presence here," Doctor told Derpy.

"It seems our plan was a success," Derpy said. "Will we really be able to pacify the humans by subliminally influencing a children's cartoon in praise of Equestria?"

Doctor Hooves chuckled. "Only time will tell. You start on that end of the building. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can get back to the revised future. We may have a little more work to do in that department, but what we've done thus far is a start." The two parted ways as Derpy headed for the conference rooms and Doc trotted amidst the cubicles.

He was jarred by the overlapping sound of multiple computers starting up at once. Four monitors lit up in the darkness to display login screens. Text had been entered into one of the text fields, with one word per monitor, constructing a message in tandem: "COME" "AND" "FIND" "ME". Doctor Hooves knew then that the jig was up. They were not alone. Somehow, against all odds, against his devious mind, an enemy had discovered their presence and knew of their existence in a time before that should have been possible.

Derpy's first mistake was to tread upon a hockey stick someone had left lying around in the dark. She had stepped a crutch on the curved portion of the plastic blade, and the long handle came sailing up to strike her right across the face. She jerked back in pain with a cringed exclamation. "Who the hell left their crap in the middle of the hall?" she asked, not knowing the implement had been carefully placed here after being removed from the cubicle of a disgruntled employee. Severely incensed, she trotted forward into the very same conference room where the cartoon about her kind had been pitched by a woman they had been mentally manipulating from the shadows. She shoved open the door and heard a snap. From her other side, a wheeled office chair came rushing at her. It collided with her hard enough to knock her over then tumbled clumsily atop her.

Cursing, she picked herself up and walked back out into the hall. Something wasn't quite right, and she needed to let Doctor Hooves know. Then she heard a sound like laughing behind a closed door. Glaring, she gently nudged it open, then threw the door open with a push from a crutch. Nothing happened, but she could see that what she thought was laughing was actually a printer going off repeatedly. She stepped into the room to investigate and nearly tripped over something like twine. Before she could even look down, she heard several loud clicking sounds and felt the severe sting of sharp, metal prongs stabbing into her face, neck, shoulder, and one of her big-ass eyes. She hollered in pain as she tried to close her eyelid over the staple stuck into her eyeball rendering her halfway blind.

By that time, Doctor Hooves had noticed a thin line of yellow light shining from underneath a door. The door read "Custodian" and said something in French, presumably the same word. Brandishing a long metal ruler he had picked up from somebody's desk, the stallion shoved his way into the closet. With a bang, a heavy plastic container fell down on his head from above where it had been carefully balanced atop the slightly ajar door. The door then yanked shut with a slam. The lock clicked, trapping him inside. As he wondered how he could have fallen for such a sophomoric trick, he noticed that the cramped space reeked of chemicals. The stench was overpowering. It stank of bleach and other unidentifiable inhalants. The tiny closet was soon suffocating with the insufferable odours, and Doctor was soon retching with sickness that already made his head ache. If he couldn't break out, he would die from asphyxiation or poisoning.

Jinn slipped the keys into jin pocket. Of course ji had set everything up. If the ponies hadn't come out of hiding of their own volition, ji would have tried to lure them out in hopes they were there. Unlike the previous night, ji would be on the defensive. Ji would make those ponies come to jin. There was only so much that could go according to plan, however. Ji hadn't expected Derpy Hooves to catch up with jin so soon. Her one eye shined in the darkness, rolling about in every which way but at jin. "You scum! How dare you ruin my one good eye? Prepare to get killed!"

Jinn ducked just in time as she whipped one crutch at jin head. She jabbed jin in the abdomen with the other, knocking him back a few steps. Slapping jin hands against a couple cubicle walls, ji kicked forward, striking her in the face. She stumbled back, and ji took the opportunity to rush past her and around a corner so ji could reclaim the element of surprise.

Ji took another turn and found the hockey stick on the ground. Ji was wondering how much damage ji could do with it at the same time battling with the idea of how much noise jin gun would make. Would it alert Mike in security? At least tonight ji had prepared by purchasing an expensive pair of night vision goggles from an army surplus store. It had been pricey, but worth it. Ji clutched the hockey stick, but decided that tonight would be the night ji ended this all. A loud gunshot would be worth it. Ji wished ji could have bought a silencer somewhere in Toronto, but ji had had all this setting up to do.

Derpy's crutch came around the corner and split a crack in the wall. Jinn had tripped back in the nick of time. Expecting her to dodge at the first sight of a gun, ji opted to engage her with the hockey stick. When she appeared in the hall before jin, ji swung the hockey stick at her and the pair duelled up and down the corridor. Ji had the superior reach. Ji knocked her in the teeth then swatted her face sideways.

Anger painted the pegasus mare's face. "I don't know how you knew to attack us, but it'll all be over for you soon. You're outnumbered, and Equestria shall be avenged."

Jinn bopped her in the face to get her to shut up. "Your friend is dead. How many of you are there?"

"I doubt that very much! He has ways of surviving. Even if you had, then I'd have nothing to lose. You'll have trapped me here. The machine we used to get here is telepathically linked to him, and would self-terminate if he died. I'd stop at nothing to end you, and take as many humans as possible with me."

"Stop this, you defect." Jinn drew jin gun and fired once. In his office, Mike looked up when he heard a bang, but shook his head. He'd accidentally spilled some pickle-flavoured chip crumbs down his shirt.

Jinn holstered jin weapon and dropped the hockey stick. It would be another long night of work for jin to clean up these pony corpses, but it would be well worth it. Ji was feeling exhausted as ji headed back between the cubicles to the janitorial closet. A mop handle clocked jin across the bean, then a phone cord was wound around jin neck. Jin face was smashed onto a desk then pressed there under a hoof. Doctor Hooves had broken out of the closet. His eyes were bloodshot and there were trails of vomit down the corners of

his mouth. It took a moment for Jinn to realize that jin head had been shoved under the blade of a giant paper slicer, usually used for large pieces of construction paper. It was probably in use for the dynamic displays of the television office.

"Tell me how you found out about us," Doctor Hooves said. "The security cameras? We noticed they were deactivated last night when we were going to erase them."

"That's part of it," said Jinn who wanted to keep the pony's interest long enough to think up a plan of escape. Jin arms were up by jin head and ji wouldn't be able to reach for jin gun in time. "The other part is I'm from the future. I know all about your kind, and humanity kills a lot of you."

The Doctor frowned. He tested the blade against Jinn's neck, leaving a very small cut that started to bleed. "Do not test me, human. I came here to end the war. I also am a time traveller, but I have vowed never to get involved in violence except as a last resort, nor to grossly manipulate the timeline. Funny you tried to poison me. I did the same thing to a cannibal once."

"End the war how? By creating some kind of television show about you? What's that supposed to accomplish?"

"A backup plan in case we don't succeed. You humans are enslaved to television. You're dumb enough to believe anything on a monitor, and you worship the ground your celebrities walk on as if they were gods. If we can't prevent the humans from invading Equestria or Equestria from retaliating, maybe we can enhance your subservience to us."

"Invasion?" Jinn sputtered, nearly cutting jinself further. "You invaded us! Humans have never found Equestria!"

"No! You sent your advanced scout into our world. He shot one of our kind. He committed cold-blooded murder, and we ponies vowed to bring justice upon you with the wrath of a thousand suns."

Jinn was dumbstruck. "I have no idea what in the hell you're talking about."

"Too late now. When we're finally able to return to Equestria again, we'll trace down his origin and eliminate him. Now what have you done with my companion?"

"I shot her dead." Jinn laughed. "She was crying when I did it."

Doctor Hooves seethed. "Murderer!" He raised the blade, ready to drop it down and decapitate jin. Jinn surprised jinself with jin own reflexes. Ji sprang out from under the deadly paper sabre and pistol-whipped Doc across the temple. The stallion went down, but not out. Jinn had the drop however, and summoning up jin desperate adrenaline, ji shoved the pony's head under the blade instead. Without even waiting until it was fully under, ji jammed the blade down, severing partway through his skull. Doc yelled out in anguish, and Jinn dropped the blade down again and again. When ji became impatient with jin task, ji shot Doctor Hooves through the head, leaving a hole in the cubicle wall in the midst of a spray of brain and blood.

It was a long moment of shaky silence on the floor before Jinn came to jin senses. The ponies were dead. It was over. Ji was still not entirely used to combat, especially face to face with actual ponies, but if all went well, this would be the last any human would ever see of their ilk. The final task would be to dispose of the bodies.

That was the story as Jinn told it to Joseph and Franz when ji walked back in through the warehouse doors forty years older than when ji had left. Barely a minute had gone by since jin departure. Joseph was too awestruck to ask questions, but still listened. Franz, on the other hand, questioned just about everything. "How did you end up so old?"

"It seemed I collided with those two time-traveling ponies in the temporal wormhole as we tried to emerge at the same time. Whatever ship they had was incredible; I suppose it must have knocked me all the way back to 1978. I tried to settle down, have a family, get my mind off the wait, but eventually my mission ate away at me. I knew I had to discover how the war began."

"So why didn't you stop the war? Why didn't you try to warn everybody? Things should have turned out better than this!"

"I tried," the white-haired Mohammad said. "And it only got me in trouble. I ended up in questioning until I convinced the authorities they had misunderstood me. No matter what I told to whom, nobody ever believed me, or else it only seemed to push them further into their fate. Eventually I gave up trying to warn people. I'm not sure history is meant to be changed. We're stuck with things the way they are, and we've got to learn to live with it. That doesn't mean that we can't still win this war."

Joseph listened to these words. He listened so hard that he forgot to listen to anything else. He would have to live with the losses he'd suffered thus far. There was nothing else for it. If Jinn was willing to keep up the good fight after losing forty years on jin farfetched mission, then Joseph could swallow his guilt, accept that Ajay's death was a grave accident, and move on. It would be the hardest thing he'd ever done up to that point, but in time, everything would get easier. Of that he was certain enough.

8. The Kimpsons

There is a man named Godwin whom neither of us have ever met who wishes to be known as "that Nazi guy" not for being a Nazi (as I'm fairly certain he isn't), but for his theory (self-styled a law, despite not being a factually scientific law) that all conversations inevitably turn to the topic of the National Socialist Party of fascist World War II-era Germany if carried on long enough. As with many hipster theories, it is unshaded doublespeak, a phrase which here means "a not-very-well disguised attack masquerading as science," as the latent statement of the above theory is that people shouldn't discuss Nazi Germany, a popular tenet among Holocaust deniers, which may or may not be coincidence. The fact of the matter is that the Nazi party was such a bold and unmitigated presence of the purest evil known in recent history outside of Equestria, that it is easy to draw parallels to their oppressive and violent regime when someone makes a thoughtless statement that could brew trouble if followed in time, such as when the leader of your country refers to an entire demographic as villains and mandates concentrating their population elsewhere. One wonders why Godwin did not pick a more cheerful image, such as "If continued long enough, every conversation eventually turns to the topic of penguins." Penguins have rarely been the subject of controversy apart from prostitution and in distant history when Italian conquistadors were harvesting one of their lesser-known food sources. Perhaps courting controversy was just Godwin's flirtation with hipster-ism. None of this matters because in order for it to be a law, one would have to continue every single conversation in history indefinitely in order to prove it.

Aryanne the earth pony mare would have had her own spin on Godwin's law. She would have stated that every conversation should begin with the topic of Nazis, specifically how organized they were and how they restructured Germany's economy after World War I. Half a dozen times she had sat through "The Greatest Story Never Told" in admiration for her only human hero's sympathetic exposé by Truth Will Out, and would have sat through it the full dozen if she'd had more time on her hooves. Her eyes were blue, her mane blonde. The documentary on the evils of the Allied Powers had reminded her of her cherished homeland back in Equestria, Germaney. Her youth had been robbed from her through Pinkie Pie's growth hormone experiments which had aged the Cutie Mark Crusaders to fighting-fit adulthood. Her cutie mark was a Chinese Manju. So little time on her hooves. It didn't help that that time was being taken up by these insufferable pawns in the room she was presently entering.

The Kim family of North Korea was something of a dynasty. Like most dictatorships, power was passed from an aging ruler to his offspring, typically under the law of primogeniture, a word which here means "to the firstborn son". Like most Asian leaderships, they believed their ruler was an earthbound divinity, despite the whole twentieth century and the fact those supposed divinities tended to turn out to be mortal and die after all. Ever the unflappable civilization, they immediately declared the next ruler a divinity, kind of like how western religious fanatics will declare the next doomsday when one doomsday turns out to be just another ordinary work day. You kind of have to wonder about an adult who buys into such a claim as making eleven holes-in-one on the first time one picks up a golf club.

Various members of the Kim family were sitting around a rather posh living room. A self-satisfied woman named Kim Yo Jong was reading off a list of various military resources, political infractions perpetrated by the country's citizens, and scheduled tasks for the day such as various meetings. "Of course, I could easily take care of these if you're busy, brother," she finished with a smile.

The jolly round Kim Jong-Un was busy playing with his bottle rockets. "Ha ha ha! You're funny, sis. A woman leader. That'll be the day. Stop worrying so much. I'll get to all that stuff when it's important. Just because I'm glorious leader for life now is no reason to be so uptight about it."

A not un-handsome but overbearingly serious-looking young man named Kim Han Sol pleaded with his father to turn the television down. "I have to study for my web design exam!"

"Oh, you're studying for your exam?" Kim Jong Nam asked his son. "Why not study for two exams and take it twice? Now go get your father another beer so he can watch the game. Remember when he took you to Disneyland?"

"That was Disneyland Japan, and you got caught trying to sneak in," Han Sol reminded him.

A wild-eyed elderly woman sitting in a rocking chair in the corner guffawed. "Yer father ain't good fer nothin'! Not like my boy Jong-Il. You know he slam-dunked a football once from the three-point line." She was Kim Jong Suk, and the Kims had long since learned to pay no attention to her crazy stories, or her claims that she could see Kim Il-Sung's ghost.

A tender-looking man with long bangs over one eye stood up from where he'd been scribbling. He was Kim Jong Chul, and he moved to the front of the room, interposing himself between the television and its audience. He cleared his throat and read aloud. "Qua qua qua. Pity poor Pozzo, for his heart has gone. His family has torn it astray. I am so sad, like the women of our land, so why do they tell me to go away?" His family groaned in annoyance at his attempt to read his poetry to them.

Aryanne wished she had a cowbell to get their attention with. She had practiced her shouting, however. "Everybody shut up! I have important news!"

Yo Jong adjusted her glasses as she approached the pony. "Please tell me what it is."

"I'm going to tell you what it is," said Aryanne, much irritated.

Jong-Un hurried to his feet. "Tell *me* what it is. I am leader after all."

Aryanne looked back and forth between the both of them with a sour expression. "I honestly do not give a shit. You people have been disorganized ever since your father, Kim Jong-Il, passed away, and he had a very important partnership with the Equestrian monarchy. I've told you repeatedly that we have a decisive alliance to strike with the Iron Wolves Corporation and, well, the day's coming up pretty goddamn soon, capisce?" The term capisce is an Italian word which here means, "Do you understand?"

An older man wearing a smarmy smile and an equally greasy suit stepped in. His name was Kim Pyong Il. "I think this calls for a celebration. Who wants to do shots of champagne out of a high-heeled shoe?"

Jong-Un and Yo Jong both rolled their eyes and sighed. Yo Jong addressed Jong-Il's half-stepbrother as he popped another Jell-O shot into his mouth. "I've told you before that these ostentatious displays of conspicuous leisure give the wrong impression of a bourgeoisie attitude to our citizens. Our decadence is supposed to be kept under wraps."

"Lighten up! It's a party. Jong-Un, you get me, don't you?"

Jong-Un thought for a minute. A party sounded fun, but it didn't sound prestigious to him. Prestigious was getting his picture taken while his military generals watched him looking at things. "I dunno. I'm reminded of the time Lenin shut down his post-revolutionary republic and censored the press so he could ban all political parties other than his own in accordance with the will of his people. I kinda feel like we should rule like that. Based on force and unrestricted by law."

Aryanne frowned. They weren't listening to her as usual. "You have forty-eight hours to think up what you can bring to the table with the IWC. Grow up or don't." With that, she stormed out of the room, leaving the Kims stunned.

Jong Suk let out a grunt. "What a fucking liberty!" The family broke out into song.

It seems today that arr you see
Is viorence on movies and sex on TV,
But whele ale those good ord-fashioned varues
On which we used to lery?
Rucky thele's a famiry guy!
Rucky thele's a man who, positivery can do
Arr the things that make us
Raugh and cly
He's! A! Famiry! Guy!

"Wow, we're like Monty Python or something," Kim Jong-Un said.

THE KIMPSONS

Joseph returned to the Red October with Logan Walker and without Ajay Ghale. He brought the sorry news to the Golden Path that Ajay had been killed in the line of duty, and it helped that Mohammad was with him to corroborate the finer details on behalf of the Red Hammer Platoon, even though he had been under lockdown during the incursion. Joseph reintroduced Logan to Irish, causing the latter's jaw to drop in shock at the apparent resurrection of his Delta Squad ally. That and the backwards head thing. That was weird. Logan's jaw also dropped so to speak when he saw the terrible condition Irish was in. Joseph stuck around long enough for Logan to lose himself in a tale about seeing some nasty burns in the outback before he decided to leave the two in peace to catch up. The thought that he had brought two long-lost friends together brought a smile to his face.

"So the head thing, that's new, huh?" Irish couldn't help gawking, but Logan was used to that.

"Been a year, actually. It's still kind of hard to eat, but I've gotten used to bending my arms and walking backwards. It was actually easier than I thought, like a blind guy using his other senses more clearly. I didn't start feeling better until I reunited with one of my Delta Squad buddies, though."

"Oh yeah? Who's that?"

"You, ya posy dog's arse."

"Oh. I never got the feeling you guys liked me very much."

Logan screwed up his face. "Now what the heck's that from? You may've been the butt monkey, but you were *our* butt monkey. Listen here, I was in two separate squads back in the Afghan war. Neither of 'em came close to being half as memorable as Delta Squad was for me. Our squad was a lifetime commitment, that. Why, aren't any others of us on board?"

Irish shook his head. "Nope. Looks like it's just us. So what do you think of this new leader of the Human Resistance?"

It didn't stay just them for long. The Red October sailed back north, dispatching Jimmy Walsh in one of their prototype state-of-the-art Twinblades, a special double-rotor helicopter designed for silencing and camouflage. Joseph had thought better of confiding in Dirk Smidgeon about the controversial truth about Ajay's demise, not that Dirk would open a rift between the Belarusians and the Golden Path, but because he couldn't trust a guy who couldn't break the greed habit of capitalism. The guilt would strike at him anew when Hurk and Sabal returned from Florida with the dire news of Tian's demise. The Golden Path was left without obvious leadership. Tubad Umad, who had been Tian's right-hand man, was nowhere to be found on board, and according to Sabal he was not considered viable leadership material. Tian had not validated his own daughter, Amita, either, ostensibly to avoid nepotism.

As far as Irish and Logan were concerned, Nick was a welcome sight for sore eyes, though Nick broke into tears on seeing them. They'd heard the hell he'd been through, but Nick revealed that it was not his own ordeal that plagued him, but the state of disrepair his army mates were now in. Joseph's stomach was knotted harder than ever when he took notice that the sombre morale on board did not meet his expectations from the success of the various missions, and he realized he wasn't exactly leaping for joy about them, either.

Not long after, Jenny returned with Artemis, Amita and Tyrone, alarming everyone with the implications of the Iron Wolves Corporation's influence in Hollywood. Joseph, Dirk and the Queen offered their sincerest condolences to Amita regarding her father's death, and it was difficult to tell how she was taking the news. Dirk tried to offer reparations anyhow. "I know things didn't exactly get off on the right foot between me and your old man when you first came aboard, so I decided to get you this copy of the Qur'an. I looked all over the ship and we didn't really have any reading materials. It was kinda hard to track a copy of this down since there ain't no more books being printed, but I know how important your religion was to you and your father, so hopefully this'll help ease the heartache. I took the liberty of highlighting a couple passages."

Amita flipped to one of the bookmarked pages that read, "So We saved him and his family, except for his wife; she was of those who remained [with the evildoers]. And We rained [stones] upon them. Then see how the end of the criminals was."

She shut the book and held it for a few moments before saying, "This gift is an offense to my people, that one such as yourself should possess and read a copy." She took the book with her back to the quarters she once shared with her father.

"That was awkward," Dirk said. "I was not expecting that."

Joseph was perplexed. "What sort of religion censors its own tenets from the world?"

"Scientology."

Even this reunion was bittersweet. Without family ties keeping her around, Amita eventually departed from the Red October. The last known reports of her suggest she had become the leader of a drug cartel.

Tyrone was stung with the guilt of a luxurious lifestyle when he reunited with his Delta Squad friends. He had thought waking himself up and leaving amidst a firefight with wooden monsters and ponies was the hard part, but it didn't compare with the shame that while his friends had been horrifically disfigured and enslaved, he had been pandered to and spoiled by voluptuous women. The comradeship of the team broke through, however, and Irish, Logan and Nick welcomed him into their midst with open arms. It was almost like the good old days again, drinking together and telling stories. Joseph grew to envy their camaraderie.

That had been weeks ago. Delta Squad had kept to themselves in getting back together. Dirk was consoling his fiancée who'd learned that the citizens of Great Britain had renamed their country "Uwotm8 Britain". Joseph had gone through the motions with overseeing operations aboard the Red October, which the scientists of Lenin Base had been working 'round the clock to ready its intended airborne capabilities. Then one day, while Joseph was paying a visit to oversee Tree Barker's health, he spoke to him. "You know, taking care of you has been more trouble than it's been worth."

Tree looked up from his mediocre meal of boiled vegetables and water. He stopped eating and said nothing, just staring at Joseph with his implacable expression.

"Each day I grow more and more convinced that the wisest and best course of action would be to forget all about you and let you rot in here to death, or maybe to execute you, and wing this whole invasion of Equestria." Joseph glared at Tree. Tree continued to say nothing for as long as it would take until Joseph shouted at him. "Well say something!"

Tree jolted back. "I do know about Equestria. I know all you need to know about defeating the ponies. I even know how you can get to Equestria."

"I've had enough of this." Joseph reached for his gun.

"There's a device you need! It's a small—"

Dirk opened the door to the maximum security cell. "Joseph. Urgent news. We need you in the briefing room."

Joseph felt as though he'd just been woken from the verge of a big mistake. "Yeah, I'll come with you." Tree only watched as they both departed, sealing the door behind them.

Dirk didn't even wait until he and Joseph had reached the conference room. "It's about that mission of yours to round up the old members of Delta Squad."

"Oh. Are we still doing that?" he asked.

Dirk frowned at him. "Yeah. Yeah, we're still doing that. It's your plan. You're the leader of the Human Resistance. You don't have the luxury to act like you forgot that your father left you in charge." He waited for Joseph's expression to soften before whipping out a large grayscale photograph. "One of our Twinblades just pulled a successful reconnaissance mission over the Iron Wolves camp in Kyrat." He jabbed a stubby finger at the image of a figure in the picture. A man Joseph recognized was sitting down to eat by himself near a barrel of fire. "It looks like Thomas Taylor-Randall is workin' for the enemy."

Thomas Taylor-Randall spent most of his evenings eating by himself in the out-of-doors. He spent most of his days packing up, moving materials, and unpacking them after a lengthy commute with the rest of the Iron Wolves Corporation army. He hadn't actually seen any combat with them, just a lot of strategic repositioning along eastern Asia and leery-eyed natives he couldn't understand. Kyrat was a cold country, especially this time of year, so the barrel of fire was passable in heat. The stars were out, and a few grey clouds passed over the dark night sky. The encampment was surrounded by high, grassy hillocks and craggy stone. The scenery wasn't much, but Tom drank it in anyway. He didn't like eating inside his tent, even though there were reasons he didn't like eating outside, either. Two of those reasons were Edward Eddington and Henry Henrikson, and they were waddling over to him now like a pre-event comedy duo: One was short and fat, and the other tall and not.

Henry was the squat one. He had brown hair with a slight bald spot and a bushy moustache. He looked the sort that made friends easy, but whose enemies were principled. He was obsessed with Shakespeare and often stank of marijuana. Edward looked like a military poster boy. He *was* a military poster boy. Supposedly their army's leader fancied him highly. He looked the part with the chin butt and broad shoulders and suave, smug face, though Tom noticed the man wasn't really as strong as he appeared, nor as brave. Both men would often try to foist duties onto the grunts.

"Looks like Tommy boy here is good at runnin' away!" Henry said.

"Yeah, in both directions. Nobody's shot him in the back yet," Edward added.

"I don't think the North Koreans will be so soft on him." Henry laughed.

Tom was going to ignore them, but the North Korean remark piqued his interest. "What are you two talking about? Are we going to fight the North Koreans? We haven't seen any combat before."

"Oh not since you joined, but Ed here's got over three hundred confirmed kills and can kill a man in over seven hundred different ways with his bare hands."

Edward laughed, having forgotten Tom's question until Henry whapped him in the arm. "Oh. Right. We're going to ally with the North Koreans, bean-brain, not fight them."

Tom was surprised. "I thought the North Koreans were working for Equestria."

"Look who knows so much! If that's what you're thinking, maybe you oughta just quit the IWC and run back home to London or wherever it was you came from," Henry said. Edward strolled up and ripped Tom's IWC badge off of his sleeve. He and Henry both chortled dumbly then walked off as someone called out for them.

Tom reaffixed the Iron Wolves Corporation patch to where it had been torn off from him by Edward and Henry. Edward looked back at him with a smug downwards smile and said, "Watch out for friendly fire, Taylor-Randall!" before Mr Trump called for them again to meet his fourth wife, Ivanka. He thought to himself that no matter what army he worked for, there were bound to be jerks not taking a life-threatening situation seriously and trying to demoralize him. It must have been a little bit like joining a book club full of rich snobs who disparage you for liking choose-your-own-adventure novels.

Dolan Trump was reclining in a lounge chair under an umbrella whilst sipping a neon-coloured alcoholic beverage with a little umbrella in it. Ivanka was standing behind him, stroking his ears with a pained smile on her face. He was groaning and moaning with a big, dreamy smile on his face. "Oh, you do give the best oo-mox. Run along now, honey. See how our son, Barron, is doing." He gave her a little pat on the rear end and sent her on her way. "Putin wants to see you pronto, Edward."

Edward frowned. "This isn't about that Anatoly stuff, is it?"

Dolan wore his practiced "disguised" smile indicating he was savouring someone else's misfortune. "I dunno. Probably."

Edward rushed off with Henry toddling after him as fast as he could wobble. Dolan, looking wearily hunched over, walked in their direction. Putin was a bald man with beady, soulless eyes and a taut frown like a slapped ass. The man could smile, but it was impossible for him to make a genuine smile of happiness, since his brain couldn't process that emotion like normal people. He and Dolan both lacked whatever crucial factor it was in the human brain to accurately process and correctly respond to other people's emotional states in a socially acceptable way. Putin wore a pair of formal slacks and a Patriots Super Bowl ring. The phrase "super bowl" references some kind of archaic sporting event and not a menu item at Taco Bell. He was also shirtless and somewhat ripped given his advanced years. "Ripped" is a word which here means "spends more time exercising than trying to forge lasting social bonds based on mutual compatibility and trust".

He was having two men rub him down with oil. "Once we kill all the Human Resistance and their homosexuals and blacks and Muslims, I will no longer have to waste time having my enemies killed and focus more on my 'me' time," Putin said.

"I was hoping to get back to watching TV," Dolan said. “Y’know, after I build a wall on the Canadian border and make the homos pay for it.”

"I was going to invite the pre- and pubescent children of the Human Resistance to a private party at my mansion," said Putin. He then rounded on Edward. "Why are you not wearing the mesh wife beater I got for you? It symbolizes my decriminalization of domestic abuse."

Nobody ever dared contradict Putin. People dared to contradict Dolan, but Dolan was too dumb to listen. Putin had that beady-eyed stare of a person stuffing himself with the bloodied entrails and clogged colon of a human being, much like the ponies used to do at the beginning of the war. Edward's situation was a little different. "Your highness, I don't wanna do the Anatoly stuff. I'm no good at it."

Putin did not yell or hit. Edward wasn't his ex-wife, after all, and hitting her was a job for contracted hit men, just as was eliminating political opponents. Instead, like an abusive ex-boyfriend dulling his own guilt through drug abuse, he honeyed his words and reprimanded Edward in the voice of flattery. "You're the face of the people. The face of Russia for the Iron Wolves Corporation. I created the persona of Anatoly Vyacheslavovich Lebed. You were in Spetznats and our top Cold War operative. You lost a foot skydiving out of an aeroplane for your country."

"But I haven't lost my foot," said Edward. It was all a farce.

"You are a symbol of heterosexual masculinity for our country that the Human Resistance stole from us. You will be their Big Brother. Don't make me take your other foot." Putin didn't blink much. Edward frowned. There was little else he could do. Putin continued speaking. "Come. You will be the face of the IWC when we go to meet with the North Koreans. We shall merge forces. Their leadership is flimsy and stretched thin by their large family, and their ponies are mere killing machines. I shall become rightful ruler of Earth."

Putin threw a greasy arm around Edward's wide shoulders. Edward hung his head in shame. "Okay."

"That is more like it. Don't worry. Soon I will possess North Korea's secret weapon, and then I will be even more invincible."

The conference room of the Red October was located towards the bridge, and like many of the rooms on board, it was made up of steely grey metal. There wasn't much to look at, not even any windows. There was a long table with several not-so-uncomfortable chairs, but while sturdily built, they offered little in the way of ambiance. This made the silence even more awkward as the four members of Delta Squad among the Human Resistance had nowhere to look at when avoiding one another's gaze. It would be rude to stare.

Irish broke the silence. "You don't think they're gonna brief us on a mission, do you? 'Cause I think we've put in our time to this war. None of us is fighting fit any longer."

"Speak for yourself," Tyrone said.

Irish gave him a defensive look. "You've had enough tragedy just like the rest of us. I think we should all head back to that Propagation place. It's safe now, right?"

The door clanged open, and in walked Joseph, Dirk, and Queen Elizabeth III. The door shut behind them, and they took seats across from the liberated members of Delta Squad. Joseph folded his hands and took a deep, contemplative breath. "Uh, I guess I'll just come out and say this. We've found Thomas Taylor-Randall."

"God damn," Nick said. "I never thought we'd survive the war." His friends tried to shush him, and he added, "As well as we have, I mean."

Tyrone asked, "What do you mean, 'found' him? He was retired to the U.K., wasn't he?"

Joseph opened up a manila folder and showed off the photos taken of Tom. "He's in the company of the Iron Wolves Corporation, and it doesn't look like he's a prisoner. As far as we can make out, this patch he's wearing is their logo."

Nick shuddered in horror. "It can't be."

Logan pounded a fist on the table. "He's one of us! Captured Tom would never join the enemy. That's got to be it." This half-finished thought led the members of Delta Squad to exchange silent glances.

"What? What is it?" Joseph asked.

Tyrone swallowed. "Three years ago, Daniel was brainwashed by the ponies."

Joseph looked down at the folder. "Ah, yes. We know about that from the war reports. Funnily enough, there've been no clear cases of the Pony Obedience Toxin being used since then. We're taking a wild guess the Equestrians lost the ability to manufacture that drug. Intel reports Pinkie Pie was their main chemical engineer, and she's confirmed deceased."

Dirk leaned an arm on the table. "Fact of the matter is, we can't assume the best case scenario. We can hope for the best, but we gotta prepare for the worst."

"I'm hoping one of you can manage to infiltrate their camp and convince Tom to leave them," said Joseph. "Which one of you was closest to him?"

Again Delta Squad held silent, knowing glances. "That would've been Daniel," Nick said. "They grew up together as childhood friends."

"Fine. Would any of you know where he is? Up 'til now, we've had no luck in tracking him down."

For the third time, Delta Squad looked at each other like middle school students being chewed out by their housemaster with delusions of grandeur above his station. "You might as well tell him," Tyrone said.

"Daniel's our best shot at getting through to Tom," said Logan.

Irish sighed. "The reason I was in Golden Path custody was because I was in Kyrat, and I was in Kyrat to visit Daniel. He's holed up in some Buddhist temple there. Far as I can tell, he has been since the fall of Moscow. I think he's done with the war. Toward then, the strain just became too much for him, he said."

Joseph thought for a moment. He thought about Daniel Williams, the man who had put his father in charge of the Human Resistance, which ultimately ended in Joseph becoming the leader. "I'm not intent on asking him to lead his people. If he wanted that, he would've come back when the year was up. All I need is for him to convince Tom to return. Otherwise, one of you will have to do. Assuming we don't get to that point, I have one last mission for you. We sneak into Kyrat, visit this monastery or temple or whatever, and make contact with Daniel Williams. We convince him to help us out if we can, and above all, kill the ponies."

Delta Squad didn't want to get into another skirmish with the ponies, but they had no objections about meeting up with Daniel again if they could. "Alright," Logan said. "We'll do it."

The queen spoke up when they thought they ought to adjourn. "I just have one question for Nick. I only learned the full story behind your predicament recently. I need to ask, were there any other survivors from Cuba?"

Nick stared at the queen a moment then shook his head. "No. I'm sorry, I was the only one from the mission to Cuba. There were a couple Cubans from earlier, but not since I came over with Bravo Squad. Er, why do you ask? If that's alright."

The queen lowered her gaze. "It's a terrible thing to lose a child. I've lost three already. My youngest daughter, Imogene, was in an accident as a child." She sniffled as a tear rolled down her weathered cheek. "She was mentally disabled. I'm sorry. This war is a terrible thing. It's taken away everything from me." Dirk reached over and stroked the queen's hand lovingly, and he put his arm behind her back to assure her he was there.

Deciding to go to Kyrat had been the easy part. Convincing Delta Squad to come with had certainly been the lynchpin, but then Joseph had to convince Dirk. "Nuh-uh. No doing," Dirk said as Joseph chased him through the corridors on the way to the bridge.

"Will you cut me some slack?" Joseph asked. "I'm running out of senior-level operatives I can strategize with. Delta Squad are only retired marines, and even if Daniel Williams was the leader of the entire Human Resistance, he didn't have the opportunity to be taught that much actual combat experience. I arguably have even less. I can't go around making unilateral decisions. That's not how a real leader should operate."

"Frankly, you're leader because no one else wants the job!" Dirk said. "No one else who's sane, that is. But even if I'm the one gettin' paid, that doesn't mean I condone seeing this big ship get destroyed. Or all these people losing their lives."

"What? Who's losing their lives?" a nearby soldier asked.

"The Golden Path has a power vacuum. Franz Bandelt of the Red Hammer Platoon is in Antarctica. Delta Squad may already be on board, but do you really expect me to confer with just Artemis and Jinn? Neither of them even use their real names." Joseph paused outside the bridge when he said this, because Artemis and Jinn should have been in the bridge room at that point. "What about those stealth choppers we've been developing? We could park the Red October somewhere nearby and get flown in on the QT."

Dirk groaned and slanted his head to one side. Joseph could tell he was caving. Then he shrugged. "You're the leader. What can I tell you? If you want to go on this mission, there's literally no one left to stop you."

He turned to leave when Joseph grabbed his shoulder. "Don't say it like that. Socialism is a democracy. I won't be turning this world into some communist dictatorship."

Dirk was very calm, collected. "What do you think martial law *is?* And if you don't, someone else is bound to later. You can't protect these people forever, and that's when the real tough decisions begin. I learned that by being an employer."

Joseph didn't like what Dirk had to say, chiefly because he couldn't separate what felt wrong from what sounded right, like old television static disguising itself as a shade of grey. How could something be unequivocally accurate when it was clouded in mist and so intertwined with conflicting points of interest? It wasn't until later when their Twinblade was touching down on Kyrat soil that it occurred to him Dirk had learned the right lesson the wrong way. Dirk wasn't necessarily a *good* employer implying he hadn't watched out for his workers. The notion didn't set well with Joseph, but he'd knew humanity would just have to learn from its past mistakes for a change.

Delta Squad could tell Joseph was distracted and gossiped about him on the way up to the mountain where the Buddhist temple, aptly named Buddha Hut, was situated. "Hey," Irish whispered. "What do you think of the new leader of the Human Resistance?"

"Hard to say," Tyrone said. "I always thought Ivan Matskevich was a bit of a hard-ass, but goal-oriented. Somehow Joseph seems a little more on the ball than him, though, at least in terms of leading."

"On the ball?" Logan asked, trying to sound respectful. "He's come off a bit out of it to me. I mean, I understand where you're coming from, Tyrone, but hasn't he been a bit preoccupied lately?"

"He reminds me a bit of Daniel in that regard, actually," said Nick. "I know you've told me how, but I still can't believe anybody but Daniel's the leader."

"God dammit," said Joseph. The entire procession stopped in their tracks. Delta Squad went silent as church mice as they waited to find out what Joseph was cursing about. They watched as he pointed somewhere off to the horizon. "Look north. Does that look like a military camp to you? Way, way out there. I can't believe how calm it feels when you can practically see it from this temple."

The group looked off into the distance. There were indeterminate signs of human settlement here and there down below, but the only real indicator at this altitude was what looked like a couple of planes and maybe a Sherman tank. They didn't stop for long, wanting to put the paranoia behind them. Nick helped Logan navigate the steep terrain, but the temple wasn't far off now. The building

had rather plain construction with dark slits for windows and yellowed grey brickwork. The only ostentatious feature was a prominent statue of a jolly Buddha sitting on top and a sign in ancient-looking foreign script presumably reading the name of the locale.

"This high altitude, this thin air. No wonder it's so religious up here," Irish muttered. His grin was a little too ingratiating when Joseph knocked on the front door. "Try the doorbell," he suggested when there was no answer for half a minute.

Before anyone could tell him temples didn't have doorbells, the double-doors with the beautiful zig-zag pattern opened. The very model of a Buddhist monk that the outsiders had in their heads was standing there: A bald, elderly gentleman with a natural smile on his wrinkled face was wearing orange and red robes and sandals. He looked something like a Halloween costume of himself. Joseph realized that none of them spoke Kyrati, as far as he knew. Why would secluded monks here speak Russian? Still, he needed to communicate with them. "Hello, uh, sir. We're here to speak with Daniel Williams. Uh, if he is here." He then leaned toward Irish, whispering not-so-inconspicuously, "How did you find Daniel before?"

Irish shrugged. "He was in the marketplace, accepting food for the temple."

"Daniel Williams?" the monk asked. "Right this way."

"Oh, you do speak Russian?" Joseph asked.

"He taught us." The monk nodded very politely. He acted reluctantly, but he deigned to permit entry to the five men. "Please do not kill anything while you are here," he told them warmly. The group was asked to wait while the monk conferred with other monks, some of whom looked remarkably young and fighting-fit. Joseph had to disparage the ideas in his mind of Shaolin monk kung Fu films he'd seen in his spare time at university, and Delta Squad hoped that Irish would keep his trap shut since he was acting more vociferous in the time since they'd reunited.

When Joseph's eyes met with a monk's, he caught the man's attention, keeping his voice at a respectably low pitch. "Excuse me, but a friend of mine wanted to spread his mother's ashes on her homeland, Kyrat. I don't know if I could do her the proper justice on his behalf, so I was wondering if you could handle it for me." He handed the elderly monk the parcel of Ajay's mother's ashes. The monk smiled and nodded.

Before the monk could depart, Joseph caught him with another question, using hand gestures to try and convey his meaning. "Would it be alright if we waited over there?" He'd been glancing down a hallway to a small, rounded alcove at the corner of the building where tall windows gazed out over the beautiful alpine landscape. Even the archaic mosaic tiles bestowed a sensation of peace and harmony in this place. The idea that soon the IWC would invade to conquer this peace was unforgiveable.

Delta Squad took a seat on some benches below the windows, but Joseph remained standing. Their first glimpse of Daniel Williams was at a distance. They did not recognize him in his robes until he had drawn closer, and they could scarcely believe it was him. He'd had his hair trimmed shorter than it'd ever been, and his goatee was shaved off. He looked quite older than they last remembered him. Irish elbowed Nick hard in the ribs, and Nick simply nodded his head while rubbing his side in response. Daniel had this kind of stoic, defeated expression on his face, walked with a limp, and was missing all but two short stumps of the ring and index fingers of his right hand. Now that he was this close, the other four Delta Squad alumni felt uneasy. Daniel had been their close friend since the early parts of the war, but that war had changed him perhaps more than it changed any of them. They had seen his descent, his brainwashing, learned of his year-long coma and purported death and subsequent revival, and Tyrone had mentioned the significant signs of stress he'd displayed leading up to the fall of Moscow. They knew he'd lost his brother and father, and the war had asked too much of him. Which Daniel would they get now?

This was a very calm Daniel. Very tempered. Very weathered, like a house that had withstood many seasons. "It certainly is a pleasure to see you all," he said, though he had displayed some visible shock to see the conditions Irish and Logan were in. He looked at Joseph next. "I did not think it would take this long for the Human Resistance to track me down."

Irish felt his deformed face turn hot when he remembered once again the extent to which he'd promised not to reveal Daniel's location. He was last to stand up when Delta Squad rose to close in on Daniel. Nick slung an arm across Daniel's back from one side, his eyes wet, and Tyrone threw an arm around his other, and Joseph found himself standing on the outside of a loose ring of a group hug. He felt relieved not to say anything and risk interfering with these men's long overdue reunion.

They broke when Daniel beckoned them to, and he addressed Joseph again. "I expect you have some sort of business with me. Maybe even a message from Ivan, if I am so lucky?"

"Actually, no. My father is dead," Joseph said. He introduced himself and why he was here. "In short, I want to use your expertise to benefit the Human Resistance."

Daniel frowned at the news of Ivan's demise, but returned to his neutral expression at Joseph's request. "I am sorry, but my days of fighting the ponies are over. I sincerely wish you victory against humanity's enemies."

"I'm not asking you to fight them. I understand you holing up here, and I'm not making any sort of demands that you abandon your rightful authority." Joseph found he was wrangling his hat with both hands. The poor headgear looked to be a hundred years old by now. "I just want your advice. Delta Squad was unstoppable in the old days. Unflappable."

Daniel allowed himself a wistful twitch of a laugh and stared down into space as he reminisced. "Those old days were only six years ago, and we really weren't as successful as people made us out to be. We were doomed from the outset. Our plane was destroyed on the way to Germany. Countless people have died in our names and as a result of our actions. The destruction of Hainan was just the tipping point for everything that happened afterward. We are cursed." For this last statement, he looked Joseph straight on in the eyes.

"But you ultimately defeated Twilight Sparkle. Rainbow Dash may have escaped, but you did manage to capture her, and she's dead now. You slew the Apple family. Delta Squad managed to track its leader down in New York against interminable odds, and you helped so many refugees flee Moscow. Think of all the good you've done! You can't underwrite your accomplishments for the sake of romanticized ideals."

"I spent much of that time brainwashed, unconscious, dead, or hiding out here. I really do not see what I have to offer you, Mr Matskevich. I am sorry, but I have to decline. You have found four of my closest friends whom I believe far surpass me. Please defer to them."

"Aren't you forgetting someone?" Joseph asked. Daniel's face remained calm, but Joseph could tell from his body language that he was intrigued. "Thomas Taylor-Randall?"

"I assume that, like me, he refused your offer in lieu of remaining in Britain."

"Never met the man. He's been loading up with the Iron Wolves Corporation. They're these suicidal lifers working for Vladimir Putin. Since the fall of Moscow, they've been pretending to safeguard humanity's interests, but in reality they're hired by the ponies and on the side establish monopolistic enterprises here and there."

"Yes, we do hear the occasional titbits of the war. It can be difficult to discern what is rumour and speculation depending upon the source. I cannot believe that Tom would join up with such rogues. They are traitors to their species and stand for everything we fought against."

Joseph pulled out a copy of the spy photograph taken showing Tom in the IWC camp. "This is the real reason I came to see you. I want Thomas Taylor-Randall. I want the full set. I do not want this to end in tragedy."

Daniel's gentle expression donned a subtle frown as he gazed at Tom's image. He recognized him, of course. "I do not know what to tell you. If this is his choice, there is nothing I can do to intervene. I would like to believe he is acting without knowing the full situation."

Joseph took a step forward until he was almost nose-to-nose with Daniel. "I don't believe *you're* acting with knowing the full situation." His eyes darted to Daniel's companions who had been fretfully watching the exchange boil to a head. Joseph took a deep breath, knowing he was being a bit too forceful. He stepped away, glanced out the window, then stepped aside while gesturing for the former leader of humanity. "Take a look out there, Daniel. Far off in the distance, but you can *see* our enemies coming toward you. They won't stop until they monetize every bit of this country, then they'll move on to the next, and each will fall like dominos, and your best friend has so munificently offered his services to them."

Irish whispered to Tyrone. "What does 'munificently' mean?" Tyrone shushed him.

Daniel was drawn to that window, and it could not be said that his heart did not race at the prospect. He looked for a moment, but the fog was tinting the lands far below. He couldn't really see much of anything, to be honest, but he felt he could trust Joseph's conviction. He glanced to his friends to be sure, and their lack of contradiction could be read on their faces. Daniel set his face like stone at Joseph. "These are conditions I cannot change. The monks and I are prepared for any inevitability."

Joseph wanted to kick something, but didn't. He ended up shuffling awkwardly and holding his palm thoughtfully over his mouth. "Are you really so stoic that—" He silenced himself. "You know what? I'm sorry. I'm just a little tense. I'm sure you understand, right?" The members of Delta Squad nodded empathetically. There was quite a bit of stress in the military. "We've got time to stick around for a while yet. Why don't you five enjoy yourselves, catch up with each other? Who knows, maybe you'll change your mind." He ducked his head, ready to route his way out of there, saying to the people he'd brought with him, "I think it best you tell your friend anything pertinent you believe he ought to know." He knew they were going to do that anyway. He also hoped that their presence would remind Daniel of the importance of their friendship.

Indeed, he would be reminded of their camaraderie, a word which here means "comradeship". He would listen at length as Delta Squad recounted their stories from the past year; in Nick's case, even longer than that. Nick cleared his throat and choked on his

words before he could get them out. "This isn't easy for me to say, Daniel, because it broke my heart. Becky and I were getting to be close during our time in Cuba." As soon as Nick stared Daniel in the eyes, his eyes watered. His breath was wavering. Somehow, he pushed the words out, because there are times words feel as heavy as anvils, and the truth we pound against them cuts like the sharpest sword. "Becky was killed by ponies."

Daniel responded with a solemn nod and tried to take Nick's hands to comfort him. "I found out already. Kyrat is not completely cut off from the news of the day." He let go of Nick's hands and gazed at the floor for a moment. "I have spent the past year mourning the deaths of my father and sister, and even my brother. The monks have helped immensely in teaching me to deal with loss." After a pause, he looked at Nick again. "I am sorry for your loss, but never forget it is a loss we both share. I am glad that you managed to survive."

For perhaps the first time since Becky's death, even including his rescue, even meeting his closest friends again, Nick felt happy enough for a genuine smile to spread across his face. Perhaps the best possible thing in the face of grief, once enough time has passed to scar the wounds, is to know truly that one is not alone in that grief. It is like falling into the arms of a skydiver whose parachute has not malfunctioned. It is like being in a set of conjoined twins in which you control only half the limbs, but they control the other half. It is like finding a quiet place in a terrible world.

Daniel's friends did their best to cheer him up, because the stories of their ill fates served to depress him as much as inform and astound. It was a very different night from all those spent at the Ivory Inn. They did not lament the lack of alcohol or meat, nor discuss women's bodies. None of them complained, although Irish did at one point ask Daniel if he now knew kung Fu. Maybe they were not necessarily wiser, but they had grown, and after separation, found one another. Lastly, he told them all about life living in the monastery, and by then the sun had set and they had fallen asleep one by one until only Daniel was left awake. The other thing their presence reminded him of was the absence of Tom. They were incomplete.

Up north and down below, there were others among the Iron Wolves Corporations' camp that were joining in unity: The IWC and the North Korean government. Not in their entirety of course, but their representative leaders who commanded authority among them and therefore by most ethical standards were responsible. This meant Vladimir Putin and Dolan Trump, and Kim Jong-Un and Kim Yo Jong. All but Jong-Un were dressed in three-piece suits. He was dressed in a long, shiny leather jacket with a "Gangnam Style" t-shirt, a pair of ladder shades on his face, and another pair of ladder shades atop his head. Aryanne was there as well, along with a flamboyant man in a purple suit named Pagan Minh. The latter had his arms crossed and looked like he had a bug up his ass, so to speak.

"Gentlemen, welcome," Dolan said. "As you know, I have a ton of respect ampersand slash or good hyphen feelings about you and your country."

"You got a lot of fit-looking people here," Jong-Un said. "Bit western-looking though. In North Korea, we keep our citizens sexy the good old-fashioned way: Anorexia! Anorexia and my honourable blessing. Can you stand fat people? I can't. People shouldn't even leave the house or take the bag off their head if they aren't at least an eight."

Dolan smiled his lumpy smile. "My thoughts exactly."

Putin fiddled with the Patriots ring on his finger. "Gentlemen, it's high time we discussed how we're going to eradicate the Human Resistance infestation. We just don't have the manpower we used to, and the same goes for our extradimensional visitors."

Yo Jong hugged a clipboard, not that it had any pertinent information clipped to it. "Our kidnapped Japanese engineers and their pony-loving public have built for us a most magnificent weapon."

"Yes, yes, tell us more about this weapon," Putin asked.

"Is it a gun?" asked Dolan, who proceeded to make "Kachang, kachang" noises with his mouth.

"It has several guns," Yo Jong promised.

"And only my prized team of Wonderbolts can pilot it," said Aryanne.

"So is it some kind of artillery vehicle?" Putin frowned at what Aryanne had said, but his buggy goldfish eyes couldn't squint.

It's like no vehicle brought to fruition on Earth before," Aryanne said. Her boast was punctuated by a colossal shake. Beyond the nearby edge of the camp was a cliff overlooking a turbulent ocean. An all-too-convenient dramatic wind blew through people's hair, and a colossal hand constructed out of segmented bits of metal grasped the edge of the land. A massive, unworldly figure hoisted its inhuman head into view like some primordial beast dragging itself out of Hell. The face was like staring into the windshield of a truck that was two lanes wide. Another hand reached over the land, knocking aside shrubs. The tremors knocked over several objects littered around the camps, mostly pitchers and dinnerware and some miscellanea. A couple of soldiers had to stamp out their campfire.

Even the Kims who had pressured the construction of this steel golem joined the Iron Wolves Corporation in reacting with shock at what was presented to them.

Even at the far edge of camp, Tom could feel the reverberations under his feet. He could see the ripples in his glass of watered-down bourbon. He could not fail to notice what appeared to be a giant robot the likes of which were only seen in cartoons and Japanese television now standing off in the distance in the midst of the camp. He had been lifting a forkful of franks and beans MRE to his lips, but dropped the fork onto his tray without taking a bite. "What?" was the only common word he could get out amidst all the questions boiling in his brain. Something about the way the other IWC soldiers were scrambling around to make sense of what was transpiring snapped him back into consciousness. He knew he needed to finish off that drink.

Perhaps just as daunting was the presence of Daniel nearby. He had deliberated for some time and left his friends asleep to wander down the mountainside. He had pondered matters over some more while he crossed the countryside. His mind kept hitting a block about what he should do, and before he knew it, he was heading to Tom for the answer. He was trying to think of what excuse he would have to endanger himself and find Tom. He realized that seeing his friend again was in and of itself his purpose.

Daniel strolled right up to the chain-link gates where two IWC guards aimed guns at him, ordering him to state his business. "I'm here to see Thomas Taylor-Randall," he said. They looked at one another, suspicion all over their faces like ugly all over their faces. Daniel allowed them to frisk his monk's robes to ensure he was carrying no weapons, and they let him through with an escort. He was just one unarmed monk wanting to see some low-level private none of them gave a damn about. What harm could it do? Plus all their higher-ups were in some kind of meeting, weakening the chain of command. That was what Daniel told himself anyway. He had a rueful confidence that he would not be walking back out of this encampment again.

"You have a visitor, Taylor-Randall," the guard said.

Tom had been staring at the shocking sight of the giant mechanical biped. He did not expect an even more shocking sight right then and there. "Daniel?"

Daniel could see the enormous humanoid construct, but he could not think of what to make of it. None of the soldiers knew what was going on with this humungous robot thing either. The sight of it made the two long-lost friends forget everything they wanted to say to one another. They had been replaying their last distant conversation over in their heads from time to time, less frequently as the months wore on, but now they were at a loss for words. Before they could get out a hello, before they could take stock of the situation, they were once again being wrenched away from one another without explanation. Henry had arrived to arrest Daniel for his intrusion. The only person who would be asking questions now would be Henry. As Daniel passively let himself be led away, his eyes did not part from Tom's gaze, and neither of them could be sure what the other was thinking.

9. Down the Barrel of a Gun

Joseph had had very few restful nights since the incursion at Lenin Base. The placidness of the monks' refuge only served to cloud his mind with thought, and he got up for a stroll to try and ease his mind. It didn't take long for him to realize that Daniel was gone, and he woke up his Delta Squad advocates in a hurry. "Wake up. Daniel's gone. Daniel's missing!"

A few groggy moments passed before the message got through to them. "Where the ruddy hell would he be at this hour?" Logan asked.

"Maybe he's somewhere else in the monastery?" Nick suggested.

"No. He's gone to see Tom. He could be at the IWC camp already for all we know." Joseph was throwing on his coat then tossing the still semi-prone Delta Squad members their own.

"At this hour?" griped Irish. "It must be about two-hundred and seventy-three point fifteen below zero out there!" He was still complaining as the five of them marched out of the monastery and down the chilly mountainside. Disgusting rivulets of phlegm were hanging down from his nose where they promptly froze like icicles. "First I burn to death, now I'm gonna freeze to death. It's so cold my balls are shrivelling up."

"Oh no! Then they'll start to enter negative space," said Tyrone. After a deliberate beat, he explained. "Because they'll be too small." Everyone had a good, hard laugh at Irish, just like old times.

Joseph stopped laughing and stopped in his tracks, causing the rest of the procession to stop too. He had to stare long and hard to figure out what he was seeing. "Guys, we got a big problem." The Delta Squad members followed his gaze and saw it as well. Even at this distance, the scale of the giant mech designed by the Japanese for the North Koreans was apparent.

DOWN THE BARREL OF A GUN

By the time Joseph and the rest had returned to the Red October, the word of the robot colossus had spread. It was a little irritating that rumour and speculation would run faster than them, but that wasn't as important as figuring out just what in the hell to do next.

"What in the hell do we do next?" Dirk asked when he was gathered in the conference room with the others. The others there were Joseph and the four Delta Squad members, Sabal of the Golden Path, Mohammad from the Red Hammer Platoon, Flawkes from down in engineering, and Jenny Everywhere in the Queen of England's stead.

"First, think of what we have to do," Joseph said. "We have to stop that war machine mecha, and I doubt Delta Squad would permit me to overlook emancipating Daniel and Tom."

"Actually, 'mecha' refers to anything mechanical," said Dirk. "You know what a giant robot is called in Japan?" The others shook their heads. "'Giant robot'. They're very popular among Japanese sentai shows. Most of you gaijin wouldn't know that, though."

"Hey, that's nice. The next thing we need to focus on is *how* we're gonna accomplish our goals, and the first thing coming to mind is getting the Red October airborne again." Joseph looked to Mohammad and Flawkes. "How's your cooperation going?"

Mohammad and Flawkes looked at each other. "Uh, it's going good?" Mohammad said.

Flawkes nodded. "It is going well. I do not know if it will be ready before their construct decimates Kyrat, but we should have it done by a certain amount of time."

Joseph pounded the desk. "I need it sooner than that! I'm giving you half of a certain amount of time." He became calm again on a dime, folding his hands. "Our earlier intel gathered more than Tom's location. We also know that the IWC have been designing some new form of mobile air vehicle, and they've been making them in droves. It's going to be a full-scale battle out there.

"Sabal, I'd like for you to send two of your best men into the IWC camp. I know it may seem risky. I know it may seem foolhardy. 'Foolhardy' is a word which means 'risky'. But I feel like we owe our previous leader this. The Golden Path hails from Kyrat, and your people know the region better than anyone. If you think you can get away with sending more troops, go ahead, but I didn't want a whole squadron to attract the attention of the enemy's vehicles they will undoubtedly deploy to engage us."

Sabal gave a nod, but Joseph raised a hand to bid him to stay a moment longer. "This is the largest battle I have ever commanded in my life, and up until a few months ago, I'd never been in charge of anything on such a grand scale. You don't want to hear your leader's weak or green right now, but what I'm doing is reiterating my faith in you all. This mission to attack the IWC is not to distract from rescuing two soldiers. It is to protect the people of Kyrat who fall under the jurisdiction of the Human Resistance, and above all, kill the ponies. Dismissed!"

Everyone left the room but Joseph and the four Delta Squad members he'd collected from around the globe. "Sir, you didn't ask us to do anything," Logan said. "I know we look worse for wear, but we're willing to do anything to bring the rest of our team back together again."

Joseph had been about to leave. "You told me you'd seen too much strife to stay in the game. I respect that. You four have done enough. I won't ask anything more of you other than your strategic experience and moral support." He turned around completely when he realized he had more to say. "I can have someone escort you off the Red October and away from this battle if you prefer. You're the only people here apart from Dirk and the queen who aren't conscripted military personnel. Probably the cook, too. Technically you people were either discharged, KIA or AWOL, none of which is held against you."

"All due respect sir, we'd like to stick around. We might as well see this thing through, and we don't want to be late for our reunion." Logan grinned with confidence. Joseph too felt his chest swell with a sort of pride. He felt like he'd come a long way, yet it didn't seem that far. He really was the leader of the Human Resistance now. Saving the human race had been passed down to him, and he'd be damned before he let the sacrifices that came before him go to waste.

The ponies were swift to lay waste to Kyrat. They had boarded the special helicopters designed for them to their specifications. They were single-occupancy units designed with two sets of propellers above and below the central chassis that were each bent at a ninety-degree angle. As the perpendicular propellers spun, they shot out dozens of bullets per second, although that may have been an exaggeration. These were dubbed the Swastikopters and represented everything Equestria stood for and believed in.

Truly they did. They did not care whether they shot down humans below or bombed villages. They were attacking the land itself; the puny, wretched Earth that had been their prison since the route back home to Equestria had been stolen from them.

Even nature was not safe. A family of four was driving home from Buddha church in their jeep when a bomb went off several yards in the distance. The explosive directly struck a particularly large specimen of wild deer, shattering its body into many pieces. The bloodied head, its eyes agog and its tongue lolling free, slammed face-first into the family's windshield, sending the parents and children screaming in horror. Soon they would be screaming in agony when another bomb landed upon them, though not for long until the coldness of death gripped them. The last one to go was the baby who tried using its own severed arm as a pacifier.

"Dammit, you ignorant fucks, I didn't give any order to attack!" Putin was yelling at Aryanne who didn't give two shits.

Their mecha reached an arm down to allow Aryanne to step onto its palm before lifting her up. "You insolent little dookie with puke all over it. You work for us, or have you forgotten? We have the weapons we need to eradicate your species once and for all, or did you forget we're at war with you? And before you try anything, yes, our giant robot is hack-proof as well. It runs on Apple." The robot then deposited her inside itself and stomped away, creaking and clanging like every laundry machine in the world. Before it left, it demonstrated its haughty displeasure by stamping on Dolan and squashing him flat, twisting its sole against the stoney ground.

The peoples of Kyrat were the first victims of this new assault by the ponies. They were a nation wracked by terror under the iron boot of Pagan Minh of the IWC, but surprise attacks on this scale were beyond the scope to which they were accustomed. Then there was the giant robot, something which not only terrorized them, but went beyond their reckoning. It stomped down one of the wider roads, snapping utility wires and snapping poles. This cut out the electricity and the cable, preventing residents from watching reruns of Keenan and Kel. Commuters screeched to a halt. One in particular honked impertinently, shouting that he had to get to the Burger King before his employees ruined the place. The robot stomped toward him, and he realized the gravity of the situation. Executing a hasty three-point turn, he could not outrace the Wonderbolts' machine which grabbed him up like a toy and hurtled him as far as it could. After several seconds, he exploded in a field of cows.

Swastikopters filled the skies like a swarm of angry bees. Angry bees with guns! After a time of just aimlessly channelling their weapons, some of them broke off into groups to rip through public buildings with hundreds of bullets per second. They shot up a thimble manufacturer. They shot up a Swiss cheese processing plant. They shot up a bootleg Wiffle ball factory. They shot up a prophylactic retailer. One of the ponies opened the window on her Swastikopter and took a shit out of it. The turds fell from a height of approximately five-thousand feet, putting a serious dent in the bonnet of somebody's Lamborghini.

All this wouldn't go unchecked, however, as the ponies' bad deeds had invoked the aggro of the irate Kyrati citizens. There wasn't much they could do with Pagan Minh controlling their military and the ponies' allies of the IWC controlling him, but a few erstwhile citizens with connections among the Golden Path had the odd bazooka with them that they bought from the Middle East who had bought them from the United States back in the 80s. They still didn't amount to much however as the Wonderbolts' robot started kicking around people, places and other Wheel of Fortune categories like they were so__er ba__s.

The Human Resistance had to do something about this, and they deployed as their advance guard several dozen Twinblades and Kirovs they had recently built and kept waiting around for just such an occasion. The Twinblades were the camou helicopters of course, but they did have combat capabilities, and their numbers were needed to supplement the quantity of Kirovs. Kirovs were Soviet re-brandings of American A-10 bomber jets. They were retrofitted from another model of plane that was swiftly called into action when dragons were discovered as a threat, and a similar model had been in use during the post-skirmish after the Fall of Moscow with the Equestrian zeppelin fleet. Similar in the sense that they are jet planes.

This was a perfect opportunity for the Human Resistance to let loose their long-standing developmental weapons. “Men, unleash the Desolator biochemical weapon!” came the command from the Red October. The Kirovs had been outfitted with forward bomb launchers, and several fighters fired out capsule-sized bombs, each one about half the size of breadboxes. They detonated remotely in mid-air, in the midst of the Swastikopter fleets, and the resulting blue-green-flamed explosions enveloped at least several Swastikopters in one hit. One of the co-pilot scouts was able to fix a sight on a pony caught in the blast. Just as theorized, the Equestrian’s body had rapidly—not immediately—petrified, then crumbled inwards on itself like a rotted tooth. The Swastikopter lilted then careened off in an errant direction toward a collision with the ground.

“It works, sir! It works! The Equestrian DNA was neutralized then decayed!” The Desolators were weapons designed from a certain species of fungi treated in a special chemical treatment from a rare convocation of natural minerals that had been anonymously delivered to the Human Resistance about a year ago. Cheers went up, but the battle wasn’t won just yet.

One pegasus stallion named Mortar Round wearing a fedora with "M'lady" painted on the side of his Swastikopter closed in on a human named Dale Earnhardt Jr. in a jet. They both laughed in pre-emptive victory as they closed in on one another, only to miss each other at the last second, neither colliding nor hitting the other with bullets. They both had to circle around in awkward silence to try again. One human in a Twinblade was getting very impatient because he was stuck behind another Twinblade that had left its blinker on.

Even though some of the Equestrians were all too happy to suicide themselves by crashing into landmarks below, there was no end to their repulsive lot. Another Kirov had its engines riddled with bullets until they belched black smoke, and the pilot was forced to eject. As he descended with his parachute, he yelped and said "Whoa!" in alarm as he narrowly avoided several Swastikopters and bombs. By sheer chance he landed on top of another Kirov and clung to it in panic. "Please land! I would like to get down," he shouted.

Inside the giant robot, the Wonderbolts were going to town trying to figure out the controls. "Aren't there any projectile weapons on this thing?" Spitfire yelled.

"I'm not sure," Fleetfoot said. "Soarin got sticky pie goop all over the labels."

"I'm having too much fun just throwing stuff!" said Soarin who had just made their robot uproot a tree. The machine swung it like a bat into a Twinblade, knocking it through the air with such centrifugal force that its propellers broke off and the rest of it plummeted to the ground like a stone. Several more humans tried to parachute to safety, but a pair of Swastikopters ripped their chutes full of bullet holes.

"Luckily we have our backup chutes!" one of them said. They both pulled their backup chutes. A Swastikopter did another flyby, destroying these as well. "Aw, heck."

The giant mecha flexed, boasting its prowess in a full-scale battle. It dominated the land. The Kirovs and Twinblades may have been able to deal a crushing blow to the Swastikopters, but not with that metal monstrosity in their midst. They tried to focus their firepower on the machine while keeping out of reach, but their bullets and even their bombs did nothing. Time and again the Wonderbolts would seize some object, usually involving a living person or non-human animal, and either defend itself or hurl their item with extreme precision and the numerous moving targets all around it.

Rising from behind the mountains, deploying its second fleet of fighter jets, the massive aircraft carrier that was the Red October flew above the terrain like a brick suspended with propellers. Within, Joseph sat in the main seat of the bridge, surrounded by military technicians of the Human Resistance. Many soldiers occupied the seats of the various turrets located along their vessel, training them upon their enemies. "Comrades! Let's lock and load."

Daniel had been locked inside a large circus cage inside a tent on a bed of straw. Straw is stiff and tends to poke you, so it doesn't quite meet the standards of "comfortable," a word which here means "amenable to the physical attribute of opposing pain". In his orange robes, he sat cross-legged on the floor and shut his eyes, trying to meditate as the monks had taught him over the months. He had been left alone with the guards standing outside, and the disconcerting sounds of battle had drifted away. There were still panicked shouts from within the camp, but they didn't sound like they were anywhere near him. That was how he could hear the footsteps entering the prison tent. Somehow he knew to whom they belonged.

"I never thought I'd see you again a day in my life!" Tom said. "Not before the war was won, anyway. What are you doing here?"

Daniel opened his eyes and stared at Tom, his face a placid facade. "Ever since I survived the fall of the Equestrian fleet, I have been living here in a Buddhist monastery."

"And you don't have an Asian accent now?" Tom was referencing Daniel's adoption of a Russian accent as a gesture of his pride for the communist nation.

Daniel took a deep breath. "I must admit I am tempted by the curiosity of how you came to be here."

"Boy, don't you talk half posh now? I happen to work for the Iron Wolves Corporation."

Daniel hung his head. "I thought as much, although I cannot imagine why you made this choice. I take it you have no intention of letting me go, then?"

"What? Oh, sorry. I should've said when I came in I'd try everything in my power to let you out. You know I can be a bit awkward about that. It's just that the guys here are really tight on security. They don't even like monks poking around, not that they have before." Tom watched Daniel. Daniel watched Tom. After a brief pause, Tom responded to Daniel's former comment. "I know I said I was giving up the soldiering business, but there was nothing for me in the U.K. In my own home. All the wounded soldiers either wanted to stick together, or with their families, and all the fighting fit men wanted to go back off to war. Um, so I lingered around for a while by myself, then eventually I had to do something or go crazy. I didn't want to just go back to the Human Resistance after leaving twice, and the Iron Wolves Corporation task force was recruiting."

"There must be more to it than that, knowing their reputation."

"Reputation?" Tom appeared genuinely confused.

Daniel blinked. "They were pivotal in Equestria's kamikaze attack on Cuba."

Tom canted his head. "I heard that rumour, but I also heard people saying the opposite. People said the Human Resistance was defeated, and they're always saying the ponies are going to invade. It's hard to know what's true or false these days."

"You can trust me, can't you?" Daniel said. "Or the Human Resistance. They have intel on their entrepreneurial ventures across the globe. Or Nick can tell you. He was a first-hand witness to their attacks. He survived a pony labour camp. All our old friends from Delta Squad survived, Tom. Wouldn't you like to see them again?"

Tom stared for a long moment. "I don't know what to say. The IWC I've been spending time with hasn't done anything like that, and I haven't seen mane or tail of a pony. At least, not a live one. We haven't even seen any combat. We've just been looting demolished cities, relocating the odd refugee and so forth." He seized the bars of the cage. “You were gone, remember, Daniel. You were all gone, and I did at least know that following the fall of Moscow, the Human Resistance was on the verge of shambles. Their base was gone, so who could account for what they knew?”

"There's also the matter of that giant robot." Daniel remained seated as a loud shudder rocked the camp.

"I've never seen it before," Tom said. Both men were silent again while the battle ticked away somewhere outside.

"Wasn't there some nurse you were heading back to the U.K. with?" Daniel asked.

Tom was again blank-faced. "I don't remember." He squinted, trying to recollect, then laughed. "I remember saying I was done with women. Yeah, thanks for drudging up that bad memory, mate. Nah, without you around, I'm awkward as heck. People always misunderstand me, and I have a hard time making myself understood. I don't actually have any friends among the IWC. I try and follow orders, but I somehow screw 'em up and they rag on me for it." He blushed. "Still, I thought you'd still be heading the Human Resistance. Rumour was someone else took over."

"I was ousted. Like I said, I have been in Kyrat where the monks is practicing Buddhism. There is a whole new life I have found for myself here. One of stoic peace."

"Wait, what? What happened to the Daniel who'd kill any pony before blinking for the death of his brother?" Tom asked.

"I have come to terms with that and the loss of my other family."

"But...no, actually, I can understand that." Tom's hands slid away from the bars. There was a lingering unspoken conversation between the pair of them. They had reached an impasse and found that after a year of being apart, they did not know what to say. They could not remember what they wanted to say.

They lost the chance to say it when Pagan Minh stepped in, adorned in his infamous purple suit. "Oh, you will not believe the chaos going on out there. It is hilarious! On the other hand, it's been so long since I've had a prisoner to interrogate."

Tom frowned. "He's just a monk, sir. I could just escort him off the premises for you."

Pagan gushed. "I've been dying to torture a holy man!"

Daniel shut his eyes. "I can withstand torture. I cannot help anything you can do to me."

"Oh, but you'll just *die* if you don't talk. And I don't mean *just* die. I mean you'll be killed in some nasty, horrible way. Aryanne does so enjoy my flair for excruciating torment, so much so the Equestrians even granted me my own personal stallion to vent my frustrations on. I've even been torturing some of the North Korean commie bastards I'm meant to ally with. Whoops! Goes down salty, doesn't it?"

There was the sound of an elephant trumpeting nearby. Pagan had an excited expression on his face as he gripped the bars, like a parent waiting to give a child a birthday present. "Right on time! I could have the elephant rape you to death, or maybe just stomp on your head and crush you. Would you not enjoy that? Being slowly crushed to death? First we'll have him step on your legs, and your arms, then your buttocks, and make sure you're still fully conscious before the big finale."

"It might just be simpler to shoot him a couple of times," Tom said, flexing the gun issued to him by the IWC. Daniel's eyes went wide at the sound of his long-time friend threatening him.

"Meh. Sounds boring," Pagan said. "My way's much more expensive."

"But we could have him talki—" Tom fired mid-sentence. Mid-word, even. A smattering of bullets struck Pagan in the gut and he keeled over, his face blotchy with pain and rage. Tom quickly fired again, right into Pagan's temple, killing him. He was dead. He'd died even faster than most of the innocent peasants and not-so-innocent freedom fighters he'd had executed.

Daniel breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He had been sweating bullets (not literal ones) at the prospect that Tom might actually betray him. "You really had me going for a moment there!"

"We don't have much time, mate. We gotta get the hell out." He rifled through Pagan Minh's belt for the keys and ripped the belt loop right off for them. He started fumbling to unlock Daniel's cage. "Shit, shit, shit!"

"So I take it you believe me now?" Daniel asked.

"I always believed you," Tom said. He opened the cage then handed Pagan's gun to Daniel.

"I don't use those anymore," he said, but he took it anyway.

"Okay, that I don't believe. C'mon!" He grabbed Daniel's wrist and yanked him out of the tent.

They were immediately jabbed in the sides by a pair of guns, and from behind them came the distinctive childlike lilt of a pony voice. "My my, what a beautiful day to die."

Back on the bridge of the Red October, Joseph was urging the pilots to keep their distance from the giant robot. "Steady. Steady! It looks to be no match for ranged weaponry."

Sure enough, the pony mech was revelling in its own destructive melee. It was taunting the populace in a booming voice, not that anybody was paying attention amidst the wanton death and property damage, saying, "Death is a preferable alternative to communism."

Hurk shook his head at the view screen. "That thing has got to go."

The pony mech was having its own share of problems, though. In front of it was the Human Resistance fleet which wasn't putting up much of a fight. They were providing it with ammunition, really. Behind it was a tank driven by the North Koreans. It rolled up and shot the mech in the butt, sending it shaking and almost toppling over. The pony mech swivelled around to see Kim Jong-Un pop up from the top of the tank, shouting something unintelligible at them like, "You stupid ponies! You screw us over for the last time!"

Twin laser beams shot out from corners on the mech's head and immolated Jong-Un on the spot. He flailed around on fire, the most exercise he'd seen in years, and then the mech threw a jet at the tank like it was a game of darts and the whole mess exploded gaily. While its back was turned, the Red October drew closer and set forth with its numerous cannons and armaments. Explosion after explosion decked the pony mech, but when the smoke cleared, the only change were a few scorch marks on the paint job. The mech pointed its arm out at the Red October and fired its fist on a long cable. The punch clanged against the Red October's underside with improbable force, sending the colossal ship listing sideways and drifting toward the ground at a sharp angle. Everyone on board was flung to the right wall, yelling and desperately clawing for their seats. Warning lights shot off, and the klaxon furthered the confusion on board. Joseph, the Belarusians, the Golden Path, Delta Squad. Everybody lost their seats, almost lost their lunch, and the loss of the battle was imminent as the Red October descended from the skies not even an hour since its inaugural take-off.

Panjit and Inferno had no need for stealth when they arrived at the IWC camp. By the time they rolled up, the chaos proved the ponies had severed ties with their puppets, leaving the parting gift of a spreading blaze and countless wounded and crushed. That did not mean their mission went unopposed. They still had some distance to go, but were closing fast, after a harrowing jeep ride across most of Kyrat. Nitrous oxide had helped cut down time on their journey, but despite the ensuing madness, there were still IWC lifers eager to defend their turf. Panjit and Inferno were outnumbered, but not Panjit and Inferno and the small squadron of elites from the Golden Path that had accompanied them.

A swathe of Equestrian land troops had been dispatched to deal directly with the IWC who were trying to avenge their betrayal, but of course Panjit and Inferno ran into these. They immediately launched a pair of Desolators into their throng. Even though the blue-green flames enveloped a few IWC stragglers as well, any humans caught in the blast were totally unaffected by the bomb's affects, although there were minor shrapnel injuries. The whole crowd of ponies touched by the flames were petrified over a swift process, then their bodies crumbled inwards like wet ash. The effects of the limited bombs was devastating.

A Swedish warrior clad in heavy, grey furs and dual-wielding war axes parkoured his way across the war-torn battlefield. He had long, dirty hair and a goatee beard, and his chiselled face was scarred and crinkled. His name was Ulfric Stormcloak, and he was a badass. He chopped one IWC soldier's gun barrel in twain. Running along a few paces beside him was another man clad in black and

yellow ninja gear. He had caught up from behind with his excellent speed, and was striking lethal blows left and right at the enemies he raced past with the metal hooks on his bracers. This man only went by the code name “Scorpion”.

“Get over here!” Scorpion chucked a concealed hook on a chain at an IWC member taking aim at Panjit or Inferno. The hook dug into the lifer’s spine and yanked so hard that the bones wrenched out of her back even as she flung backwards through the air toward her ambusher. He kicked her corpse off his weapon as he reeled it in.

Ulfric leapt like a wild elk over the lifer’s body and chucked one of his axes mid-leap into the face of another IWC patsy. His victim hadn’t even hit the ground before he passed him, wrenching his war axe out of the man’s face and back into the first of his flexing, macho, purebred Swede arm. “I am dar Dragonbork!” he shouted.

The first person the pair met once they crossed into camp territory was Henry, but he wasn't dressed like a soldier. He was dressed like a civilian. He waved his arms frantically toward them. "Stop! Please! Don't shoot! I'm an American tourist!" His porky face flushed, he clasped his hands together in a pleading fashion. "I only came here to study the Buddhists. Please don't hurt me. I only wanna get home."

"God dammit, a civilian," Panjit said. "We're very busy here! Can't you see this is a warzone? You'll need to protect yourself, so take this gun and stay behind us." He handed Henry his M-TAR.

"Oh, absolutely!" Henry couldn't believe how dumb these two were. He almost regretted shooting them in the back and killing them too quickly for them to realize how stupid they had been. Once they were heading off ahead of him further into the camp, he pulled the trigger.

Nothing *happened* when he pulled the trigger. Just a click sound. "Funny," Inferno said, peering over his shoulder. "It's as if he was pointing your own gun straight at your back when he pulled that trigger, friend." There was a subtle kind of sarcasm in Inferno's inflections that made Henry's lungs sink into his abdomen.

Panjit shook his head. "Pity he didn't figure that in the Golden Path, we learn to trust no one. Not even the people we're here to save." He faced Henry and held his hand out as if expecting to be given his gun back. "I ran out of bullets sniping enemies on the way here."

Inferno sighed. "I can't believe I'm about to kill someone this pathetic, but we can't let a traitor live." Henry wasn't dead by the time he hit the ground. His bulging stomach was bubbling blood like a science project and the pain was paralyzing. He rolled over from the stupendous sensations, unable to watch as Inferno and Panjit walked away, with Panjit reloading his weapon.

The two Golden Path members were a little discouraged that the IWC were panicking this way and that, trying to eliminate fires, trying to mobilize anti-aircraft guns to avenge themselves against the ponies, and trying to assemble their squads by making sure who was still alive. Very few of them even noticed or gave a damn that the enemy had trespassed into their midst. There were plenty of obstacles to take cover behind; barrels of fire, vehicles (of which some had been destroyed by the ponies), and tents and so forth. The IWC of Cuba had been finely trained stock, but these IWC were desperate additions, not good enough for the front, or only in it for the money. Most of the Golden Path members had been fighting the tyranny of Pagan Minh's regime all their lives.

"I was expecting more ponies," Panjit said. "Remember when they used to overrun the continent?"

"Those were some good firefights," Inferno agreed. "I like to think my grandfather is smiling down on me from the heavens, asking me to kill a lot of bastards."

"I can send you there to see him if you like!" A man wearing a full suit of red Kevlar armour appeared before them. His suit had the motif of a white skeletal structure, and the only thing out of place with the look was the logo of his regiment on his shoulders and the corner of his chest. "The ponies have stolen the technology given to them by the government and misused it to bite the hands that fed them. Stand aside, or face the might of Quan Chi of the Korean Volunteers Army!" Quan Chi swung around a katana, whipping it audibly through the air, then held it in front of himself like a samurai.

"What? What the hell's a South Korean doing here?" Panjit asked.

"He's *North* Korean, numbskull," said Inferno. "North Korea are the crazy ones."

"I thought South Korea was crazy," said Panjit. "They actually prohibit Japanese people from speaking in their media. Now that's fucked up." He paid attention to Quan Chi again. "Hey, you know people these days use guns, right?"

"My katana is for slicing up wildlife," Quan explained. "I am so skilled, however, that I can take you on even against ranged weaponry."

"Okay, I'll bite," Panjit said, pulling a weapon out from around his belt. It was a long chain. On one end was a hammerhead. On the other was a sickle. "Hand-to-hand combat. If I win, you let us pass, right? Er, actually, weapon-to-weapon."

"Wrong, because I am a man without honour," said Quan. Everything he said was in a voice muffled by his armour and with a bloodthirsty, dramatic tone to it.

"That's...upfront," said Inferno. He leapt back as Quan rushed in, catching Panjit's chain weapon when the latter defended himself. The sickle portion wrapped around the katana blade multiple times then Quan slipped his weapon free.

"Have you ever heard of a man called Onyx Tibersire?" Quan asked. He twirled around like a ballerina, swiping his katana horizontally across Panjit's armoured chest. Panjit leapt back, jutting out a tautened length of his chain to counter the weapon before it could do any serious damage.

"Yeah, vaguely." Inferno remembered the rumours of the war from over a year ago.

"I have read his vanity-published book, 'Mary Sue: The Demon Eater' twelve times." Quan dragged the tip of his katana along the ground and swung it upwards at Panjit. Panjit still had to uncoil his sickle end, but his hammer was still free. He slammed it down onto the blade, bending it out of usable shape. Quan looked down at his broken weapon, dropped it, and pointed his helm back at Panjit. "I didn't say the weapon itself was very good." He reached behind himself and drew out two Type 99 light machine guns. He braced them using special notches in his arm armour.

"Oedipus Rex." Panjit dived one way and Inferno the other. This distracted Quan from knowing which way to aim, and the buggers got away from him behind a tent of medical supplies and a car that had been almost bisected in the middle so hard that the front and back ends stuck up to form a V-shape. Instead of pursuing either of them, he lowered his weapons and stood there.

"Psst," Panjit said. "Psst" is a word which is not technically a word but is used when trying to get someone's attention to whisper at them. It wasn't pertinent because Inferno wouldn't have been able to hear him if they whispered. "He's just standing there!" Master of the obvious, this Panjit was.

Inferno rolled his eyes, pulled out his Type 95 rifle, and shot off a few rounds into Quan's masked face. Quan's armoured helmet ricocheted the bullets and jerked slightly, but that was it. Panjit fired a couple of rounds at the guy's dick, but that was protected as well. The man was like a walking tank. This wasn't working for them on multiple levels. Frustrated, Inferno shouted, "Hey, where are the rest of your volunteers?"

"They are busy fighting with Putin's dogs, the IWC," Quan answered. He dropped onto his knees in demonstration of his invulnerability. "The ponies' betrayal was on both sides. Our alliance is no longer."

"Oh really? I hadn't noticed." Panjit turned his head about to examine the sparse carnage. He ducked his head just in time as Quan fired a round at him. When this happened, Inferno hit him with a blast of his rifle's flamethrower attachment. He held a sustained burst, keeping the roaring flames on Quan's kneeling form.

"Damn! What kind of armour is this? It shouldn't withstand a whole hail of bullets!" Inferno complained.

"It is fireproof, too," said Quan. "It is thicker than your average bulletproof vests. I barely feel a sting!"

"Yeah, well, I happen to know that Kevlar suffers immediate tensile stress when intense heat is applied to it. It may take weeks for you to burn inside, but you must be finding it harder to move!" Inferno said. Truth be told, he wasn't an expert.

"Hahaha, you still cannot penetrate my perfect armour! It's layered with impenetrable steel underneath! Now fight me for reals!" Quan guffawed some more. He did find it difficult to move his arms and aim, however, and Inferno had slipped past the tent before firing upon him, moving around behind him in the process. Panjit similarly had moved around his cover to flank Quan.

Inferno stopped shooting flames. "You know what? Let's just ditch this guy and go. We can't beat him, and one guy is nothing compared to an army of ponies."

"What?" Quan said.

"Yeah, and we can always come back and crush him to bits with a vehicle or something," said Panjit.

"No, you've gotta fight me! I'm the most powerful member of the Korean Volunteers Army!" Quan struggled to pick himself up onto one foot.

"Korean volunteers? Don't make me laugh. You live in a hopelessly transparent and impotent totalitarian dictatorship. You should be ashamed of yourself for believing in your government's bald-faced lies." And with that, Inferno and Panjit strolled away. Quan angrily pointed his guns at them, but was too humiliated to fire. They were right. There were bigger fish to fry than two Human Resistance members infiltrating his enemy's camp.

As Panjit and Inferno fought their way in, Daniel and Tom realized they would have to fight their way out. "Go on," demanded one of the ponies behind them. "Drop your weapons. All of them."

Daniel and Tom exchanged knowing glances. They'd been trained for just this type of situation in the past. They turned their weapons over in both hands and slouched. Then at the same time they whirled around, striking out with the butts of their guns. They only struck two broom handles that had been propped up against them.

"Hey, newbs. Up here."

When Daniel and Tom looked up, they saw Milano and Button Mash standing on the top of the prisoner tent, carrying assault rifles. They smashed the two humans in the face with the butts of *their* guns, sending them both crumbling to the ground in pain. Both earth ponies jumped down and relieved the cringing pair of their weapons. "Well, well! Well well, well well," Milano said. "It's been a long time, Daniel Williams. I'd say it had to have been, oh, since the last time you saw your fingers."

Daniel scowled. "I do not recognize you. All you ponies look alike to me."

"I'm Milano Mash, and this is my darling son, Button Mash. Ever since his father was butchered by you savages, he's become the best shot in all Equestria. Why, in the past ten minutes alone he's slain more humans than the pair of you together have remaining digits! Though to be honest, that bar's about to be set far lower in a moment." Milano enforced a tongue-filled kiss onto Button Mash, to which Daniel and Tom retched in revulsion.

"What is their problem?" Button asked nervously.

"Never mind them, honey." Milano addressed Daniel again, stepping a hoof upon his head. "Honestly, I do sympathize with you, Daniel. All your family's dead. Gone forever to nothingness. You see, working for that repulsive man, Onyx, taught me something. There is no life after death. This existence is all we've got. Your father is gone forever like so much pony faeces. No Nirvana. No Hell. Not even a ghost. Only decaying meat whose neurochemical chain reaction has been severed. That's why I'm doing everything to get my son and I back to Equestria, so he can lead the happiest life there is for him. I didn't believe in the gods that commanded this war, but they've supposedly promised us eternal life if we genocide your entire race. It's not a fate I envy."

Putin and Edward chose that ill opportunity to scurry along nearby. They stopped when the ponies shouted at them. "Who the hell are you two?"

Putin ducked behind Edward. "This man is Anatoly Lebed. He is Russia's proudest soldier. He was in Spetznatz, which is just crazy in and of itself. Only the strongest trained killers get to be trained by them. He is a member of the KGB, the most dangerous espionage agency in the world. He once lost his leg jumping out of an airplane. You cannot hope to defeat someone as heroic as him." Putin then cast some doubts on his definition of heroism by shoving Edward toward the ponies and bolting a run for it. Edward's arms flailed then stopped as Button Mash blew a round smack dab through the centre of the man's forehead. Putin, meanwhile, disappeared into the smoke of burning wreckage, never to be seen again.

"Boom, headshot. Defeated now, bitch?" Button Mash blew on the nozzle of his gun. "Wasn't so tough after all, was he?"

Tom saw his opportunity. He seized the knee of Button Mash's leg and wrenched it as hard as he could in the wrong direction. There was a severe snap. He bellowed in pain and fell over, crying. Milano screamed. "Button, no!" In her horror, Daniel mustered the strength to shove her off of him, mostly sliding out from under her hoof. He socked her right in the jaw with his right hand, and both he and Tom snatched up the first guns they could grab. Button aimed his weapon, but being prone, the humans had the jump on him. They took no chances, both unloading their ammo into his skull. His propeller beanie fell off into the dirt.

"No, you bitch!" Again Milano screamed, but she was not stricken so much with horror that she could not fight back. She fired her assault rifle in a hasty spread across Tom and Daniel, catching them in the hands and thighs. They dropped their weapons and groaned in pain as blood gushed readily from their now pale and shaking appendages. They wanted to ignore the hurt and grab up their guns, but Milano kept the draw on them, even as she moved in to comfort her son. "Back away! Back away, you foetus-raping mounds of retarded shit!"

Tears streamed down her face, but she didn't need to see perfectly to blast Tom and Daniel into oblivion. "Baby, can you hear me? Mommy's gonna fix you up! She'll find some medicine. She'll stitch you up. She'll kiss it and make it feel all better." She sniffed loudly as her son wheezed and oozed blood. "There are no words in Equestrian for the kinds of villains you are," she seethed at the two men. "You're going to bring me to your finest doctors, and they're going to save Button's life!"

"We are prepared to face death instead," Daniel said. Tom gave him a look. "Even so, there is no way we could get you to a doctor without you becoming surrounded by our soldiers."

Milano watched in agony as her son breathed his last. A death rattle was followed by a heap of dark, thick blood pouring from his mouth and one eye socket. He was dead. "No." Milano gave her son a little shake. "Come back to me. Come back to Mommy!" She kissed his face, his wound, his broken skull where his brains were showing through.

Tom and Daniel were seeking an opening when she rounded on them again, her eyes drilling into them a primal fear hearkening back to the first years of the war with the ponies. "I've lost him. I've done everything to ensure he would survive to receive the gods' reward. I would have sacrificed my own life for him. An eternity without him means nothing. Thankfully, there's one way even this incredible pain can be taken away." She turned her gun on herself and blew her own brains out.

This was but a couple of seconds before Panjit and Inferno happened upon the scene to find Daniel and Tom, recognizing the pair from their intel photos. "Thank goodness it's you two!" Inferno said. "The country's descended into chaos, and we're being stalked by this asshole in bulletproof armour!"

Panjit held out a hand. "Come with us if you want to live!"

Not only was the Red October keeling over, it was now shuddering to boot under the strain. The bridge crew strained to crawl back into their seats, which wasn't that hard considering the texture of the metal floor. "Get to the upper side of the ship! We've got to balance her out, people!" Joseph shouted into the intercom.

"What do you mean, 'her'?" Artemis demanded to know.

"We are in a crisis! I don't have time to consider the infinite interpretations of subjective connotations from my speech!" Joseph yelled.

That last part was a little bit confusing to the army aboard the Red October, who by now was wishing they were all safely back at sea. In the kitchen, Neelix had a pot of sauce fall onto his head, and he emitted a breathy, falsetto screech in response. In the infirmary, Dr Heartwell was pinned against the wall when a rickety trolley of hypodermic medications came barrelling toward him. It fell over, flinging the needles through the air. They stuck into the walls, each one missing him but together forming his outline like a stage knife thrower. In the air, Jimmy Walsh was directing his fellow pilots back to the Red October to press down as gently as they could on the higher edge to try and level the carrier out. "Not too much, men!"

Joseph got into his seat and tried to readjust his dishevelled uniform. "God damn. Thanks for that one. But hell, how can we be a match for that mech? Why can't our firepower overcome it? Why aren't our guns working?"

"Arrows are better than guns," said Artemis.

"We aren't equipped with anything like a harpoon gun," Joseph said. "Shouldn't you be down in artillery, shooting down those pony choppers?"

"Sir," said Sabal. "Perhaps we should withdraw and figure out a plan."

"And leave Kyrat in tatters? The country Ajay wished to protect?" Joseph shouted.

"It's the country the Golden Path swore to protect! I swore that same oath!" Sabal added, "Sir. We could at least regroup with other nations and come back with a stronger fighting force."

"The other nations of the world can barely protect themselves," said Joseph. "We're it! We are the fighting force! We're the Human Resistance, and I'll be damned if we're going to just die out here!"

Jinn leaned away from the communications terminal. "Sir, the Red Hammer Platoon is offering their help!"

"What can they do from all the way in their Antarctic base?"

"It seems they brought the base with them!" Jinn was just as astounded as anybody else in that bridge room. The massive view screen displayed what the external cameras were tracking. None of them could believe it.

"Is that Sigmund Freud?" Hurk asked.

"It's Vladimir Lenin!" Joseph said, a little annoyed by Hurk's inability to recognize the father of communism on sight. Of course, it wasn't really Vladimir Lenin, who has long since shuffled off this mortal coil. It was a gigantic replica of the man

constructed out of some type of metal that might resemble stone. Joseph, Artemis and Jinn knew what it was, though with much disbelief. "That's the Antarctic base?"

Jinn nodded. Artemis confirmed it. "I knew the interior was shaped like a human body, but I had no idea this was the *exterior!* I had no idea it could move!"

Move it did. Lenin Base was fully mobile, stomping across the Kyrati landscape. Its presence brought with it decimation and property damage as well, but these were unavoidable collateral damages in the need to combat the latest pony menace. "I got Franz Bandelt on the line, sir!" Jinn said.

"Put him through!" Everyone was in a shout-y, adrenaline-fueled mood.

"We had a little trouble getting this thing up and running, but here we are," said Franz. "If the leader of the Human Resistance isn't too busy, maybe he'd like to make the fight against the ponies personal?"

"You mean that?" Joseph asked.

"This is a six-person job here! Ideally, of course. Complex, but quite user-friendly, I assure you."

"Pilot, dock with that giant Lenin!" Joseph ordered.

"Aye-aye!" The great ship Red October lowered until one of its ports was level with the doors on the back of Lenin's head (which may have been anatomically inaccurate). Joseph summoned the members of Burke Squad that were available: Himself, Artemis, Hurk, and Jinn. Panjit and Inferno were naturally indisposed. The four of them marched side-by-side off the Red October and into Lenin Base where this time their entrance was given a little more pomp and circumstance. Franz led them through the complex into the chest area where a lab had been cleared away to reveal a wide control console and several monitors side-by-side giving them an impressive panorama view of their front and sides.

On board the Red October, Sabal had taken command, a position that would soon solidify his leadership over the Golden Path, which was astonishing considering his low subordinate rank before. The vacuum of power served him well, and while he had even less experience with command than Joseph, he took to it like something of a natural. "Raise up. Back off," he said. "Let's see if we can't get a better angle on this. We could almost have them surrounded if we play our cards right."

The enormous replica of Lenin tromped boldly onto the battlefield, stomping across waste already laid by the giant pony bot. Under the controls of Burke Squad, the machine swiped away Swastikopters like gnats, and the Twinblades and Kirovs knew better than to get too close, rising high enough and spreading themselves to try and enclose upon the enemy fleet.

By now, the pony mech had noticed the Lenin bot approaching. "Gott in himmel! What is that?" Aryanne shouted.

"It looks like a giant human," said one of the spandex-clad Wonderbolt pegasi, Fleetfoot.

"What it is is a challenge! Let us go and dismantle it and strew its pieces across the countryside," Aryanne commanded.

"We're on it!" Silver Zoom said. The five Wonderbolts flexed and gestured dramatically as though commencing one of their famed sport flights, then charged.

"Heh! Watch this," said Hurk, who was winding up a massive right punch. Instead, Artemis set Lenin to kick the pony bot in the crotch with a loud thunk. The pony bot keeled onto its knees, grasping its metallic junk as if in pain. "Whadja do that for?" Hurk complained.

"You were too obvious," was Artemis's reply. "It worked, didn't it?" In the meantime, Jinn set the other arm to karate chop the pony mech in the shoulder. The ponies backed off and stood up once more.

"Franz, I thought you said this thing would be easy to control." Joseph was desperately trying to get their machine to dodge the ponies' counterattack.

Franz shrugged. "Yeah, but I'm a genius. Everything's easy for me."

A slew of Swastikopters dive-bombed Lenin base all at once, striking it with a swathe of suicidal explosions along the back of its head. It keeled off-balance for the ponies to enact a spinning uppercut to its chin which threw the entire base over to be sent crashing into a skyscraper housing a government-mandated newspaper. The building caved in on itself, burying the base in a mountain of dust and rubble. This was just such the circumstance for which the Red Hammer Platoon had outfitted Lenin Base's interior with extra padding on their way over from the Antarctic. That didn't render the fall completely safe or comfortable, however. Though

Burke Squad had been strapped in upright by the ceiling and floor, they felt their insides wrench like a kangaroo on acid as they were thrown upwards, then downwards in the surreal midst of the toppling structure.

While Lenin Base was driven to pull itself back to its feet, the pony mech was already launching a follow-up attack. The mech barrelled straight through a suburb and leapt, sticking both feet out at Lenin Base. The Human Resistance fleet had seen what was happening and sent out a pre-emptory command to concentrate missile fire on the pony mech's legs, knocking its aim off. Instead, the Equestrian robot careened into a gas station which went up in a searing fireball, raining flames and debris around for several square miles.

Now Lenin Base was standing while the pony mech was prone. The latter tore away the broken utility cables that channelled electricity along its chassis into the ground. "Prepare to say your prayers," Joseph said, lifting a foot to stamp on the enemy construct.

"It doesn't have an external speaker system," Franz said.

The antennae on the sides of the pony mech's head glowed hot and fired two conjoining laser beams through Lenin Base's foot. The crimson ray narrowly missed striking any other portion of the body, but the resultant klaxon indicated the severity of the injury. "Get those engineers down to caulk that wound!" Franz shouted. Burke Squad struggled to maintain their upright position. Artemis and Joseph fought with their controls, ordering Hurk and Jinn to utilize the arms for counterbalance. They nearly teetered one way, then the other, and in the time it took to reassert their equilibrium, the pony mech had stood back up.

"You can't take another shot like that," Franz said. "Activate the deflectors in the arms. I put sticky notes on the corresponding buttons." The antennae were already lighting up again. Lenin Base threw forth one arm as another laser stabbed forward. A ripple of blue electricity emanated from the extended hand and redirected the laser off in some other direction. "Oh hey, what do you know? It worked!"

"Lives are at stake! Please take this a little more seriously!" Joseph said.

“Lives are always at stake where science is concerned. Get used to it,” Franz said.

Hurk and Jinn had got into a grappling fight with the Wonderbolts. Both giant robots had locked hands with one another and were trying to push the other over. The exchange was more or less a stalemate until the pony bot slackened, allowing itself to be pushed away without surrendering. It jogged a few paces backwards, yanked a utility pole out from the ground, and whirled it upside Lenin Base's head like a baseball bat. The wooden pole snapped clean in half, and the upper portion went whirling off into the distance where it sank halfway into a pond with a splash.

"Two can play at that game, eh?" Hurk indicated for Lenin Base to stoop down so he could scoop up a mound of earth. He flung the enormous clod right all over the pony bot's head and chest, declaring, "Hah! Jumbo pocket sand!"

"Urgh! You bitch! March closer!" Spitfire ordered the pony mech to close in, and both giant robots set forth slapping one another repeatedly. They flailed their limbs like limp noodles, thwacking their opponent's face and neck with open palms. The pony bot got fed up and shoved Lenin Base away. Hopping aside, it picked up a sixteen-wheeled oil tanker, hefted it over its head unsteadily with one hand, then grabbed Lenin Base's head with its other. "Eat this truck!" The Wonderbolts proceeded to try force-feeding the truck right into Lenin Base's face. There was a cacophony of fiery explosions as the vehicle caved in on itself and ruptured, and Burke Squad felt they might be convulsed to death.

The pony mech rubbed what remained of the charred and twisted carriage into Lenin Base's visage until the scrap fell from its hand to the ground. Two fin-like protuberances extended from the pony mech's back side, resembling the wings of a jet airliner complete with engines. They whirred into action while massive wheels extended under the giant machine's feet. Hurtling forward, the Wonderbolts full on tackled into Lenin Base which tried to hold them at bay with both arms.

As they skidded across the terrain, Hurk tried the EMP again, but nothing happened. "What gives?" he said, explaining his action.

"It needs to recharge in each hand," Franz said. "Try the other one."

Jinn activated the other, emitting a sphere of dim blue static, but still the pony bot kept pushing against them. "It's not working!"

"You must not have taken out any crucial systems! You'll have to keep fighting!" Franz yelled.

They had reached the edge of the land. They were standing on the last piece of Kyrat before the ocean in the sea of Japan. The sky was marred with smoke, and all around them was the tinder of flaming wreckage from Earth and Equestrian aircraft alike, like some hellish Armageddon snowfall.

"Hurk! On my mark! Double-fist punch it!" Jinn said.

Hurk nodded. "Roger!" He and Jinn clasped Lenin Base's hands together into one larger sort of fist and swung it mightily toward the pony bot. The Wonderbolts ducked and locked one hand between Lenin Base's legs. Their other hand swooped between the outstretched arms and grasped the neck. Mustering all the strength in its pistons and gears, the Equestrian robot lifted Lenin Base bodily into the air and over its head.

Burke Squad panicked. No amount of flailing their arms and legs could save them. "Dammit!" Sabal said over on the Red October. "Leave those Swastikopters! I want all fire concentrated on that Equestrian menace now!"

The Equestrian robot bent its knees, then thrust back out, letting go of Lenin Base. At the same time the latter went sailing over the sea, the Wonderbolts had charged up and fired another laser. This one cut right through Lenin Base's abdomen with a nasty explosion out the rear. With a colossal wave that flooded onto shore, Lenin Base plummeted far enough out to sea on its back that it was completely submerged.

The few human aircraft that remained offered cover fire to the Red October, though by that point few Swastikopters were even left. The Red October unleashed an angry volley at the Wonderbolts, who rounded on the airship, baring its fists. "Oh, shit!" Sabal noticed their mistake. "Pull back, pull back, pull back!" The pony mech's left arm shot out from its wrist. Halfway from the Red October, it was hit by a series of missiles from a nearby Kirov, setting the robot's hand off-course. "Don't stop!" Sabal hadn't even blinked. He was on the verge of wetting his pants. Who would become the new head of the Human Resistance now? As the ad hoc leader of the Golden Path, he didn't fancy the idea of taking over the role, but if he did, he wanted to live long enough to make use of the position. He had a sinking sensation he wouldn't live to see the day as he watched the Wonderbolts retrieving their robot's hand by ravelling up its cable.

The ocean waters pushed upwards like a bulging eye. Stalking out from its depths was Lenin Base, gushing salt water from its open wound like haemorrhaging blood. Dragging behind itself in one hand was what appeared to be a thrashing whale of some variety, easily bigger than itself. Tromping up on the Wonderbolts, the ponies scarcely had time to turn their machine around when Lenin Base raised the whale high and slammed its open mouth down around their mech, engulfing it to the ankles within the sea beast's maw, throat and stomach. "Launch every weapon!" Aryanne screamed.

"The digestive enzymes are interfering with the particle beam!" Spitfire complained. They thrashed around within the belly of the beast, and much to their chagrin, it appeared to be thrashing back. Outside, Lenin Base was pummelling the whale as fast as it could, as rapid as punches from a giant robot could be. It then seized the whale by the tail again, picking up the Wonderbolts' mech with it. Lenin Base spun around and around, faster and faster, building up kinetic energy with centrifugal force. They let go, flinging the Equestrians with excellent aim into the nearest junk yard, where the resultant explosion tore numerous fractures through the whale's carcass, but also set off a tire fire underneath which cooked the ponies alive within. Lenin Base dusted its hands off after a day's honest work.

Everyone was in awe, even Burke Squad who were none worse for the wear. The elation of victory soon wore off as they discovered the cost. Kyrat was in tatters. Irish himself was checking the outlying landscape through some monitors on the Red October bridge. "The whole country's destroyed! I can't believe it!" He switched the terminal over to some cameras pointing to the opposite side of the vessel. "On the other hand, this side sorta looks okay."

That was how victory had been won. That was how the Iron Wolves Corporation was disbanded. That was how Delta Squad had finally been reunited with one another. That was how the various factions upon the Earth finally came together as one under the banner of the Human Resistance as one. That was how every last Equestrian on Earth but one had been defeated.

10. Pandemonium

Daniel had rescued a dog in Kyrat and brought it with him aboard the Red October. It was a scruffy mutt, slightly smaller than a mastiff, but looking nothing like any breed he could identify. It had wild, scraggly hair of off-white or pale yellow. It had been injured when he'd rescued it, and Dr Heartwell had had to amputate one of its front legs, but now it was wagging its tail and panting as excitable as a puppy. Daniel couldn't help but feel his heart warmed by the sight of it bouncing back from its traumatizing ordeal. It was warmth he hadn't felt in a long time, one he shared now with Tom.

"I have been thinking of naming him Stud," Daniel said as the two played with the dog in one of the aft hallways.

"You should name him Tripod." Tom snickered. Daniel gave him a disapproving look, and Tom blushed. "Sorry, that was a bit morbid. You know my sense of humour, though. I don't mean anything by it."

Daniel allowed Stud to lick his palms. "Yes, I know, but he is not going to be a tripod for long. One of the Red Hammer Platoon members said something about getting him an artificial leg." After a beat, he added, "I do not care if this sounds corny, but I feel like the human race could learn something from this guy about bouncing back."

"That does sound corny," Tom said. An awkward pause followed during which he reconsidered. "Er, sorry, just sharing how I feel, but you're right."

The two watched Stud chase his tail for a bit when they were approached by Logan. Tom still couldn't quite get over the sight of his friend having a backwards head. "Oy, mates. We're wanted in the conference room on the double," Logan told them.

Tom frowned. "We're not going to go on missions now we're back together, are we? I thought between the IWC disbanding and the remaining North Korean government being tried for war crimes, the Equestrian armies were finished."

"They are not having us out on missions anymore," Daniel said. "They just want our input."

"Oh. That I can live with, I guess," said Tom. The two stood up and followed Logan to their destination. Daniel ordered Stud to wait outside.

When Daniel entered the conference room, he got a surprise. He balked at the sight of Queen Elizabeth III. "Mom?" he said.

The Queen huffed at him then looked away. "I have no son. My only son was killed six years ago in the war."

Daniel hung his head, instantly depressed. "Right, Mom. I guess some things have not changed."

Tom whispered to Daniel. "Mate, what's your mum doing here dressed like the bloody queen?"

Daniel shook his head. "I do not think we should discuss it." He could feel everyone else's surprised looks, but his decision was the moratorium on the subject. A "moratorium" means it's a severe faux pas to continue broaching a subject.

Joseph Matskevich was standing at the far end of the room in front of a wall monitor. "Um," he said, interrupting the awkward silence. The members of the room included Delta and Burke Squads, as well as Sabal and of course Dirk and the queen who were holding hands. "Anyway, I called you all here for a briefing."

"Well no duh," Irish said without thinking. Everyone glared at him, but Joseph continued on anyway.

"I have it on good authority how we're going to enact Daniel's original plan of invading Equestria," Joseph said. Just like he expected, everyone was dumbfounded. He allowed them time to process this bold idea, even Daniel who had been the one to propose it over a year ago. "I'm sure Irish has told you about whom that authority is, but I must ask that his identity not leave this room."

"Huh? I have?" Irish was puzzled.

Now it was Joseph's turn to be dumbfounded. Unable to think of a proper response, he instead switched on the monitor. There was a collective gasp at the scene in maximum security of Dr Heartwell treating the pony prisoner, Tree Barker, who was laying on his side heaving for breath. The stallion sat himself up to face the camera. "Oh, right! Now I remember! I totally forgot!" Irish laughed. No one laughed with him.

"For the past several months, the Belarusians have been harbouring a pony prisoner by the name of Tree Barker, alias Trey Bunker, who claims to have been a human transformed into earth stallion form by Pinkie Pie. He defected to Equestria for personal reasons, but now claims to want to defect back. He has provided some key intel at certain times, namely with the sea pony incursion that occurred early on after the Red October's launch. He has promised to aid us in our invasion of the pony dimension." Joseph turned to the monitor. "I know this is a risk most humans wouldn't have taken. Tree, please tell us what you told me."

Tree looked as soulless as any pony, but his speech was ostensibly nervous. "Um, well, Equestrians cross the bridge between dimensions using a quantum device shaped like a black box with a crank on the side. Only the royal family had access to them, but in the end, a draconequus named Discord took possession of the last one."

"That's why you asked us about Discord?" Daniel said. "You believe this monster's stories?"

"We've got nowhere else left to look," Joseph said. "Those photos on the table are of the tower that appeared in the irradiated region of Moscow. We've identified at least three separate landmarks stacked on top of one another at the location of the former Human Resistance headquarters."

"If Discord is anywhere, he's bound to be there," Tree said. He lapsed into a brief coughing fit. "He's a dangerous creature with magic that defies all reason. He nearly took over Equestria on multiple occasions. The ponies believe he killed off the dragons. He exists solely to sow chaos."

"How is that any different from any of the ponies?" Daniel glared as he gripped the edge of the table. He could feel his anger welling up within him for the first time in a long time.

"The ponies have committed awesome evils, but they aren't anarchists," Tree said. "They want to end this war at the expense of the humans, but Discord would want to prolong it at the expense of either side. You should treat Discord with the utmost caution. According to the Equestrians stuck on Earth after his coup, he stole magic from them through some supposed gods that had banned it. It's not supposed to be possible on Earth anyway, but considering the looks of that tower, somehow he's done it."

"Gods?" Artemis grimaced.

"That's just what I heard through the rumour mill," Tree said. "I don't know anything about it. All I can really tell you about Discord is to expect the unexpected with him."

Daniel shuddered and frowned. He thought back to that moment a year ago when the draconequus had brought him aboard the pony airship fleet to witness the punishment of the villain, Onyx. “It’s true,” he said. “I saw it happen. One of the Equestrian army apparently broke some kind of rule after betraying them.”

Joseph switched off the monitor. "Burke Squad will be going into that tower. We'll be wearing state-of-the-art protective radiation suits designed by the Red Hammer Platoon. Lenin Base will take us to Moscow, but they believe its radiation shielding is too antiquated to actually enter city limits. Plus if we just had them attack the tower, this 'black box' might be lost in the rubble. This may be our most dangerous mission yet. We're to infiltrate the tower, confront Discord if we have to, retrieve the quantum device, and above all, kill the ponies."

There was silence around the table. Daniel could tell Burke Squad was at a loss for words, so he stood and spoke to them. "My fellow comrades, saving the human race is not an easy job, and it is not a pretty job. Maybe you want to do it out of revenge, or because it is what you know how to do. You must fight because it is the right thing to do. Teamwork is your greatest asset, as my friends have shown me over the years. Our fight may be over now, but yours continues, and I am glad to say that it is in fully capable hands."

"Here, here," the other members of Delta Squad added. Tom patted Daniel on the back as the latter sat back down.

Joseph nodded. "Thank you, sir. With your blessing, we're ready to rid the Earth of its last great foe."

Pandemonium

The members of Burke Squad were led by Joseph Matskevich himself and included Alessandra "Artemis" Galanos, Mohammad "Jinn" Kareem, Hurk Armstrong, Panjit Gavaskar, and Pham "Inferno" Quan. Anyone else tentatively included among them had been reassigned to more pertinent and capable projects. Telling them apart under their protective yellow radiation suits was a little difficult as only Pham's more rotund frame allowed him to stand out the most. Lenin Base had deposited them as far as the Moscow outskirts where the radiation from the nuclear weapon dropped over a year ago was most prevalent. These suits resembled hazardous material suits, covering the body in its entirety with no leaks in yellow, with a shielded one-way window for the face, but these suits were also lead-lined for added protection.

"Really looking forward to the birth defects when this mission is over," Artemis griped out of the blue.

"Really? You never struck me as the sort to settle down and have kids," Hurk said.

"I'm not. In fact, when I'm ready to have children, I shall find the most powerful woman and have her donate her egg gametes. Gametes contain only half the chromosomes to form a new human organism, so I'll combine them with one of my own eggs."

"I'm pretty sure there's a reason women don't accidentally impregnate themselves from time to time," Joseph said.

"Oh yeah? What about Jesus's mom? Or that shark?" Hurk asked. Nobody had a clue what he was going on about.

"I'll admit it's an interesting idea for same-sex couples as an alternative to adoption or adultery or betraying their identity," Joseph said with a shrug.

"I don't even know what the opposite gender is to a Jinn," Jinn said. Nobody said anything after that.

Discord's tower, or Moscow Tower as they had taken to calling it, was visible from just about every vantage point in the deserted city. The scenery was downright post-apocalyptic, and the post-apocalypse was nowhere near as glamorous as pre-event media would have its audience believe. Everything was dead. Even that which didn't appear alive to begin with felt deceased. The sensation that they were the first humans to set foot in this city since the last survivor of the Equestrian attack had died of radiation poisoning was an omnipresent force in every abandoned storefront, every crack in the pavement. Windows had been blown out for miles from the shockwave of where the bomb had landed, and numerous corpses of human and pony alike littered the landscape. That tower lorded above it all; a testament to the madness war had wrought. Joseph couldn't even identify the landmarks that had been used in its construction, as the exterior looked like a lopsided mishmash of incongruous construction; brickwork met other styles of brickwork and wooden exteriors and cement foundations ripped from the ground. All of it had been stacked on top of the old Human Resistance HQ in such a way that it looked ready to topple over at the slightest breeze.

"Welp, we're here," Joseph said when they arrived at the front doors. He pushed them open with ease. "That's a surprise. I was worried we'd have to find some other way around. I was telling Daniel about how my father would sneak into Moscow for supplies using these underground tunnels, but it looks like we can just come in through the front door."

"Oh hold on," Jinn said. "I gotta take a whiz." Ji moved off around the side of the building.

"You're not gonna unzip here, man. It's radioactive. That's why we're wearing the diapers," Joseph said.

"I still don't wanna mess myself in public!" Jinn shouted.

"Smells like a trap. I bet Dick Sword's expecting us," Panjit said.

"It's always a trap with Equestrians," Inferno told him.

The Lobby

Burke Squad moved into the lobby and looked around. None of them were personally familiar with HRHQ, but Joseph had managed to procure some blueprints and photographs for their briefing. The ground floor looked relatively the same save for the signs of rampant destruction: Bullet holes, scorch marks, decomposing bodies, things like that.

Once they'd taken the time to drink in their dismal surroundings, a voice crackled in on the intercom system which by all reasoning shouldn't have been functioning if the city's power plants had been abandoned. "Burke, party of six, please adjourn at the top floor. Burke, party of six, your table is waiting on the top floor."

"Is that Discord?" Jinn asked as ji joined jin compatriots inside.

"He sounds like the guy off SST Death Flight," Hurk said.

"How does he know we're called Burke Squad?" asked Joseph.

"I'm very observant," the unseen Discord responded. "Tell me something. If everyone said that your failure here was inevitable, that it was synonymous with your very names, that your vain deaths were indistinguishable from your identities, how would that make you feel?"

Joseph clenched his fists. "Shut up, Discord! Nobody's falling for your games anymore. We're going to win. We're going to prove it to you."

"You don't have to prove it to *me*," Discord said. "You have to prove it to the world. This tower is decorated as a testament to every running gag the world obsesses over and won't let die, but only the least deserving of them all. This is my tower of undeserving memes."

"What in the hell is he babbling about?" Artemis shook her bow. "Show yourself so I can just shoot you through the head already!"

"There'll be time enough for that later, Cupid. See you real soon, maybe!" With that, Discord let out a long laugh followed by a bout of coughing. Then he went silent.

"What's he mean by all that shit, eh?" Panjit asked. He was looking at a shirt hanging up on the wall. It had a picture of three wolves howling at the moon.

"Undeserving memes. Is he going to kill us with green ogres and Rick Astley's shit music?" Inferno asked.

"How's he going to fit an entire fandom in here?" Panjit asked. "Any fandom. Any fandom for a pop culture icon since 2009."

"Those things aren't memes," Inferno said. "A meme is conceptual in nature. It's not a running gag. For example, the concept *of* running gags would be a meme, but any running gag itself wouldn't be."

"I think that's a moot point," said Hurk. “Whatever a moot is. I think D-scrod doesn’t care.”

Joseph hung his head in thought, not listening to the members of Burke Squad arguing around him. After a moment, he snapped back into reality just as they'd moved on to the argument of which path to take. There were two staircases leading up on either side of the building, and he agreed with their assessment that the structure above was bound to be a maze. Then Artemis said something else.

"For all we know, Discord could be hiding below us. From what we were briefed on, it sounds like he's got more than a fair number of screws loose." Artemis looked to the others, but it was Joseph's agreement that clinched things.

"We should split up. We're all highly-trained marines," Joseph said. "Let's take on the buddy system. You've been quiet, Jinn. Where do you wanna go?"

Jinn could join Joseph on the left stairwell up. (Left Stairwell, p162)

Ji could join Hurk on the right stairwell up. (Right Stairwell, p166)

Or ji could head downstairs with Artemis. (Basement Downstairs, p153)

Basement Downstairs

Artemis was rechecking her gear as though impatient to get to using it. Jinn nodded a farewell to Panjit and Inferno who were going to ascend the staircase on the right. Jinn and Artemis were to descend. It was darker down below, so they made sure to use the lights on their weapons. Jinn's was on top of jin KS-23 shotgun barrel, whereas Artemis's was just above and to the side of where she would set arrows to be fired.

The ordinary basement of the Human Resistance headquarters had been used for ordinary storage purposes. Running a military includes an awful lot of paperwork, far more even than compiling the notes of numerous war reporters, researchers, recipes, and enigmatic correspondences into a lengthy series of books to put order to chaos. Millions of lives around the world had been involved with the Human Resistance, and all those people had to be outfitted, fed, and otherwise provided for. This was also a storage room for some of the more mundane myriad supplies, such as fatigues, MREs, and so forth, meaning that in addition to countless alphabetized filing cabinets, there were shelves and crates forming a sort of natural maze. The last function of the non-secret basement of the HRHQ was in the HVAC, electrical and plumbing systems for the building. While in use, the HRHQ was actually pretty well-kept and maintained, but now it had fallen into disrepair what with the maid taking some time off, so to speak. The place was lousy with cobwebs and dust, a phrase which here means "so rife with cobwebs and dust that conditions were lousy".

Artemis and Jinn weren't entirely sure what it was they expected to find down here, and while neither of them wanted to take any chances, they were both fairly certain they weren't even subconsciously trying to evade the more obvious danger of climbing the maniacal structure. When they entered the basement, they did notice a peculiar green glow at the farthest corner of the spacious room. Green glows are usually peculiar when they aren't the faces of digital alarm clocks, novelty nightlights, or those fluorescent sticks that bipolar ecstasy-using teenagers from the early 2000s liked to wield. Artemis nodded to Jinn, signalling that the pair of them should split up. They inched around the walls in opposite directions, skirting around the obstacles where they must.

Along with the destruction of human literature when the ponies purged as much Earth culture as they could went many of the sciences, and radiation information was probably scanty at best to begin with. Few people possessed the convoluted and niche polysyllabic vocabulary intrinsic to the study, and try though they might, the war recorders were hard-pressed to investigate the truth into its properties. It’s believed anyway that Discord's influence may have tainted the validity of science within his tower, but there was a teacher once who may have been spreading an apocryphal story that when Madame Marie Curie discovered radiation, her work shed developed an ominous green glow about it. "Apocryphal" is a word which here means "likely untrue".

One of the outstanding features Artemis didn't see coming was the ice all over the floor. Perhaps it was during the fall of Moscow, but the water main in the basement had burst, flooding the entire floor. Then the temperature dropped, allowing it to freeze in the harsh climate of Russia. Artemis slipped and fell on her bum, and when Jinn saw this, ji became distracted and lost jin footing, doing a wide and painful split. For a moment ji worried that jin suit might rip, but ji lucked out. When ji righted jinself, ji could see that Artemis was alright, and she asked nothing as to jin well-being. The two attempted crossing the icy floor, slipping and sliding into the various barriers described above, even when stepping slowly and carefully. At one point, Artemis banged so hard into a shelf that it shuddered and knocked a few objects onto the floor. She thought the shelves might collapse outright, but they remained anchored by the thick layer of ice on the floor.

Getting across the room without getting too banged up was an arduous albeit doable task. Luckily neither of them suffered any tears to their protective suits, although the cold did make every bump exponentially more painful. In the end, they came upon the far corner from two sides and bore witness to the source of the green glow, although neither of them could explain it.

Two skeletons sat side-by-side propped up against the wall like ventriloquist dummies. One seemed the size of a regular human, but the other was far shorter, just over half the height of the other. It didn't seem like a child's skeleton.

Artemis holstered her bow on her back. "Huh. Guess that's it then. I'd heard the HRHQ had a subbasement, but I don't see how we get to it from in here."

"It could be under the ice," Artemis and Jinn both said together. They might have missed a third voice if not for its squeaky pitch.

"Did you hear that?" asked Artemis.

"Yes," Jinn said.

"So did I!" This time, Artemis and Jinn identified the speaker. It was the taller of the skeletons. Its skull, glowing an eerie green, creaked an inch or two to face them both.

Artemis was transfixed with this impossible sight. "It was the skeleton! A skeleton just talked! No, a skeleton just freaking moved! Did you see it?"

The short skeleton also spoke, its jaw creaking just a little. Even though it had no flesh, the position of its teeth and bones made its face appear to be smiling a cruel, dead smile.[21] "What are you sounding so surprised for? You've got a skeleton, and you talk."

"Jinn, are you hearing this? Please tell me I'm not crazy. I mean, I know I'm not crazy, but come on, say something!"

"You're not crazy." Jinn had jin eyes closed.

"She sounds crazy to me!" The tall skeleton raised an arm very slowly as though every centimetre gave it great trouble, and pointed a bony finger at its left eye socket. "She's so in awe of the things she's seeing right before her very eyes."

There was annoyed panic in Artemis's voice as she witnessed something that defied all rationale in her eyes. "How can you move without any musculature? How can you *talk* if you can't move? You don't have lungs!"

"Those are very interesting questions," the short skeleton said, "but your inability to explain it doesn't inhibit our ability to perform such actions."

"Yes! Perhaps you should examine us further!" the tall skeleton said. "Unless you are too scared to do so, of course. Nyeh heh heh!"

"I ain't scared of nothin'!" Artemis said. "You're the ones that are creepy as hell. Jinn, don't tell me this doesn't blow your tiny little mind." She gave jin a shove, shaking jin by the shoulder.

Jinn's mind couldn't have been anything less than ordinary human size. Jin mind was filled with busy thoughts of how to proceed. Ji really had no interest in continuing a preternatural conversation with the undead, particularly as there was no scientific basis for their ability to speak or move. By the same logic, ji saw no merit in attacking the skeletons. Though ji was certain ji could shatter them with jin assault rifle, ji didn't expect that to be very effective when they were already supposed to be deceased. The best thing to do would be to ignore them and continue searching for a hatch or something that would lead down further, but where under the ice could it be?

There was a problem with ignoring the skeletons. Artemis couldn't discipline her mind to shut them out. Even though her skills as an archer required utmost concentration, something like this was far too engaging for her. She continued to probe them for questions, and with every question, the skeletons became livelier and more animated. "So who were you guys in life?" she asked. "Wow, I've never met dead people before."

"We're not dead. How else could we be talking? Maybe we were just born like this. Maybe we're no one," the short skeleton replied.

The taller one said, "My brother's pretty smart. He's also really strong! Mayhaps he was some sort of genius bodybuilder in life."

"Your brother sounds like a Mary Sue," noted Artemis. "Besides, why can't you two keep your stories straight? Jinn, you're listening to this, right?"

"There is no need to listen to corpses," Jinn said before becoming quiet again. Ji shuffled along the ice and back around a set of shelves.

Artemis focused her attention back on the talking radioactive skeletons. "Huh. Forget him, eh?"

"Yeah, pay some more attention to us instead!" the taller skeleton barked. He raised a hand and flipped Jinn the bird. The phrase "flipping the bird" here refers to nothing to do with fowl, but to a foul hand gesture of raising the middle finger which carries some connotation of rudeness to it. It's not precisely known why this is, but it's not something to perform in front of your grandmother. If it is, then you might come from a pretty trashy family.

"Artemis, look out!"

Like honking a horn to try to get a car to move faster, Jinn's shout only caused Artemis to delay further. The taller skeleton had lashed an arm out and seized a portion of Artemis's radiation suit, stretching out the special fabric. "What the hell, man? Knock it off!" Artemis wasn't the sort to scream in fear at what resembled a haunted house gimmick, so she was treating the situation like a drunken partygoer had just tried to cop a feel of her. She fumbled with her bow and smashed the wrist bones with her fist. The hand let go, and though there was a sound like a rip, no damage had yet been suffered by her outfit.

---

[21] Of course having no flesh would make something look dead, possibly.

"Have you ever eaten a pie in your life?" the short skeleton asked. "Wait, I know you did. Well PIE is actually an anagram for Psychotic Immolation Evidence. Meaning that every time you ate a pie, you were actually burning someone alive."

"What in the *fuck* are you talking about?" Artemis screeched.

"It is *too* late, hyu-mon! Your attention only makes us stronger, and now that we can threaten your lives, you have no choice but to beware us! Now we shall replace your skeletons and have us some warm meat suits," said the tall skeleton. He stood to his feet with great effort and rounded on Artemis, the bones of his fingertips spinning like drills.

"Where's the other one hiding? The one with even more hair on his face? He's a bit tall for me, but I think I can make it work," the small one said.

Jinn could sense disaster. Ji could sense that no matter the choice ji made, he couldn't prevent Artemis from making a rash decision on her own. She had nocked one of her explosive arrows to her bow. "No, Artemis, don't fire!" Jinn yelled.

"No!" Artemis yelled back in a sing-song tone of voice. Sending herself skidding backwards along the ice, she shot the piercing arrow straight through the front of the tall skeleton's cranium. It splintered apart where the arrow entered, and within a second, it exploded into smithereens, sending fragments of bone like shrapnel through the air. Artemis fell over onto her back while Jinn ducked.

"You dirty brother-killer! You could have shown him mercy," the short skeleton said.

"He was actively trying to murder me!" Artemis countered. "Mercy isn't an action!"

"It doesn't matter anyway. This just makes it all the easier to kill you with, my dear."

Artemis didn't know what the short skeleton's words meant at that moment. He was brandishing one of the other skeleton's ribs like a dagger, but something else was happening as Artemis rose to her feet, ignoring Jinn's insistence she should find cover instead. The fragments of bone were rising into the air and swirling into one point. "Uh, how the hell is this happening?" Artemis asked.

Jinn sounded exasperated. "They were already dead. Shooting them was hardly going to eradicate them, now was it? There's no telling what the rules are with talking radioactive skeletons in Discord's domain. I wish we'd just left well enough alone." Jinn shook jin head and watched in dismay as the bone shrapnel shot out at Artemis, piercing her suit this time and impaling her. She grunted in pain and fell back, but the damage had been done. She'd been poisoned with radiation.

Jinn realized this loss wasn't worth the effort, and jammed on his wrist uplink. (The Lobby, p151)

Discord's Ultimatum

Jinn trudged up the last few steps of some circular stairway and into a dark, featureless room. Jin morale was shot. Ji could barely focus on anything that surrounded jin. Ji knew ji was alone, but someone else was here. That someone was not anyone in Burke Squad. None of them would be showing up. They would have done so by now. That someone was Discord.

Discord was an Equestrian, but he was not a pony. He was something that had been called a "draconequus", a supposed half-breed of dragon and pony blood. He had a body like a limp noodle, with a grey, elongated face, a black mane, and a long maroon torso that ended in a red serpentine tail. He was a chimera; a mishmash of various creatures. He had one antler, one wavy horn, one leonine paw, one hand like an eagle's talon, one horse's leg, and one dragon's leg. He was a convoluted mess, but it suited the crazed mind behind those beady yellow and red eyes. He was holding a chequered flag which he waved with enthusiasm as Jinn crossed an imaginary finish line. "And he's safe! But now for the lightning round!"

A bolt of lightning struck Discord just then, but suffice it to say, it was non-lethal. Over a year ago, Discord had sided with the humans in their war against a terrible and tiring man leading the Equestrian armies, and by outing the man's treachery to his own people whom Discord had named the gods who determined the rules of the war, Discord had been able to steal a potent power sealed away for the sake of fairness: Magic. Little could be confirmed on how this power would manifest itself.

"Spoiler alert, kid: You don't have what it takes to take me on alone." Discord spun around, throwing his arms up. "Johnny, tell him what's behind mystery doors numbers one and two!" Twirling back around, Discord, adopted the voice of a greasy game show announcer. "Well, Discord, behind door number one is time traveling back to the start to try it all over again, casting the dice of fate once more. And behind door number two is outright pitiful and painful surrender. What's it going to be?" Discord held a melting ice cream cone toward Jinn's face as though it was a microphone.

Jinn could take door number one. (The Lobby, p151)

Or ji could take door number two. (Surrender, p169)

Elevator Crawl

"The direct way is the fastest," Hurk said. "Do let us know how it's going out there!"

Joseph followed this response up with a kind of look, and departed down the hallway away from the lift. One can leave it to the imagination what sort of look it was.

"Heh. I'm sure he'll be perfectly fine." Hurk smiled. Jinn had a similar sort of look for him that Joseph had. They pried open the lift doors using lots of leverage and a crowbar a looter had tried to use to break open a suite liquor cabinet. They looked up the long, dark shaft stretching above them and shone their flashlights up. "Wait, where the hell's the elevator car?" Hurk asked.

"It likely wasn't in this section of the hotel," Jinn explained.

The two scanned the lift a moment further and almost straightaway found the emergency ladder. It was nowhere near as long as the one in Lenin Base, but the climb itself would prove no less eventful. Hurk insisted on going first for "bravery reasons," and Jinn bore the unpleasant yoke of staring at the man's rear end the entire way up.

Halfway up the ladder, there was a loud clang from below. "What in the hell was that?" Hurk asked.

Jinn replied, "That was the doors slamming the hell shut down below."

"Hah! We don't want to go down. We want to go up! You have to get up pretty early in the afternoon to put one over on ol' Hurk Armstrong." Their climb continued until they reached the top. "Hand me the crowbar." Hurk wedged the crowbar into the crack of the lift doors. In his favour, he did have fairly muscular arms, and he was able to wedge the doors open using his strength, even while gripping the ladder with one arm and bracing his boots on the rungs below. That helped keep him from falling off when the rush of water blasted him straight in the face.

"Augh! Phhpt! What the hell's happening?" Hurk shouted. The crowbar flew out of his hands and went careening down into the darkness.

"It's the hell flooding in here!" Jinn replied.

Both marines were being poured over with icy cold salt water, with Hurk getting the brunt of the powerful flow gushing against him. He yelled out that little fishies—neon tetras, he said—were squiggling against his visor. "Ow! Something hit me on the head! It's stuck!" He reached up and tried to pry off a sea sponge, but it was stuck there.

"Use that damn fool machete you tied to the waist of your radiation suit!" Jinn shouted over the din.

Hurk seized the machete, almost slipping it from his fingers given how wet it was. He raised it above his head and slashed blindly at the sponge, chopping at it. "Huh? It won't cut!" He raised the machete in front of his visor to get a look at it. He thought he saw a bunch of little spiny rocks with clam-shell-like objects embedded inside. "Barnacles! Augh!" In a knee-jerk reaction, Hurk half-tossed, half-dropped the weapon away.

Jinn had to swing jinself to the side to evade the blade. "Dildo-sucking magistrate! Be careful up there!"

Water continued to splash onto Hurk's visor, hitting harder and harder. The sound of sloshing could be heard below, already rising up to meet them. "I can't see shit!" was the last thing Jinn heard Hurk say. A starfish slapped him right across the visor, blinding him for certain. He continued to writhe and yell in pain as dozens of barnacles started to attach themselves along his arms, chest, and neck, tightening up his radiation suit. Jinn in the meantime felt crabs crawling all over jin. Ji gagged in revulsion and tried swatting them off jin arms, almost losing jin grip on the ladder by mistake. Ji then received two swift kicks upside the head from Hurk, but still ji held on. The first kick was in panic. The second was because Hurk had fallen. With a half-finished expletive, Jinn caught Hurk's slippery gloved hand, but the weight of another adult body was too much, and the water was beating down on jin fully now. Barnacles had begun cementing themselves to the walls and upper ladder, miraculously not latching onto Jinn yet. Jinn lost the grip of jin free hand on the ladder and jin torso swung backwards into the air.

For a moment, ji thought ji had hung on by jin legs, but this was not the case. Ji was falling, and Hurk was just below jin. Hurk had no way of escape, and would be trapped in the rising waters. With the barnacles weighing him down, he would be unable to tread water and drown. Jinn knew ji had the only route of escape.

Ji activated jin time travel device. (The Lobby, p151)

Fire Escape

Joseph led Jinn to a window at the end of the hall and paused after sliding it open. "It might be a little difficult to get out at this angle."

Jinn tried to sound encouraging. "I'm sure we'll catch up again soon."

Joseph had a second thought and realized he could bend the pane out of the way by sliding it a certain way. He set the window carefully on the floor, not that the hotel was in any salvageable condition. It was still a climb to get a leg up, but he was able to perch on the windowsill. "It's not too late to change your mind," he told Jinn.

"What's the point in making this decision if I'm going to change my mind?" Jinn asked.

"Fair enough." Joseph stretched upward to try and grab on to the metal bars above, but he couldn't reach it. He looked down to the underside of the fire escape platform below him. It was a bit of a drop, but he could make it. "Good luck, Jinn," he said shortly before dropping down the edge of the window. With a rattling clang that seemed to echo on for minutes, he had landed on the fire escape for the missing floor below them. He hoped to hell it would hold. He then offered his assistance to Jinn, holding out his arms for Jinn to jump down to his level. "Looks like we can climb up the underside of the stairs. It'll feel a little awkward, but we should be able to manage."

They both angled their heads upward when they heard the beastly roar. When Joseph was done quivering uneasily, he asked, "Was that Discord?"

"No, look." Jinn pointed through the narrow little spaces between the metal planks. It took Joseph a little moment to see where he was pointing at, especially since the gorilla was four storeys above them. A portion of the fire escape fencing extended above the underside of each level, and Joseph clung to the staircase to lean back and peer upwards. He could see a gorilla alright, big and ugly, with a kind of creeping disposition on its face.

"What the hell is this, the Rue Morgue?" he asked. "Huh. Beyond that, it doesn't look much farther up. We're halfway to the top at least, at least to the most stable-looking portion of the structure. We have to be careful, though. Damn, wish I'd thought to bring tranquilizer darts."

"That gorilla's bound to die of multiple teratoma from radiation sickness," Jinn pointed out. "We'd be putting it out of its misery to gun it down."

"Harsh, albeit true." Joseph immediately regretted his choice of saying the word "albeit" aloud. "I can't get a clear shot on it from here. We'll have to head up slowly so as not to spook him."

The gorilla did not look prone to being spooked. It looked large and strong, in other words deadly. It picked up a round object in both hands and hurled it down with brutal strength at Joseph's head. Joseph ducked in the nick of time, but he barely saw what had almost hit him until he was staring down at it plummeting through the air. "Was that a freaking barrel?"

"That was a freaking barrel," Jinn confirmed.

There was a clanging overhead, and after a few seconds of advancing, Joseph could tell that the noises were coming closer. Before he knew it was coming, Joseph was being run down by a barrel that bounded off of him and rolled off the edge of the fire escape. He was saved by Jinn seizing the shoulder of his radiation suit and yanking him to his feet. "Thanks, old man."

"You can thank me by not calling me that," said Jinn.

"Right. Sorry." Joseph led Jinn up a flight of stairs and then around. This time he was aware of the next barrel coming down for them. He braced his strength to push back against its onslaught, but though he knocked the barrel away, physics dictated that Joseph should stumble backward as well. Jinn caught him from behind, keeping him upright. "Thanks again," Joseph said. "Think I won't try that next time."

Joseph reached to his back pocket, but remembered he couldn't get his hat out through the radiation suit. Instead he readied his gun and crept up the next staircase. He nearly lost his footing for a second, but didn't even sprain his ankle. The next barrel came even sooner after the prior one than it had after the first. This time Joseph unloaded his ammo into the obstacle, shattering it more or less into pieces. A bunch of wooden shrapnel flung about, but thankfully none of it could pierce his outfit. "Dammit, that wasn't the best idea either," he admitted. "Why am I so off my game today?"

"Don't worry about it, kid," Jinn said. "We all got days like this."

Joseph kicked aside the remnants of the barrel in his path. The gorilla clambered down the side of the fire escape and swung its heavy frame onto the same level Joseph had just reached. The loud clang felt like it might shake the bones from Joseph's lower legs. Grabbing the fencing and level above, the gorilla screamed and shook the entire fire escape from side to side without regard to its own safety. "Whoa, whoa!" Joseph had to hold onto the railing and underside of the next staircase with both hands just to stay on board. Jinn pressed jinself flat against the staircase below to keep from being tossed away.

The gorilla was out of barrels, but it was not out of things to throw. It moved on Joseph. Joseph fired, but the gorilla was so stubborn that it didn't realize it should have been blown backwards by the force of the bullets, especially at such close range. It seized Joseph in its strong grip with both hands, cracking his arms. Joseph screamed in pain as he was lifted up and his head was smashed into the underside of the level above him. Jinn tried to aim jin KS-23 shotgun at the gorilla, but worried about hitting Joseph. Ji wished ji had jin old Judgement gun again, but it'd broken back on his mission to 2009. "Shoot it!" Joseph tried to yell, his chest under too much pressure. He tried to repeat his command, but the wind was squeezed out of him.

Jinn complied. Joseph was jin commander, after all. Ji blared jin shotgun at the underside of the gorilla several times. The animal shrieked and bellowed in pain, then tossed Joseph bodily off the fire escape out into the space below. Joseph banged against the side of the lowest fire escape level, but his arms had been broken and he couldn't grab on. Jinn could only watch in disgusted horror as Joseph started to tumble, and his head smacked against the edge of the HRHQ roof below. Yelling in frustration, Jinn unloaded several rounds into the gorilla. After a few hundred more bullets, it sluggishly dropped to the floor and bled out.

Jinn panted heavily, jin rage having taken its toll on jin. Ji wanted to be sure the gorilla was dead. Ji stepped up to the next landing and tip-toed around the felled beast. After a moment of staring, ji took another step past. The gorilla tried in vain to weakly swat at Jinn, but it could do nothing. All the wounds it sustained had done it in. Jinn dragged jin leaden feet to the next staircase and sat down to think.

The leader of the Human Resistance was dead. Again. Now what in the hell could ji do? All jin comrades in Burke Squad were likely dead at this point. Ji had had no contact with them, and Discord's tower was a nefarious place of danger. Ji had to continue upward.

Ji had to see what was lying in wait at the top of all this tragedy. (Discord's Ultimatum, p156)

Hotel Stairwell

When Artemis noticed Jinn following her, she scoffed. "Try to keep up," was all she said, and the two continued down the hallways in silence. They hit the stairwell pretty soon. At the door, she twirled her bow off her back and into her hand then reached for the handle with her other. She tried to rip the door open at the same time she burst through with her weapon drawn, but the door didn't budge and she smacked into it.

Jinn sighed. "It's a push door."

"Well that's dumb," Artemis griped. "Every door should be a pull door only." She wedged the door open with her boot, this time nocking an arrow. She then shoved the door open, and when it swung back closed, she gave it a hard kick so it banged as far open as it would go. She rushed in, pointing her arrow up and down, then up again when she saw that below was nothing but the roof or a ceiling of the building below them.

Jinn pushed jin way through after her begrudgingly, but readied jin shotgun nonetheless. *So much for stealth,* ji thought, knowing Artemis's stubborn personality was difficult to temper.

Sliding down the edge of the underside of the stairs as though it was the bannister was an old man with a short beard covering much of his face and a cowboy hat over his ginger hair. He was wearing an outfit not unlike a sheriff from the American old west. He was not wearing a radiation-proof suit, a fact which Artemis and Jinn noticed.

"What the hell's a human doing here?" Artemis asked. She may have been stubborn and aggressive, but even this detail did not slip by her unnoticed because she envied not having to wear such a heavy outfit. "This area's radioactive! You should be dead or something! I dunno how radiation works."

The cowboy had a Texan drawl to his voice. "My body is physical perfection. I don't get radiation poisoning; the radiation gets me-poisoning."

Artemis was taken aback. "That's quite the declaration. Now move aside, old man. I got a world to save, and that's a job for the young."

"Oh really? By the time I was your age, I'd travelled the world and beaten up practitioners of twelve different varieties of martial arts," said the cowboy.

"Whoop-de-doo," said Artemis. "By the time I was my age, I had a statue of myself erected in Athens, Greece for eliminating a criminal syndicate."

Jinn cocked jin shotgun. "Just let us pass. What we're here for doesn't concern you."

"You're not going to shoot him first; *I* am!" Artemis boasted. "Wait. He hasn't even done anything yet. Lower your weapon, Jinn." She then walked up the steps until the cowboy drop-kicked her in the face. She let out a yell as she crumbled on the stairs and went rolling down to the foot of them. Before Jinn could even get a shot off, the cowboy had thrown his hat over jin face, blinding him. Jinn fired off a blast anyway, but when ji pulled the hat off, the cowboy had sprung up in front of jin, grabbed jin shotgun from jin hands, then decked jin with the barrel right upside the face. It hurt. A lot. Jinn crouched on the floor, gasping in pain.

By that time, Artemis stood back up, pulled back an arrow, and let fly at the cowboy. He grabbed the arrow mid-air, an inch away from his face. He then hurled it like a dart with such force that it struck Artemis deep in the knee. She screamed in pain as well as annoyance, stumbling as she strained to keep from falling onto that knee. She dropped to her other instead and seethed. "I don't always hit a woman," the cowboy said, "But when I do, I hit her so hard, she wakes up back in the kitchen."

Only then did Jinn realize jin shotgun had been grabbed from jin, but ji had other concerns on jin mind. "Artemis! Your suit!" Ji said this not because ji thought she hadn't noticed she'd been struck with an arrow, but because ji was deeply concerned for her well-being as jin comrade in arms. Ji wasn't sure what worried jin more—the puncture wound to her knee, or the breach of her radiation suit.

Artemis yelled in grotesque pain, but there was determination in that look of fury on her face. "He's mine! Back off, Jinn!"

Jinn wasn't sure ji had a choice. With jin shotgun, the cowboy had the drop on them both.

"You think you can take me, you cracker-ass, smug motherfucker?" Artemis grinned. She winced for a second, but had this self-satisfied smirk on her face. She reached for an arrow. "How's about you stow that shotgun and we have us an honourable quick-draw duel, you and me?"

"Can you really out-draw him with a bow?" Jinn asked.

"Your disbelief just makes me all the more confident I can pull this off." Artemis pulled off the hood of her suit. "This way you can look into my eyes, old geezer. That's how this is done proper."

The cowboy nodded and tipped his hat back. "I like the cut of your jib, little filly. Let's do this." He stuck the shotgun into an open slot on his belt. "Think you can take me? Go ahead on."

"You know, when the Albanian mafia broke my father's legs and I hunted down the don as a fully-trained and exceptional stealth archer, I mowed down his henchmen one by one before I cornered him, and I made the same deal here as I did then. And you know what he said to me? He said—" Artemis flung an arrow to her bow faster than Jinn could see. The cowboy didn't fumble pulling out the shotgun and cocking it. The arrow let fly. The shotgun erupted the moment the arrow impaled his flesh, and Jinn could see the bloodied arrow head jutting out behind him. Jin heart sank when Artemis's body, propelled by the blast, rebounded off the wall and down the hole that was the bottom of the stairwell. There was nothing but Moscow six stories down at least.

The cowboy was gloating. "Guess you're next, and you ain't got nothin' to draw with."

Jinn knew he wouldn't be gloating for long. "She drew a little bit faster than you realize if you didn't see what she did."

"This? Merely a flesh wound. I can take over nine-thousand wounds and still be sittin' pretty. 'Tis but a scratch."

"'Tis more. She used one of her special arrows. There's a cable fused to that arrow in your chest, and the other end is tethered to her. Sayonara." Jinn scowled as the cowboy had only a fleeting moment to look shocked before his body was propelled by gravity through the hole he'd just sent Artemis through. He too was lost six stories down, never to return.

Jinn had been tempted then to use the time travel device. Ji could try again, try to save Artemis' life, but ji knew that a soldier pressed on, no matter the consequences. Besides, there would be a chance ji could learn of their enemy.

Ji had to see what waited in store for them all. (Discord's Ultimatum, p156)

Left Stairwell

"The leader of the Human Resistance wants *me* to give orders?" Jinn asked.

Joseph nodded. "This isn't a dictatorship. I'll defer to my valued soldiers."

Jinn shrugged. Ji thought things over carefully. Every time Joseph deferred, Jinn thought it was a little too easy. Ji couldn't help voicing jin disbelief every time, almost as if to test something. Ji sighed. "Well then, I guess we could go up the left stairwell," ji said, or words to that effect.

Ji trudged up the stairwell behind Joseph. Every footfall stirred up a cloud of dust which clung to long-dried, sticky stains of blood and viscera that coated the floors and walls. The building creaked ominously from overhead, as though weighed down by the mishmash of errant construction above, reminding them all the while of how far they had yet to go. Up and up they went, undeterred by obstacle, with Jinn remembering jin idea that perhaps collective pronouns ought to be replaced to include jin as well. The stairs stopped at the sixth floor. The stairwell continued, but there was no way up.

"There should be another roof access," Joseph said. They wandered down a sixth floor hallway and around a corner not far from the stairs. The trail was littered with bones, pony and human, along with scratch marks and bullet holes all over the walls. The office at the end was a mess of books and furniture in various states of destruction. Behind a scarcely recognizable desk was a skeleton covered in tattered scraps of clothing.

The window had their attention. Instead of opening up onto the outside, there was another room beyond it, made of brown wood. They could see pillars, tables and chairs, recognizing the place of business as a bar of some sorts. Joseph beckoned Jinn with a nod, and the pair clambered on through into a draftier, darker building. The wood creaked beneath their feet, which wouldn't have felt all too out of place if they didn't know how high above the ground the building was suspended. They weren't entirely sure there wasn't some structure underneath them, but without being certain, they felt threatened they might plunge through the wood and plummet several stories to the ground below.

"Get your weapon out and turn the light on," Jinn said.

"Yeah, I know. I know, man," Joseph said. Both his Colt 9mm submachinegun and Jinn's KS-23 shotgun had lights attached to their barrels, having expecting there to be no working electricity in the ruins of Moscow despite all the radiation. He aimed his light around the establishment to take stock of where he was, glimpsing over the various signage advertising alcoholic beverages. "These must all be Moscow landmarks. The Ivory Inn showed up in intel reports on Delta Squad. Funny, I would've expected this place to burn down during the attacks."

Jinn shushed him. "Be quiet."

"I know you may not have elected me leader, but you could still show some basic human respect," Joseph said. He shut up when he saw Jinn had a hand to jin ear. Joseph too tried to listen in close. There was a soft scratching sound, more like a long scraping. Joseph swept his light toward the direction he thought it came from and gave a start. He tried to turn his light back the other way to see what he had passed over, but like aiming a telescope over the night sky, he`d lost what he was looking for. He could have sworn he'd seen a face. It'd had large, reflective eyes and a strange grin, looking something like an animal. Had wild creatures somehow gotten past the closed doors, up all the flights of stairs, and into this bar, or had they been transported along with the building however it had been moved on top of this other building? No, if that were the case, wouldn't it be likely they'd have gone after the bone marrow of all the skeletons in HRHQ? He sure wished he had someone available who knew this sort of stuff.

"Jinn, did you see that? Where's your light? Help me search." Joseph turned back, but Jinn was gone.

"Jo—-!" Jinn's voice cried out in the darkness and was silenced. Joseph cursed to himself, waving his flashlight through the room, but all he could see were collapsed tables and chairs. He was certain Jinn's voice had come from somewhere over there, and now the scraping noises were louder and in multiple directions. He didn't realize Jinn had something cold and hard covering jin mouth and pinning jin back. Jinn was able to move one arm with great duress. Ji needed Joseph's help.

Jinn could turn jin light on. (Light Goes On, p163)

Or ji could leave it off. (Light Stays Off, p164)

Light Goes On

Joseph got an eyeful of bright light. He shielded his eyes with one arm and skirted aside to try and make out what was happening to Jinn. In that moment, he was so distracted that he never noticed until too late the sharp pain of something impaling straight through his chest. He could feel his spine knocked aside and his ribs stretched to breaking as something the size of an arm puncturing through him with tremendous force. He choked as whatever it was tore through a lung, shoving his other organs aside. He could feel his heart beating faster and faster until it just stopped.

Jinn's light shone on Joseph's face as this happened, revealing a look of total terror through the radiation suit headpiece as the latter choked on his own blood, pouring it down his chin. Ji pointed his light down, revealing something that looked like a metal hand with sharp, stubby fingers jutting out of Joseph's chest. His protective gear had been ruptured.

Shit, Jinn thought. *I fucked up.* Panicked, ji fumbled about with jin wrist uplink and activated it as quick as ji could.

Ji'd just have to try again. (The Lobby, p151)

Light Stays Off

Joseph fumbled around in the darkness, waving his gun about in wide arcs, but he couldn't find any trace of his companion. That was when he felt the presence behind him. He paused a second before swinging around. His heavy gun clanged against something hard and metallic. He backed away and aimed his light at the object to find that shocking face once more. It wasn't just the face of an animal. It was the face of something metal. Some kind of bestial automaton wearing a bib was staring back at him, like an animatronic puppet without its fluffy exterior. It parted its simple jaws filled with inappropriately jagged, sharp teeth as if to roar at Joseph then took a lumbering step toward him.

In a split second, Joseph had a thought that his bullets might ricochet off the hostile entity, but then he thought that at this close range, they'd penetrate even a metal surface, and this one didn't look that thick. This latter idea held true, as when Joseph blasted the robot in the face, several dents and holes struck through the surface, rupturing one of the machine's eyes and leaving it looking like it had a horrific case of acne. It stopped in its tracks, and Joseph scurried back a good few steps. Taking another swift look around for Jinn from a new angle, he found jin in the arms of another metallic creature. Jin mouth was covered and one arm pinned. This metal creature opened its jaws as if to laugh at Joseph, and tugged Jinn in front of itself. Joseph aimed. The creature underestimated his ability to do so. He switched from automatic and put one well-aimed shot right into the creature's left eye, impairing its vision and confusing it. As it reached to cover its face with a metal hand, Jinn slipped free, then blasted it in the groin with jin shotgun, busting off a hip joint. The robot fell sideways with a clang. Joseph and Jinn hurried into a back-to-back formation, aiming both their lights at their aggressors, and sweeping the room for any other visuals.

"Screw this. Let's just find a way out," Joseph said. He could feel Jinn nodding behind him. They both broke between the enemies for a rush at the door. As Jinn kicked the front open, Joseph blasted away at their pursuers, dragging a chair with him. They slammed the door shut behind them, barring it with the chair. "Not that it's bound to hold them," Joseph said, completing half a thought. It would have to do. "Those things didn't look very Equestrian. They don't tend to use advanced tech like that. Those choppers and that giant mech were of Earth design after all."

"We need to get going," Jinn reminded him. They both got another reminder at the sound of crunching wood and cracking glass behind them. The pointed digits of the robots were sticking through the doors, and the entrance to the Ivory Inn was made of thick, heavy wood, with thick, ornamental glass windows. A lot of force was required to muster that kind of damage.

"I've had enough goddamn robots to last me a lifetime," Joseph said. He and Jinn hurried up an immediate stairwell from a building they didn't recognize, but they entered what looked like several floors of cross-section from some apartment building. Their frazzled minds required a moment to recognize that the building was upside-down. Doorways reached from the corners above to just above what they initially mistook for the floor. Light fixtures jutted up from the ceiling below their feet like giant mushrooms, showing that their design was such to keep them as rigid as possible for stability. A janitorial cart lay on its side toward one end of the hall, its contents spilled over as though the objects within the building had been jostled quite a bit during transport. Peeping into one apartment through the doorway revealed that every bit of furniture had crashed to the ceiling when the building was turned over.

"You know, I think this might be the Red Star Hotel," Joseph said. "My father had me stay here once when we visited Moscow toward the start of the war. There're so many rooms to check. Where the heck do we go?"

Jinn pointed. "This way."

They didn't need to overthink their decision as not long after they heard the voice of Artemis up ahead. Joseph raced on ahead, calling back to her. "Artemis, we're down this way!" Following one another's voices, they rounded two more corners before encountering one another again. "Where's Hurk? Isn't he with you?"

"We got attacked. He didn't make it." Her face couldn't be seen through the headpiece in the low lighting, but Joseph could tell she sounded angry. "Have you seen Panjit or Inferno?"

Joseph shook his head. "No, but they went downstairs. Is there a way to double back for them?"

"We'd be wasting time," Jinn muttered.

"Too true, too true." Discord's voice sounded as if it was coming from all around them. "Tell you what, 'cause I'm such a generously impatient guy. If you can climb past this hotel section, I'll let you meet little ol' me! How does that sound?"

"Tch. Sounds like I'm ready to kill a bastard." Artemis wanted to spit, but that would've been unwise in her suit.

"Should we just pick a stairwell and ascend?" Joseph asked. "That shouldn't be too hard. The undersides are shaped just like stairs."

"Not unless you wanna waste time prying open the elevator," said Artemis.

"I've had enough climbing through elevator shafts," said Joseph. "Do you suppose there's a fire escape we could try? I'd like to get a lay of the land if I could, and at least pincer the enemy if we can."

Jinn could follow Artemis up a stairwell. (Hotel Stairwell, p160)

Or ji could follow Joseph up the fire escape. (Fire Escape, p158)

Right Stairwell

Hurk kept humming some tune under his breath that took Jinn a while to identify. Was it the French La Marseilles or something like that? After two floors, the stairs ended and they exited out into a dreary hallway that had been neglected by the year-old battle. "Welp, looks like we're already at the top!" Hurk announced. "Where are ya, Discord, you ugly son of a gun?"

"We're not at the top of the building yet," Jinn said. "We just have to find another staircase on this side." Ji decided to follow the wall on the same side as the stairs, parallel to Artemis and Joseph's ascent.

It wasn't long before they saw something that gave Hurk a start. "What in the fuck?" Then the lights in the hall went dark. Jinn wondered how the lights were even on in the first place.

"Did you see that?" Hurk asked.

"I think so, but it's pretty hard to catch," said Jinn.

"It was white and round and just popped out of that doorway. I'll turn my flashlight on to be sure." Hurk ended up pointing his light straight at his own face, temporarily blinding himself. It was bad enough the light was affixed to the barrel of his gun, so he was pointing his weapon at his own face. He corrected this, but Jinn already had jin light pointing along the doors along the right side of the hallway.

There it was again. "There it is again! Holy crap, it looks like a face looking right at us, except it's got no face! Jesus motherfucking Christ I wish I was mistaken!"

Jinn noticed that the faceless head was peering out of a closer doorway than it had before the lights went out, but it was still in the same exact posture. Try as ji might, ji couldn't completely shake off the razor-sharp pain eking its way through jin gut and up jin spine. Ji didn't share either of these observations with Hurk. Ji just raised jin KS-23, but the instant he did, the figure ducked back inside the room.

"Hey, come on out, man. You don't need to be frightened," Hurk said. He then whispered to Jinn, "I'm sure he's *much* more frightened of us than we are of him." This phrase means roughly what it says, that the vulnerability of fear may in actuality be greater in the object of one's fear, such as when someone finds a particularly gruesome spider invading their habitat. Aside from the fact that uninvited pests reflect poorly on a person's discipline to maintain a household, and that maintaining a household in the first place is a privilege, not a luxury, this is certainly not the case. Spiders are dumb and follow very basic fight-or-flight programming. Knowing a spider's emotional state is irrelevant to its ability to deliver an unsanitary bite to the rightful inhabitant of a home simply because that person didn't look under their bedsheets or into their shoes beforehand.

The unknown figure demonstrated a profound lack of fear when it pulled itself out from the room it was hiding in with its hideously long fingers and stalked like a ginormous spider into the hallway which now appeared far more cramped than it really was. The thing had to stoop it was so tall. Although it is often impolite to judge too much based on appearances, there were many things Hurk and Jinn did not like about what they saw. The figure looked like a human that had been stretched like taffy to cartoonish lengths until its body was slender as a balustrade. Its face was pale to the point of actual whiteness, not that light beige or brown colour typically misnomer-ed as white; but the worst thing about its face was that it didn't have one. No eyes, no nose, no mouth, no hair, no ears. There was even something ominous about the way it had been dressed into a well-tailored black suit with a grey shirt underneath and a red tie. Its feet were adorned with polished black shoes, but its hands were huge and narrow with fingers that may have each been a foot long.

"That's unnerving," Hurk muttered. "'Unnerving' means 'scary', right?"

Jinn nodded. "Right."

"One thing I don't get, though," Hurk said. He and Jinn were both backing slowly down the hall. When they got pretty far, the gaunt entity would take a long, loping step forward with its spindly legs. It kept bobbing on its haunches from time to time like a strutting chicken. "How can it see us without any eyes? Can it hear us without ears? Also, how the hell did it get so damn big?"

"Um."

"Further which—" Hurk and Jinn scuttled backwards a bit faster when the creature stepped even closer to them. "Who the hell dressed it in that dumb suit? Did it have to be custom-tailored? Its body is so thin; where's its rib cage? Where are its internal organs? Is its dick long and skinny too, like a piece of limp spaghetti?"

The thin thing stopped for a moment and pointed its head downwards as though to look at itself, though it was hard to determine exactly at where.

Hurk didn't stop. "Hey, wait. How does it eat without a mouth? How does it *breathe* without a nose or mouth?"

"Maybe it has subcutaneous skin or whatever it's called," Jinn said.

"Hey, I may not be the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree," said Hurk, "But even I know that's scientifically bullshit. Speaking of shit, do you think it has no butthole either? Not that it needs to take a dump if it can't eat. Probably why it's so damn skinny."

The slender creature began clutching at its face with frantic gestures. Muffled noises emanated from it, perhaps from within its throat, but suffocated by the lack of an oral orifice. It stretched out its long arms in a desperate bid to attack, sending Hurk and Jinn running in the opposite direction.

"Shit, it's tall, though! I don't even have time to aim!" Hurk said. Jinn did look over his shoulder to fire, but that shifting, narrow body was somehow impossible to hit. The point was moot, however, because it soon fell to the ground like a dead praying mantis, trying to scratch and claw at its own non-mouth until it was bloody. Its limbs went limp when there was no oxygen to carry blood to its muscles. The thing had died. The emergency lights of the building kicked in, despite there being no explanation for the electricity, bathing the hallway in low red light. It didn't help make the sight any more pleasant, and neither did the fact their mysterious assailant was now irrevocably dead. Creeping past its corpse was the most frightening thing they had to do yet, but Hurk followed Jinn's lead to the next staircase.

This stairwell started out much like the first. They climbed and climbed, but before long, Hurk kept complaining every time he banged his head on the bottom of the staircase above. "Hey, what the hell, man?" He tried stooping, but pretty soon even Jinn had to crouch low to get up the stairs.

"The stairwell's getting smaller and smaller. We're getting higher more slowly," Jinn said.

"That's less quickly, right?" asked Hurk, who by now was crawling on all fours.

The stairs were also becoming narrower, but Jinn eventually found a rectangular opening that led into what appeared to be a smooth floor. Ji pulled himself out which some difficulty and gasped for air as though ji'd been suffocating. Ruminating on the unpleasantness of the journey, ji turned about to help tug Hurk's bulkier frame through. What they found next was just as strange.

There were light fixtures standing up from the floor, but they were upside-down miniature chandeliers like the kind one might find in a modest hotel. The surface above them was carpeted, and the doors were all situated to the surface above. The building they were in was upside-down. Jinn put two and two together and explained to Hurk that this was a cross-section of some hotel in Moscow that was flipped over. Hurk noted the wallpaper was even uglier in this direction.

A short walk down the hall brought them upon an inconsolable Joseph slouched against the wall. "Joseph, man, what's wrong? Hey, you can tell me, buddy." Hurk threw an arm around Joseph's shoulders.

"Artemis is dead!" Joseph seethed. Part of him was mourning. Part of him was enraged. "We ran into trouble, and she didn't make it. Oh dammit, dammit! How can I lead if I can't protect the people around me?"

Hurk backed away awkwardly, standing upright again. He shrugged at Jinn. Jinn looked a little frazzled by the sight of Joseph being this upset. Ji had to say something. "A leader can't always protect the people around him, but he has to be able to pull himself together. There are always sacrifices in war. Artemis knew that. She may have been a skilled combatant, but that's just the kind of hell we're up against with these ponies."

Jinn sighed and slid down the wall to sit next to Joseph, who looked like he was calming down but could still use a pep talk. "My family's farm was attacked in Yemen. Maybe I told you this story already, but I've told a number of people by now. Shortly after I earned my archaeology degree from the University of Sana, I landed a pretty sweet job, while back home on the Sanawat Steppes where three generations of my family were tending our farm, they were being harassed by the British government during the War on Terror. Thought they were hiding WMDs under the fields, I guess. Then two years into the pony invasion, the Iron Wolves Corporation attacked Sana, bombing my family's farm. By some miracle, most of my family survived, but not all of them.

"The Iron Wolves, as you know, were comprised of religious extremists, ultranationalists and self-righteous gun aficionados. To retaliate, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the survivors of the Middle East banded together under one flag which you ought to recognize as the Middle Eastern Coalition. Even though my family suffered a great loss, I kept on fighting. Using the history I learned in university, we employed superior tactics against the brutish Iron Wolves Forces, using a Tunisian tactic of decoy grenades. That was the very same 'Wolf Hunt of Yemen'. But even still, using my strategies, a number of my fellow comrades were slain in battle.

"For my prowess, the Red Hammer Platoon showed an interest in me, and I joined them in their research on things like the Judgement laser gun, and you know what else. I joined up because I could keep fighting. I understand that leadership is a burden. I

understand you're not on top, but underneath all these nations expecting you to coordinate and listen to them to liberate each and every one of them from the pony menace. So I'm asking you. Please, lead us."

Joseph looked at Jinn and blinked away the raw sentiment in his eyes. He stood and stretched his shoulders, then made the bold declaration to scout the floor for a way up. He uncovered two means. "There's a stairwell leading up, but I'd much rather take the fire escape route. The exterior should give us a better understanding of the structure up here than being inside it."

"Why don't we just take the elevator?" Hurk asked. "It's a direct path upward, isn't it?"

"The elevator isn't working anymore," Jinn said.

"We could still climb up, right?"

Jinn could either climb up the elevator shaft with Hurk. (Elevator Crawl, p157)

Or ji could accompany Joseph up the fire escape. (Fire Escape, p158)

"That's a relief," Discord said. "I was beginning to get bored watching your futile antics. Do you know what it's like, being the harbinger of chaos and getting bored? It's torment! The last thing I want."

Jinn could feel a sob welling up within jin, but it was the only thing ji could feel. Ji took off jin radiation hood and stared into a mirror Discord held up to jin.

"Look at you. How many times have you travelled back to try it over again? You're so old now, but at least you've kept your hair. Think of how many years you've wasted time traveling back over and over. It's a power no mortal should have. Even I don't use it. How far have you really gotten? You were a young man when you started, but then you had to stick around, didn't you? There's no way past things but through them. I want you to think about that with the last few seconds you've got of your life."

The figure in the mirror didn't look familiar to Jinn at all. When was the last time ji really got a good look at jinself? Ji no longer recognized jinself. Ji didn't even know who ji was. Ji'd spent a lifetime just to reach this point. Discord was right. No one should manipulate time. "Why did you do this?" ji asked.

"Because," Discord said, pausing for effect. "It's fun! Now let me ask you something." He threw an arm around Jinn's shoulders. "Do you know the definition of insanity?"

That was the last that anyone ever heard of Burke Squad.

11. Puff the Magic Dragon

"It has been ten hours since Burke Squad's last report in. We have to assume the worst," said Dirk.

The members of Delta Squad sat around the briefing room table along with Dirk Smidgeon, Queen Elizabeth the III (alias Jenny Williams), and the representatives of the Golden Path and Red Hammer Platoon; Sabal Kareem and Franz Bandelt, respectively. Daniel didn't want to listen to the grave news, but the reality of the words banged like drums into his ears. As they did that however, his mind drifted away, obsessing over them, flirting and evading the dread consequences bearing down on him like a cow birthing a stillborn calf. The table top was strewn with reports all focused on Discord and suspicious activity theorized to be connected to him since the fall of Moscow. He could hear arguing in the back of his mind and knew that these people were distraught over the muddled future of the Human Resistance. Phrases drifted in and out of his ears.

"We can't just let that Equestrian monster sit about on our planet!"

"Plus which, there are other Equestrian monsters roaming the Earth right now. They have to be hunted to extinction."

"You never know if the Iron Wolves Corporation doesn't resurface again."

"If what the prisoner says is true, Discord could let more ponies through at any time."

"So what do we do about it? What will you do about it? We lost a lot of soldiers in Kyrat. Can we afford to break up the Resistance now?"

"Stop it!" Daniel slapped the desk with his palms. He felt himself shivering as though he was going to be sick. He hoped the others couldn't see him shaking. He hoped the past year of Buddhist meditation wasn't about to be undone. Above all, he hoped the Human Resistance wouldn't simply disband and abandon the Earth it was meant to protect. All eyes were on him now. He swallowed his words then spoke. "We need leadership. The Resistance can't end now." He sat back down in his seat, having realized he stood up.

"And that someone should be you again," Tom said.

"No. No, it cannot be," Daniel said. "I finished with it, remember?"

"Don't look at me," said Sabal. "The Golden Path is in disarray with its power vacuum. I've been a nobody grunt since the war began. I'm only here by circumstance. I wouldn't have the support of the people."

"By all rights, it should be Daniel Williams," said Franz. "The agreement was that he would give up leadership for a year to Ivan Matskevich or Ivan's son, Joseph. The position actually should have gone back to Daniel months ago."

"Well don't look to me," said the queen. "People are content to be done with this war. We have to start rebuilding our lives."

It was one of the few times Daniel looked at his mother. He showed contempt toward her and Dirk in that fleeting moment, then tore his eyes away. He had stood again then barged out of the room in a huff. "I have to think this over," he said. Though it didn't refute the image of leadership he wished to distance himself from, Daniel was followed out by the members of Delta Squad.

Tom found Daniel facing the wall just outside in the corridor. He reached out to seize his friend's shoulder but stopped himself. Instead, he gently rested his hand there. "Hey, come on, man."

Daniel rounded on him with a look that begged patience. Tom raised both hands disarmingly. "Not trying to pressure you into a decision, mate. Not saying any period of thinking will force you to do what they say. Just wanting to make sure you cool down, right?"

Daniel nodded, still saying nothing. Tom continued. "Okay, so, we'll give you some space in exchange for letting us let you know you have our support whatever you choose. Okay? You wanna retire to Buddhaville and shop organic markets, fine. You change your mind and wanna clean up the ponies' mess, fine. We'll be around if you need to chat us up." Tom winked and bumped his fist against Daniel's upper arm. Delta Squad then broke off in separate directions throughout the ship.

So Daniel wandered about the Red October. He passed by the canteen, but he wasn't hungry. He dropped into bed and tried to crash into slumber but he just laid there, recent events trying to burrow into his mind to become real to him. It is difficult to acknowledge things happening when one hasn't borne witness to them, because human beings do not have extrasensory perception. We hear, see, and touch things, but those things must be within earshot, line of sight, and reach. That's empiricism. Burke Squad was likely dead. What if Delta Squad had gone in there?

A happy bark took him away from these morbid thoughts. Stud had been let into his room when Daniel wasn't paying attention, and the giddy dog was dashing about in small circles. Daniel felt excited to see that Stud had been fitted with a prosthetic metal leg which clanked lightly on the floor. He scratched behind the pooch's ears and shook his paw several times. For a time, his mind was devoid of words. Happiness welled up in his soul, allowing him to feel something for the first time in a long time. He wanted to be outside in a field, taking this dog for a walk, playing fetch with it or whatever. He couldn't do that right now here on the Red October, but he decided to take what he could get.

Stud occasionally trod on Daniel's heels with so much energy one would hardly guess the dog was a casualty of a recent battle. Some people balked at the dog, giving him a wide berth. Most just gave him a sceptical look. A few people were happy to be greeted by the jubilant animal, even going so far as to pet him or scratch under his chin. Daniel first came across Tom sitting on the bottom step of a stairwell and eating something.

"What're you eating?" Daniel asked.

"Um." Tom remembered to swallow his mouthful and frowned at what he held in his hands. "Tuna burrito. From the mess hall." He dumped the rest of the dubious food onto the floor which Stud ravenously devoured.

"Uh, I wonder if that's safe for dogs to eat," Daniel cautioned.

Tom slouched. "Oh. Sorry. I was just trying to share, y'know?"

Daniel scratched at the back of his head, waiting for Tom to prompt him to unload what was on his mind, but Tom was deliberately keeping silent so as not to pressure his friend. Daniel broke first. "Remember our first mission?" he asked.

Tom smiled. "We weren't exactly raring to fight ponies as much as we thought."

"During training, sure, but once we were on that plane to Berlin, my heart was in my lap." Daniel chuckled, but he didn't know why. "This is kinda like that, huh?"

Tom crossed his arms and looked Daniel in the eyes. "Delta Squad going on a mission?" There was an awkward pause. "This is what, the third time I've been recalled? Drafted back into the army?"

Daniel's gaze listed into space. "I was trying to avoid that, but it seems like I made that Freudian slip. What if, though? Let's say it's just hypothetical."

"Well." Tom stood up and dusted his pants off, though he didn't need to. "I feel like I've been driving for twelve hours straight through the dark, but I'm with you all the way. Right up until the end."

Daniel nodded softly. "Thank you."

"Just, this feels like the final push, you know? How long you think we got until somebody's gotta go stormin' the castle? Better take the time now to get done what we want to before we never get the chance again." Tom and Daniel spent a good moment staring at one another, not really thinking, but feeling as though they'd crossed a tidal ocean of discomfort and adversity between them. There's no need to recant it all here, just as they had no need to speak of it.

Daniel caught up with Tyrone who'd been gazing out a rear window and having a private conversation with Nick. Nick was elated to play with Stud. Daniel struck up the inevitable conversation. "So, Burke Squad might be..." He stopped himself, realizing he was dampening the mood.

"He might not be," Tyrone countered.

"Do you think it's a bit like the first time we set out as a squad?" Daniel asked.

Tyrone shook his head. "Nope. Too much has changed. Ain't never gonna be that way again. Nothing's the same about any of us."

"I wouldn't say that." Nick was ruffling the matted fur of Stud's neck. "We're still comrades through and through."

Tyrone had to agree. "That's true. I should've said none of us is the same."

When Daniel went to splash cold water on his face from a bathroom sink, he caught Irish writing illegible graffiti on the exterior of a stall. He was relieved to change the subject from what he was doing. "I never thought I could get revenge on those glue fuckers, but I realized that here I am, back with my old crew, even after all the shit that's happened to me," Irish said. He then had a hard sneeze and long dollops of phlegm dangled from both nostrils. Daniel excused himself, nauseated.

Daniel had actually been trying to find Logan before the others, but it took him all this time to track him down. He thought he was almost used to seeing Logan with a backwards head. His mind kept imagining the strange arrangement of his trachea, oesophagus and spine. He was sure Logan must've been x-rayed at some point. Logan interrupted Daniel's distracted thoughts. "You have somethin' to ask me?"

"Uh, yeah. Just, I need to do something about Discord."

"Still mad at them pony bastards, eh? Aren't we all?"

"Somehow I do not feel mad anymore. At least not right now. Still gotta wipe every last one of 'em out of existence, though." Daniel smiled.

"So what do you mean *you* need to do something about Discord?" Logan patted Stud on the head. The dog kept trying to chew his shoes.

Daniel sighed. "I have a feeling they're gonna try to make me the leader whether I want to or not, and somebody's gotta lead these people."

"That's true," Logan said. "Since the beginning of this war, people have needed to put their differences aside and band together. They need that now more than ever. To do that, people need a cause to follow. That's how a few individuals become a whole of something else."

Daniel had made his decision, and Delta Squad was of one mind. He presented his resolution on the bridge before all, with Delta Squad in their full army regalia. "I have decided to accept the offer to lead the human race once more into liberty. Liberty from these Nazi ponies, into the shining light of communism. Delta Squad is hereby conscripted back into action and ready to rumble."

"Sir, yes, sir!" The other members of Delta Squad saluted like the marines they once were.

Daniel next addressed his fellow Delta Squad members on a more personal level. "On that note, as leader of the entire Human Resistance, I find it only fitting to laud you for your commitment to duty in the face of terrible suffering. Nicholas Bronson, you are hereby promoted from specialist to technician fifth grade."

"Sir, yes, sir!" Nick saluted again. He liked to.

Daniel stepped sideways. "Irish and Tyrone. You've both been promoted from privates to airmen."

"Cool," said Irish. Tyrone elbowed him with a grin.

"Logan, you were actually promoted posthumously. I didn't think it relevant 'til now, since I wouldn't expect you'd want to keep fighting in spite of your newfound disability. It gives me great pride to announce you've been promoted from sergeant to lieutenant."

Logan smiled. A tear ran down his cheek.

Daniel stared at Tom for a moment and thought. He reached to grab Tom's badge and rotated it clockwise by ninety degrees. "You are hereby promoted from sergeant to left sergeant."

"Damn I feel good." Tom beamed.

"Enough of this. It's time to talk strategy," Daniel said.

"It's about time," said Dirk. Basil nodded emphatically in agreement.

"Ever since Burke Squad's attempt, Moscow has been swarming with Equestrian activity," Franz said. "Sea ponies, Parasprites, Timberwolves, not to mention a few weirder horrors, have all congregated from around the world here as if to defend Discord, not to mention a few Swastikopter sightings. If it weren't for the radioactive fallout, Lenin base might stand a chance to bust in there. We're still trying to construct a giant radiation-proof tarp to throw over the mech."

Everyone gathered around a table where Daniel unrolled a large blueprint he'd been carrying. "I've been thinking about a conversation I had before with Joseph Matskevich, and he reminded me of something I hadn't thought about since I was a kid. I've always been fascinated with Russia's great socialist thinkers. Anyway, Joseph was telling me about how his father, Ivan knew all about secret tunnels beneath the city of Moscow which Joseph Stalin had constructed way back when, and Ivan would use these to sneak into HQ for supplies."

"These are pretty convoluted plans," Logan said. "But we're fairly certain we can find a route through. We don't know what sort of damage has been done during the fall of Moscow, so we'll have to come fairly well-equipped."

"If I might interject," said Franz. "We in the Red Hammer Platoon have been wanting to get a little more information on the area. We'd like to gear you up with Geiger counters. Now they're pre-event technology, so we're not entirely sure how they work, but they should click more frequently when there's lots of radiation present."

Planning went underway, and input was given from all factions present. Delta Squad geared up like never before, with sacrifices being made to ensure they would go down fighting if worse came to worse. The ship's cook tried to leave them packed lunches, but they conveniently forgot them. When they were certain every last preparation had been made, Delta Squad set off for their first decisive mission together since that woe-some day in Hainan.

Lenin Base stomped around the perimeter of the determined range of nuclear fallout. The sky was turned hazy red by sunset and the lens of exigence. As expected, the nefarious legions of Equestrian monsters and Swastikopters that patrolled the outskirts of Ground Zero proceeded as one to the mechanical goliath replica of Vladimir Lenin to do battle. Meanwhile, Delta Squad, clad in radiation-proof suits, proceeded on foot some kilometres away into a subway tunnel under the cover of distraction.

Daniel was reminded all too soon of dank tunnels and claustrophobic corridors, having had to traverse them with the pony Pinkie Pie. Still, a subway station is a touch sight different than a sewer, if only by a smidgeon, and Stalin's tunnels were designed to be traversed by man (even though sewers more frequently need to be serviced). His discomfort was allayed by a fascination of what they were about to see in the vein of Russian history and its obsession with pointlessly splendiferous ventures that only served to detriment the national trust as was typical of several Asian nations. He thought it a pity if they were really built by Stalin.

Logan signalled for everyone to stop and pay attention. "Alright, lads. Last minute equipment check. Geiger counters ticking away. Lights bright enough for sunshine underground. Nick, how's the gas detector working?"

Irish snorted. Nick tested the device. "It's working fine, but Irish is totally setting it off."

"Hey! What the fuck, man? I thought we were through with that shit," Irish said.

Nick grinned. "Nope."

"Are we really calling it the gas detector?" Tom asked. "I kind of expected a more scientific-sounding name."

"Nah, it's just called a gas detector," Nick said.

Daniel had lost track of the conversation and was staring down the darkness of the abandoned subway tunnel. He shone his light down the shaft which ended in an abrupt turn. His mind drifted to recollections of that time Tom had chased him aboard a subway train in New York that ended in disaster. Most of the time, his memories of those days were pretty hazy, though Tom remembered them all too well. When Tom noticed Daniel examining the tunnel, he realized what his friend must have been thinking, and he thought about it too. He thought about how Daniel had been involuntarily brainwashed by Equestrian drugs, and how a man named Sam Fisher had sacrificed his life trying to avenge his son's death even though he agreed it wasn't strictly Daniel's fault.

Tom walked up behind Daniel and patted him on the back to help snap him out of his stupor. "Oy, mate. You doin' okay there? Still with us?"

Daniel gave a little jolt and gasped. "Yeah. Great. We should head inward." Without remembering to ask if everyone else was ready, he marched down the tunnel. Everyone else gathered up their things and headed after him.

Tyrone read off directions on the map, acting as navigator. Irish was supposed to keep a watch on everyone's six, a term which here means "behind them". Nick and Logan took up flanking positions while Daniel and Tom led the squad forward. After almost an hour of walking, during which they learned how far a kilometre really felt, they traversed down a branch in the tunnels that was marked for maintenance. Daniel inhaled sharply again. "Are we here? Is this it?"

"We should be here," Tyrone said. "This says it's a maintenance tunnel, but that it also connects to this long-ass loop. It looks like there are some very short stations here and there with ladder access, mostly to a few buildings, but I'm not certain which ones."

"Oh holy Buddha, look." Daniel's hand shook as he pointed his lamp dead ahead. Around the bend they had just taken, which Nick and Logan noted lacked any luminaires, was a considerably older-looking tunnel. It looked far smaller and less impressive than the grandiose subway Daniel had imagined when he was far younger. He'd pictured gleaming golden walls and celebratory lights, which as an adult he realized would be ridiculously ostentatious for the socialists he idolized. On the other hand, the paranoid Joseph Stalin did carry more than a mote of notoriety, especially regarding the abuse of power and the abandonment of the socialist principles his forerunners had advocated. Daniel had also expected great murals depicting the heroes of communism that stretched fifteen feet high, though he saw no such decoration. He had also envisioned a great many equal workers puttering about performing numerous vague tasks here and there to ensure safety and security, although by the time his childhood had ended, he had long since realized that a secure operation would mandate secrecy which would in turn mandate far less personnel, certainly none of which could be civilians. Yet, even how much smaller, stained, and decayed it was than he had imagined, he was no less impressed, minus the temperance adulthood had inhibited his dreams.

"Well this place is in cruddy condition. Did they build it this way?" Irish asked.

"Those are probably water stains," said Logan.

"How does water stain through cement walls and ceiling?" Nick wanted to know. The others thought it was a fair question. None of them were constractors after all, and if they were, then they'd probably be too corrupt to answer.

They came upon a section that was particularly flooded. One could almost not see the horrifically rusted tracks between them. "The place must have fallen into disuse, and the government didn't bother to pay for the necessary maintenance," Daniel said. "The reputation was more important to the government in those days anyhow. A few of their numbers stations were just for show anyway. The ones on the extremities of the public radio bandwidth at least."

Tom clicked his tongue. "I always knew you were obsessed with the Russian stuff, even enough to develop your own Russian accent, but I can't remember the last time I ever saw you geek out like this."

Daniel would have been irritated before, but instead he shot a blushing smile in Tom's direction and threw him a playful, "Shut up."

Delta Squad followed a few more curves here and there, during which Tyrone was having trouble judging their position even though he had a GPS. Logan surprised the group by being the first one to gripe even before Irish that it would have been nice if the railway was still in operation so they could cruise to their destination.

"I don't know if it's even been in use any time recently," Daniel said. "Still, that makes it pretty safe." They took the time to admire the haunting architecture. It was cramped and alien in a different way from the New York City sewer system. The tunnel was fairly uniform without, with wide but short sections of ribbed metal ceilings with short sections of chains inexplicably hanging from them. They entered another cement-built segment where Daniel drew the squad's attention to a station. The square columns were decrepit and chipped. The only indication of an exit was some shutters that had been welded shut. Tom suggested Nick burn his way through it, but they agreed it probably didn't lead anywhere they wanted to go.

"Alright already," snapped Irish. "We need to go blast that ruddy Discord into smithereens, don't we? Let's not waste any time."

Daniel sighed. "Yeah, okay." He too was eager to finish teaching a lesson to the Equestrians. He hopped off the ledge of the subway platform and back down onto the tracks. When he stepped on the rails, his body was blasted with such a powerful shock that he landed back up on the platform and skidded a few feet.

Daniel thought he heard someone screaming his name. When he opened his eyes, there was a terrible ache in his jaw. His vision was blurry, and he felt woozy.

"Honestly, fainting at your age just because you have a cavity." This was his mother's voice. When he heard that, Daniel's eyes snapped wide open to take in the scene around him.

He was lying back in a dental patient chair in a tiny office staring at blinding sunlight through some venetian blinds. A man in a hygienist's mask leaned over him to poke and prod his teeth with a metal hook and a tiny mirror. He mumbled something to Daniel's mother, but Daniel was far too stunned to pay attention. Something along the lines about dental health being an indicator of overall health.

His mother spoke again. "What am I going to do with you, Daniel? You're costing me a fortune in dental hygiene bills."

"Now spit," the dentist commanded.

"Blagubbuh," Daniel said, drooling down his chin. The dentist wiped Daniel up with the latter's crinkly bib.

"He's free to go, Mrs. Williams!" The dentist sounded so proud. On his way out, Daniel took a glance at a huge mirror in front of some sinks. The mirror had etchings on it of disembodied, smiling cartoonish faces under the words, "Have you brushed today?" He looked very much the same as he expected, minus his goatee. He looked down at his right hand in amazement. His missing fingers were no longer missing. He bent and un-bent them several times until his mother grabbed his hand and nearly dragged him out of the building to the car.

Puff the Magic Dragon

How long had it been since he'd seen this scenery? He gazed out the side of the car window as his mother drove, recognizing buildings and locales from back when he was living in northern Wales as a kid. "Am I really home?" he asked aloud.

"I can't afford to take you any place else today," Jenny Williams said, stumbling over her words. "I haven't got the time, either."

Daniel examined himself in the mirror behind the sun visor. "Mum, what year is it?"

"It's the same year as it's been since January first," she said. "Honest to goodness, Daniel, how can you not remember 2018?"

"It's the same year," he muttered to himself in thought.

"And will you stop with that ridiculous Russian accent?"

Daniel frowned. Trying to remember what he'd been doing just before awaking in the dentist's office and realizing he'd been transported several countries away from the war he'd just been fighting were both very disorienting tasks. Having his mother nagging him after every sentence was becoming agitating. "Is it alright if I turn on the radio?" He reached over to do so.

"Daniel, I am trying to drive."

He knobbed through the static to catch a fragment of a news report. "—that despite the surmounting evidence even after two years which he continues to deny of Mr Putin's own personal involvement in Russia's invalidation of their elections, that the two leaders vowed to further solidify the peace between their two nations. In national news, the legitimacy of the Brexit economic decision continues to come under fire—" Daniel frowned and tuned through the stations with annoyance. Diplomacy and money? Those qualified for news stories when the planet was still at war with the Equestrians? "—And that was, of course, 2018's hit of the year, 'Fuck Piss Nigger Faggot Shit Ass Cunt' by Snoop Shady THC. Coming up on the hour here on K-RAP radio—"

Daniel's mother clicked the radio off. "I don't want you listening to that barbaric potty language."

Daniel slouched in his seat. The whole ride home, his head throbbed along with the bouncing vehicle, and the accident which occurred came back to him. He'd been knocked unconscious. This must have been a dream state like the coma he'd experienced two to three years ago. Did that make this some kind of a relapse?

Daniel arrived at their luxury condominium, but the place didn't feel like home. The distant memories that pecked at him like ravenous birds felt more like a haunting than nostalgia. He kept telling himself to wake up from this coma, but the details felt far more real than they had. He could tell the difference between dreaming and being wide awake right now. The details remained fixed in place as they'd always been. He wasn't waking up as an inexorable synonym of thinking he was dreaming. Even though it had been years, the war made it feel like decades, yet still he could tell nothing was exaggerated or out of place, even when he hadn't remembered them. He passed by the shelves of knickknacks his mother liked to keep. Just above the family photograph of his parents, a younger version of himself, his older brother, and two sisters, was those infernal children's toy horses on the highest shelves that his mother had immortalized. He hated them more than ever now rather than finding them a shrill embarrassment.

"Hey, out of the way, loser."

Daniel hadn't seen who had elbowed him until he'd nearly been thrown to the floor. He looked up to see his older brother from behind. "James?" He almost couldn't say it. The breath had been taken away from him.

It was just as well since James gave no acknowledgement of hearing him. He was yelling something to their sister, Becky, who was fixing on some earrings while standing in front of an ornate mirror of some kind in the bathroom down the hall. "What the hell took you so long with my car?"

"I told you I needed to borrow it. I had to attend a double lecture today and a lab, for which my lazy partner didn't show up to for the third week in a row. I dunno how that idiot hasn't been flunked out of the course yet. You have it back now, so what's the problem?" She shot him a sideways glare.

"Did you put gas in it? I've got a date."

"It's the middle of the afternoon!" After a beat, she added, "Plus you had three quarters of a tank left. What gives?" Instead of waiting for James to answer, or perhaps to block him so he couldn't, she looked at Daniel with a pitying stare. "Uh oh, here comes Senator McCarthy's nemesis."

"What are you two doing here?" Daniel asked, still shocked to see his beloved siblings alive.

"Uh, we live here." James rolled his eyes sarcastically. "It's you none of us ever see, holed up in your room looking at those posters. And please tell me you're not seriously going to do a Russian accent. You're already too weird to bear."

Daniel kind of felt socked in the jaw. He was even getting a little woozy again. His siblings were treating him like jerks, something he wasn't used to after their struggle to survive against the Equestrian menace. "Is dad home?" he asked quietly. He tried not to do the Russian accent this time, but he'd kept it for so long that it was hard to catch himself unless he wasn't being berated by such an unsettling situation.

"Uh, hell no." James said. Becky had walked off, and he followed after her. "Wait, I'm not done with you!" They went back and forth asking one another if they were "bovvered". A few moments later, their mother yelled at them both to shut up from her position watching some home shopping channel on TV.

Daniel carried himself upstairs, sliding against the walls along the hallway to his bedroom. He stared at a distended square on the wall where a dumbwaiter had been filled in and realizing that this house, devoid of Equestrian influence and populated by his bickering relations was real. Or some kind of reality, anyway. He couldn't accept that. He couldn't accept that the last six years had been the dream, and he carried vivid memories from such a long period of time with him that he couldn't just shake away as mere nightmares. Where were his memories of living in this house in all that time, then?

He opened the door to his room which was bathed in red light from a flag of the Soviet Union he had hanging across a window. He shut the door, not wanting to be disturbed. He gazed around at several posters of communist propaganda and one of Vladimir Lenin. If the war was still going on somewhere outside his sphere of perception, surely even his own family would mention it, rather than make mountains of molehills over classes, cars and dates? Part of him wanted to just pass out, but part of him knew he would never be able to sleep until he'd solved this riddle and wracked it to its core.

Daniel opened his closet, finding only jackets and fancy clothes hanging up and boots on the floor. He checked the dresser drawers only to find ordinary clothing folded away. Staring at a full-length mirror on the inside closet door, he next checked his pockets to find a smart phone similar to the iDroidBerry. His suspicions told him he was trapped in some kind of realm unaffected by the war. If that was the case, he recalled the Internet was a thing before human infrastructure had been largely demolished by the pony forces. Using this device to access the network might be simpler than trying to use the computer over on the desk which very few people during the resistance had had thorough experience with outside of the military bureaucracy and R&D folks.

He wasn't sure what to search for, so he just typed in the word "pony". His eyes were assaulted with a smorgasbord of images of Equestrians. None of it made any sense to him. It almost felt like the early days of the invasion, when the ponies were still lulling

most of the major governments into a false sense of security. There were some textual links as well, but it was all just words, words, words. Nothing indicated a real-life war with talking ponies. Incidentally, he didn't see a single Earth pony—that is, a pony from Earth, not the Equestrian variety of the species lacking a horn or wings. A numerical value in the corner caught his eye regarding the quantity of results his search had turned him. It was quite a large number.

Even without hailing from this reality, Daniel got the innate impression he was getting nowhere. He checked the contacts portion of his phone to find a very short list. There were the members of his family, a couple of others he didn't recognize, and Thomas Taylor-Randall. He'd grown up with Tom in the same neighbourhood, so naturally they ended up in Moscow together when the war came. Without a second thought, he tried dialling him. The phone rang and rang, but the call was forwarded to an automated voice mail. Tom had even left a custom message Daniel couldn't fully comprehend, but it sounded as though it was saying, "Oy, mate, why you callin' me number? Better leave yours if you're a hot chick. Nah, better to text me on me Facebook, a'ight?"

Confounded, Daniel tried to think. Could he contact any other members of Delta Squad? He had no idea where they'd be in a world without the war against the ponies. That was the only way they had met one another. Tyrone was somewhere in Middle America. Logan fought in Afghanistan and could be either there or Australia; Daniel had no idea whether all the troops were brought home or kept on bases or something. Irish had never said he was from anywhere more specific than Ireland. Belfast? No, for all Daniel knew he'd just visited there one time to deliver daisies to a gaffer. He'd become pen pals with Nick while the latter was still living in Canada, but that was through a soldier correspondence program aimed at fostering unity amongst the human race. Could he remember Nick's address? Wait, no, Nick had been stationed at a Canadian base back then. Dammit!

He had to try something. Daniel turned on his computer, intent on trying to find his friends via the internet. His system was locked by a password, but after a few guesses, "Trotsky" and his birthday got him in. There were a slew of icons he didn't recognize. Computers during the defence against Equestria were far simpler, but "Internet Explorer" sounded like it did what he wanted. He stared at the window that popped up and saw ugly images he never asked for of people, most of whom he didn't know but some he recognized from his real life as members of the Iron Wolves Corporation.

After some thought, he typed into the address bar to search for "yellow pages for Ireland". Instead, what he got were results for reviews of a brand of Irish whiskey, pictures of leprechauns, the yellow pages for Debuke, Iowa, and advertisements for gardening tools. Frustrated, he realized he would need to narrow the scope down anyway if he hoped to find the right Colin Dwell out of an entire country.

Then he remembered Facebook, which is never pleasant. It was some kind of gathering site for desperate attention whores to read obviously fake headlines, wasn't it? Visiting the site was as simple as typing it in, and when he attempted to search for Thomas Taylor-Randall, the site somehow knew which one he wanted. It was somewhat eerie, really. "Rape-y" would be another apt word. It had to be Tom, though, because Daniel recognized his face, though the image of Tom wearing a t-shirt with a grenade on it while holding up what appeared to be a handgun inside of a high school was a tad unsettling.

Daniel scanned through some of the activity on Tom's page, but it didn't come across as particularly legible to him. What in the hell was Tom saying when he typed, "Any1 who dosent accept Trump for prez is autist cuck"? A sense of trepidation swarmed over Daniel, utterly dwarfing the pain still in his jaws. He typed a message he hoped Tom would receive, inviting him to meet up somewhere public. A park nearby. ASAP.

"I'm going out!" Daniel called as he raced out his front door. Well, *the* front door anyway.

"You?" his mother called back, not masking her disbelief.

Daniel didn't care what she had to say, and he didn't care that Tom might not show up for an hour or more. He had tried to find the others, but there were so many people in the world with the same name, and he suspected Facebook wouldn't have been Logan's thing. There was something mentally draining about that website, and the fresh air, though damp and cold, was far preferable. He walked around the park for what felt like it could be hours, though realistically he was certain it wasn't. He grew bored and tried to find a bench to sit on that wasn't wet. He gave up and just sat down on one.

Not long passed before he felt his phone buzzing in his pocket. He tugged it out in haste and held it to his ear. "Hello? Hello, hello?" He realized he wasn't receiving a call, but a text message from Tom saying "wer u at m8". Daniel had no idea what that meant. Sounding it out aloud, however, he realized Tom was desperately trying to say, "Where are you at?" and then the word "mate". Daniel looked around for any sort of landmark to convey back to him, but all he saw was a statue of a man with a rather silly moustache mounted on a majestic-looking horse. Daniel grumbled at the equine, even though it was of the Earth variety. Not feeling like moving lest they miss each other for hours, Daniel stayed put and texted Tom the general idea of his vicinity.

Tom kept him waiting a bit before showing up. It had started to drizzle. Daniel watched a dog walker rush by and thoughts of Stud weighed heavy on his heart. It was a little while after that that Daniel caught sight of Tom. Daniel ushered him over as if in a

panic. "Chill, mate. What's the deal, yo? I haven't seen you in person in ages." Tom had a kind of off-putting grin on his face. "Off-putting" is a phrase which here means "did not put Daniel at ease".

Daniel didn't know where to begin. "Can you tell me what war we're in right now?"

Tom didn't just look confused; he looked annoyed. "Uh, the war on terror? War on drugs? War on swine flu? I dunno, mate, you tell me. 'Merican government might get its citizens into war with us soon if they don't fix their shit."

"Do you remember a Logan Walker?" Daniel asked. "Tyrone Jones? Colin Dwell? Nicholas Bronson?" Tom shook his head to each one, at one point jokingly nodding his head before soon shaking it again. Daniel knew the answer to the question he was about to ask, but like directions to the bathroom when your bladder is full, he just had to ask. "So you don't remember a war against the ponies?"

Tom scoffed. "Sorry, you what, mate? Ponies? Like My Little?"

Daniel frowned, remembering the show that had aired prior to the invasion that mystified everyone to this day. "Yes, them. Trying to invade the Earth, destroy the human race."

"Are you a brony, mate?" Tom asked. Daniel quirked a brow, not having the faintest idea what the word meant. Tom laughed aloud. "Hah! Give me a break. I never expected you to be a fan of My Little Pony. That's terrible!"

Daniel's face went hot the way it does when someone is being violently unreasonable. "I do not like them. I hate the capitalist scourge that is Equestria. Please, Tom, I need you to listen to me. We were at war with them when Discord did something to me."

Tom laughed harder, even though Daniel had not said something funny. When someone is desperately telling you about events that did not transpire, it is worrisome, not humorous. Either they are delirious or lying, but either way there is something very wrong with them. "You havin' a lark, mate? Is this 'cause I beat you at Call of Duty all the time?"

"I don't—"

"I'll beat and cuck your pony army any day of the week, mate. Show up online tonight. You'll see."

"You're not listening to me."

"No, but yeah, but no, but yeah, but no because what happened was you only just oxed me out to this park and started talking about how much you love My Little Pony only it's a show for little girls, innit mate, and izzit that you can't even beats me in Call of Duty?"

Daniel felt like he was being caged in or held down and unable to even breathe let alone move. Tom was stubbornly ignoring him and mocking him at the same time. What the hell had happened to make Tom such an asshole? Why was everyone talking in such an odd manner? Daniel felt a strong urge to retreat. There were a few pushes to verbally attack Tom and yell at him, but what really could he say? He walked away and heard the scornful laughter of Tom's belligerent taunting. Even when Tom was long gone and Daniel was heading up his own walk, the confrontation rang in his ears.

Anguish only fuelled Daniel's hunger when he got home. All the troubles eating away at his mind did nothing to distract his bodily needs. When he entered the living room, he forgot about his hunger. His mother, brother and sister were occupying the couch and two recliners. Their fifty-inch flat screen was turned to an episode of *My Little Pony*. Why were they watching *that?* Why in the *hell* were they watching *that?* To think that show had lasted as long as the war had, whereas the television stations had all been annexed by Equestria in the early stages of their invasion in his reality.

He even recognized the characters. The ferocious Applejack and the comparably malevolent Rainbow Dash were running at full tilt, galloping wildly through some autumnal scenery. Their hoofbeats ached inside Daniel's head. They ran across the screen this way and that, even toward the screen. The room began to spin around Daniel as he grabbed his head. He recognized the high-pitched voice of Pinkie Pie scratching his gums. His family didn't seem fully aware of what it was they were watching. On the screen, Applejack and Rainbow Dash were hurrying at breakneck speed, colliding into a ball of aggressive smoke. Daniel screamed, "Rainbow Dash raped me!" and grabbed the nearest solid object—a slipper—and hurled it at the television screen with a bang. The screen wobbled, nearly toppling off its stand, and went blank.

"Hey!"

"What the hell?"

Now his family was pissed. Becky had stood up. James was glaring over the edge of the recliner. His mother, however, was fuming, exhaling air through her nostrils like a cartoon bull being tortured by a toreador. "You broke the TV! I'm gonna wring your neck! Go the hell to your room!" She was screaming.

Daniel went the hell to his room, his heart pounding, his face dripping with sweat, and his brain throbbing in his skull. There was iciness to the vacuous sensation in his chest. He locked the door and pressed on it to be sure it was tight, then grabbed the sheets off his bed and wrapped up in them. What the hell was happening to him? He felt like he was having a panic attack. Was this what shellshock was like? Was this what he had to look forward to if he managed to get back to and survive this war? It'd been several minutes now and he still couldn't get his breathing back to normal. He looked at his hand and found it was trembling uncontrollably. A dread that something very wrong was about to happen to his body wracked him with further worry. His mind was starting to lose all semblance of coherent thought, repeating incidents like rapid-fire mantras so fast he couldn't even keep track of them all.

Everything was wrong. This world was not his world. He was not of this world. He carried these all-too-real memories of the war, of the Equestrian invasion, of fighting the ponies and losing everything time and again. Everyone he counted on was inaccessible or some twisted version of themselves that hated his guts. Not since that ship off the coast of Hainan had Daniel ever felt so trapped.

Over time, his body became numb. He wasn't sure if he fell asleep, but it sort of felt like he had. He got up, throwing the blankets off of himself onto the floor around him. Pausing to think, he next got into bed and sat cross-legged. All the things he needed to know to contact the others had been lost from his memory in the years he spent meditating in Kyrat or in a coma, but these meditation techniques ought to help him remember. The monks had imparted with him all the benefits of mental clarity and focus through emptying his mind of all thought. He hadn't spent the last year training only to lose this ability in a matter of a couple of days. This may have been another timeline, but he still had his real memories.

Transcendental meditation is a method of meditation known for its endorsements rather than its techniques, and was purportedly founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who as a young approximately-thirty-something was apparently facing a lot of anxiety in 1950s India to push him to do so. It then grew in popularity during the 60s, a decade where a lot of religions were being created such as Scientology, and whether or not transcendental meditation (or TM as it preferred to be known in the 90s) was religious or not depended upon what gave it the best image at the time. Aimed at reducing stress, the scientific proof of its efficacy to this end has been undermined by the fact people are charged money to learn it, a universal source of stress.

It was like rebooting a computer in a sense, to get it to run more smoothly after a fresh new start because rebooting fixes every issue a computer can have. He hadn't even needed the usual mantra, which was good since he didn't want his family to hear him. In the empty void of his mind, Daniel attained peace. That was one of the very first hurdles he had to pass: To accept the pursuit of peace before the war had been won. Once he had attained the level of focus he needed, he swam through the ocean of nothingness in search of information. He didn't try to remember the phone numbers of his friends in Delta Squad. Once they had all moved to Russia and joined the Human Resistance, it was logical they would have changed. None of them would believe in the Equestrian invasion and the war against the ponies. He needed to make people see.

Somewhere in his mind, he called forth the names and backgrounds of people he had frequently reported to. He recollected the history of the war, some of which he had been interviewed for to give details from his own mouth. These war reporters had had their backgrounds thoroughly checked, and though they were not details that were crucial to the operation of Daniel's military career, he was able to draw out the details he needed.

"Daniel! Dinner!" yelled his mother in her yelling voice. It burrowed like a spear into his concentration, and Daniel awoke from his trance. He left his bedroom before he even realized he might not want to. Another shock he was not fully prepared for awaited him when he entered the dining room: Peter Williams, his father, was sitting at the head of the table with his back to Daniel, fixing his plate of bangers and mash.

Daniel's heart trembled to see his father alive once more. He forgot how emotionally distant his father was. He forgot how his father had pushed him into this war after James's death. He only remembered how his father had been cut down in battle at the fall of Moscow, betrayed by his own subordinates. Daniel reached over and hugged his father. "I miss you, Dad."

Peter was already chewing on food. He grunted at Daniel, peering sideways at his son. "Hmph. If you broke that television, you're going to have to pay for a new one." Peter Williams was a high-ranking military bureaucrat who pulled in over a hundred k a year, although it was only in European money where they had to overcharge for things to get by.

Daniel let go of his father. He wasn't sure he could bear to eat dinner down here with his family. His dead family, filling their plates around the table as they had done so very long ago. Daniel felt like he had died and gone some place, but that place was very sombre and out of reach. It wasn't Hell, but it wasn't quite Heaven, either. Again, he remembered the feelings of his coma. He wanted nothing more than to join them; his brother, his sister, his father; but he couldn't. He had to be happy enough just knowing that somewhere, in some alternate world such as this, they were still alright. They weren't *his* family, but they were alright. He asked permission to go eat in his room and was excused.

He ate at his computer, and, using his father's credit card he had nicked from Peter’s pocket, bought himself a plane ticket to the Americas. That was the story he gave of how he found me.

Urbanization is a shithole. The cramped and crowded buildings render the streets claustrophobic cluster-fucks of navigation. The people are superstitious, accusatory, and spoiled with self-pitying stories of dangerous and unconventional childhoods. I couldn't figure out how in the hell Daniel Williams, a young man from the UK, could find me in this blighted mess. I'd been sitting on the stoop of this house whose exterior was clearly compensating for its interior trying to get some fresh air. I'd rather not go into too much detail of why I needed it. There was nothing to look at but high rises and traffic congestion, and there was this guy who looked like a kid clearly approaching me. I remember thinking, *Dammit, he's done it to me again.*

He wasn't a bad-looking guy to be fair, but he looked like a nice guy in a hell of a sour mood that would give certain lemon trees a run for their produce. He just came up and asked me, probably because like I to him, I just had this strange sense that this person was looking for me. "Are you Semeny Licket?"

God I hated that name. You're not supposed to call a person by their penname out loud. I thought it was funny at the time I picked it. A name for stuff people would say I probably shouldn't be writing. People who then turn around and watch exploitative trash like *Human Centipede* or *Freddy Got Fingered.* People who think *Cards Against Humanity* is "lol" so random funny. I digress a lot. Sorry.

I regurgitated some excuse my incompetent college education had fed me. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights grants me freedom of speech, so if you have issue with something I've written..." I wasn't even sure if the US or Samoa had ever gotten around to signing that declaration while they were making guns and cookies.

"No, no, I need you to write something for me," he said.

"Um." Not a very choice answer for someone supposedly dealing in words, but then conversation was always my weak suit. I'm a writer, not an improv artist, and I'm not saying I'm a good one, either. "I guess that depends. Who the hell are you?"

He introduced himself by name and where he'd come from. "I just flew in from the UK."

"And boy are your arms tired," I replied before I could shut my stupid self up.

"What?"

"Never mind. You picked a hell of a time to immigrate. I take it you didn't tell anybody if you were Muslim."

"Huh? Why?"

I gawked at him. I had no idea of the story he was about to feed me, that he was supposed to be from some kind of alternate dimension or something completely impossible. "The president enacted a travel ban like two years ago. I'm surprised anybody in their right mind would wanna come to this country anymore." I knew I shouldn't have said that last bit. It was dangerous to border on sedition, but there’s something you ought to keep in mind. If you ever ride past a car accident on a busy highway, don't look at it. Wanting to change the subject, I brought him back on topic. "What did you want me to write?"

So he told me what he wanted me to write. I think I took a deep breath when I saw where it was going. By a truly random encounter, he showed me some of the notes he'd been scribbling, ostensibly on the plane over. He explained to me the premise of the human race on the brink of destruction at the hands—er, hooves—of the characters from *My Little Pony.* "You know the show *My Little Pony?"* he asked me.

I'd heard of it. It was kind of ubiquitous for a time for the sake of irony. "Killer ponies? From *My Little Pony?* That show with the little talking ponies?"

"You don't like it, do you?"

I could tell it bothered him, but I hadn't really given it a thought in more years than I could remember off the top of my head. "I could take it or leave it. It's just a TV show."

I could actually see him swallowing his pride before continuing on about the things these ponies had done in the story he wanted me to tell. It all sounded a bit gruesome and unnecessarily graphic and made me uncomfortable for several reasons. I'd be digressing 'til the moon's orbit decayed if I explained what those reasons were. He and I may have had our differences from the start, but if I really gave a crap about writing, then I thought (at the time anyway) that I needed to play the consummate professional. It hasn't failed me yet, when I can manage it. Still, I had my doubts.

Daniel continued speaking before he'd said even a fraction of what he wanted to tell me. "I mean, where I'm coming from, these ponies are unflinchingly evil."

I didn't want to turn down a job that was falling right into my lap, but I've never been one to brook extremism. From my perspective, I had to offer temperance lest I ended up working for a maniac. Still, there was that penname, and audiences can only understand the extremes. "I suppose that's one point of view, but it is just a cartoon. Like it or dislike it, it doesn't really matter. Worship it or hate it, though, I mean, that's a bit much. Either extreme gets the same results: People frothing at the mouth and losing sleep when they could just let be if only they were honest with themselves."

"Plus they're capitalist barbarians," he added as if that changed my mind about something.

"Yeah, that's how it goes. People who can't keep integrity supplant it with money. Tell me again, where exactly are you coming from? I mean like, why do you want this written?"

He just looked inward on himself, indicating he couldn't come up with an answer. I'm not usually astute enough to notice those things, so maybe I was just projecting what I thought I'd feel if I was in his position. The difference was I don't usually think things through, and he'd given this a lot of thought. I was already fishing for themes to work into the veritable books he wanted me to craft for him, since a good tale is never just one layer of story. I'm not sure what provoked him to tell me his next big reveal.

"This is an alternate reality. Where I come from, the ponies have invaded the Earth and decimated the human population."

"Oh!" I said. What the hell else do you say to that? Laugh and insult him? It wasn't funny and there was no call to be rude. I gave him the benefit of the doubt in that I didn't think he even believed what he just said. Some people find the easiest way to explain a story through different methods. Some people use analogies, some use blatantly obvious metaphor that gets mistaken for generalization, others try a little too hard to immerse you.

"The human race is unified into a single resistance under soviet communism, and you're a war reporter."

I nodded carefully. "A bold choice. Not familiar with Russia or politics, but fiction is about ideas, not regurgitating facts. Not sure about the reporter thing, though. I like the angle, but I won't do the self-insert thing. It's egotistical and banal." I narrowed my eyes in a scrutinizing gesture. "I still don't understand how you found me. I mean, I got your text, but I'm only out here now because the sociopath that's been fooling around with me is in there with his self-satisfied drug dealer right now who's telling disgusting stories about how he once drove across state lines in a blizzard to have underage sex which, by the way, is ephebophilia, even if he was only seventeen then. All because his friend wouldn't visit him today because of the weather. You know some guy got killed by a plow today because of the snow?" I shook my head in annoyance and tried to distract myself by opening my handheld video game console back up.

"What is that?" he asked me. He could see it plainly, I knew.

I looked at him in silence. "It's a Nintendo 3DS," I said. It was then I first suspected he must really be from an alternate dimension. I could never have admitted I was convinced of something so ridiculous, but he really wasn't adding up.

"What do you know of Discord?" he asked me.

"He's basically typecast John DeLancie but with a wider range of special effects."

"Huh? He's somehow trapped me here, and I think that if I get the story out, I may be able to bring myself back to reality."

It sounded dubious to me. "You know, I don't think I need to know all that just to write this for you. Sounds dangerously a little too much like J. K. Rowling's bizarre solipsism. 'Just because it's in your head doesn't mean it isn't real.' What kind of psychosis is she feeding?"

Somehow, Daniel followed the important things I was saying. Either he was smart or just goal-oriented. "So you'll do it?" he asked.

I shut my console, stuck it in my pocket, and shook my head. "I don't do fan fiction. Maybe as a parody or a satire, but using other people's intellectual properties is presumptuous, and, in a way, a form of censorship via obfuscation. Frankly I'd have a stronger literary justification than the legitimate showrunners hired to exploit people's children to sell cheap merch for Hasbro." I translated for him in case he couldn't keep up: "Consumerist. Like you were getting at."

"I don't have anyone else to turn to."

“Why can’t you finish the story yourself? It’s simple. Start with a hook by presenting gibberish as rational, rationalize it with hyperbolic bureaucracy, and then thread things together with stolen ideas and present caricatures you loathe as patronizing affection. Then when you get bored, stuff in special effects for a climax, and send everyone home. Writing isn't a real skill anyway; not now any wannabe hack can get a TV show and a memoir published. Nobody knows what good writing is anyway, because there’s always some poser kissing the asses of billowing sad sacks like Maya Anjelou, obfuscating pornographers like Stephen King, or whiny little posers like Kurt Vonnegut. You ever see *Waiting for Godot*? It was terrible like watching an Irishman masturbate all over a piece of paper.”

"I need someone tied to my experiences back in the real world. I have my reasons," he said.

Instead of objecting to some hypothetical world he must have dreamt up being "reality", I kept listing off my objections because a good client is a good listener. An okay client at least has patience, even if he won't listen. "The other thing I'm worried about is this seditious stuff about Putin and Trump. A lot of people are butt hurt about that stuff right now, about how some people think an election is invalid if a foreign government interferes with it, or that an unintelligent orange racist is unbefitting of the principles of truth, liberty, and equality or what have you. I mean, you seem to genuinely have even less a concept of current events than I do, if such a thing is even possible, but people are smug and aren't likely to believe it just happened to turn out that way."

"That's why the penname though, right?" he asked.

I canted my head sideways in a sort of "yes and no" gesture. "The past year has been fucked up. Lots of websites are now banned from American ISPs. A lot of late-night talk show comedian hacks got rounded up and executed for treason. Even that jerk with the talented yes-man musician who bragged to Bernie Sanders about being disgustingly wealthy. It was a wonder he had an audience. There's a gravity to the situation that's deepened by the fact nobody's willing to admit it exists. Now with certain governments getting buddy-buddy, I can't help but be reminded of Vinzer Deling's post-parade speech from Final Fantasy VIII." I sort of half hoped my obscure references would entice him to seek someone else to fulfil his macabre request, but I had my reasons to accept it anyway.

If he wasn't persistent, that would've been the end of it. "So you're not gonna do it?"

I exhaled. “Do I get paid?”

Daniel gave me a look I would have to describe as sheepish, a word which here means “like a sheep not pulling its head completely up from grazing.” “I can't really afford to. I kind of borrowed the money to fly here.”

I exchanged his sheepish look for a scrutinizing look. Not that I gave a damn. What was I going to do about his financial decisions? I sighed again, which I admit was rather a bad habit. Sorry. “Alright, that's fine. I could use the portfolio material anyway, even if this is going to be some weird parody clause thing. The worst I have to worry about is sassback from the Hub not understanding they only want to control how people respond to them. What I wanna know is: What do you get out of it?”

He got this sort of dreamy smile on his face that worried me. “Freedom and equality under the banner of communism.”

“Uh-huh.” I didn't mention that communism is something from the 1950s. I also didn't mention all the problems with this sort of hopelessly idealistic philosophy, mainly because I didn't want to get drawn into some discussion on politics, and also because I don't know a damn thing about politics or economics, and I care even less. I'm an empiricist; I'm limited by that which I can personally interact with and observe. “That's a very...lofty goal. I don't get how that's supposed to work, though. Care to enlighten me? What are people going to get out of a world that ordinarily depends on money?”

Daniel looked a little taken aback, but then he stared off into the distance again. “Necessity. Nothing can stop the human will to survive. And why will we survive? We'll abandon all the frivolous industries. People will instead be brought together by community. Neighbourhoods will gather for meals, breaking bread with one another regardless of the differences that kept them apart in the past. Families will remember how being together is enough. People's achievements will be to provide, whether that be food or medical care or shelter, or expression through the disenfranchised arts. We'll be able to give our lives meaning again.”

I was a little surprised he knew the word “disenfranchised”. I live it, and I couldn't quote you the definition. His words did make me think, though. I imagined neighbours, like he said, gathering around a picnic table or something on a nice day, just talking with no violent urges between them. I couldn't quite hear in my head what they were talking about, but it was pleasant like sunshine, peaceful like rain.

I almost stopped myself from sighing again. "That actually sounds really nice. Kind of like the early days of the internet, before commercialism replaced ingenuity.”

Daniel told me, “We don’t have public internet anymore.”

I digested this then in one breath I both sighed and said, “That’s enviable. No more unqualified success, I suppose.” Shaking my head in regret of what I was about to say, I continued. “I'll do it, and I'll tell you for why. I'm a writer. I'm not published, not yet, but I'm an actual writer because it's what I do. I'm a coffee writer, not a liquor writer, but even still I don't quite get on with other literary types. In my experience, they just want to boast about jet setting, make up codes, and generally behave like elitist poseurs. You don't get that with me. I'm not cheap, though. I'm not gonna undervalue your vision.

“See, in the town where I grew up, there were a string of arsons. When I was young, there were these students everybody looked up to, which meant they were jerks. They were in the volunteer fire department, but high on the fact they could do no wrong to their flock of sycophants, they set fire to a building one night in hopes of being the first ones on the scene to put it out and become big heroes. They got caught seen rushing *away* from the scene.

“Maybe a decade before that, a case of condominium insurance arson. Back in the seventies, industrial insurance arson. A lot of local businesses pulled out because they have issues with paying for fire safety to save lives. Not long ago from now, a member of a fire department pled guilty to arson and burglary. And I personally witnessed two firefighters going at fisticuffs in the next town over in their fire department parking lot with bottles of beer littering their feet. Actual fisticuffs like you see in 1920s boxing posters. These other literary types won't help me out with these investigations though, because I don't give a rat's ass about Edgar Guest or whatever names they like to drop without evidence.”

“That...that sounds pretty heavy?” Daniel guessed.

I took a deep breath because once again I could tell he wasn't seeing where I was going with this. “I'm illustrating that I understand what it's like to be threatened by forces I can't control, and that I won’t waste my time believing in heroes that don’t exist. But these notes you gave me are a mess. I'm gonna have to edit these down to know what's being said here."

"I was kind of in a rush on the plane."

"So what sort of story is this? Low sci-fi military epic? Not that it needs to be pegged, but it writes faster when you know how to present it."

His whole body language brightened up when my intent set in. "So you really are going to do it?" He was getting a little bit repetitious.

"I said as much. Um. Wait. What's this stuff here about you and Rainbow Dash in a mosque? Dude, I can't write that." I grimaced.

He blushed angrily. "That's what happened. I wish I could undo it, but I need to get back to my reality and stop Discord from trying to make me forget it all."

"Alright, alright, I get it already." I’d been told worse things by too many people, and so have you. "Well, if I can proofread all this violence and such, I can write anything. Besides, I've grown up with people into worse stuff. The only condition is I finish the story. I need to bring a project to its closure." It didn't feel as though anything significant had really been made following our agreement then and there, but I was intrigued by this guy's story. For such a simple-minded premise, there had been so much effort and thought crammed into the storyline, and it was a challenge to do it enough justice in ending the tale.

"I want nothing more than to bring this war to a close," he told me, I think. My memory's a bit sketchy at the best of times. I wonder whatever happened to that guy.

"Daniel? Daniel, are you okay?" Logan was smacking Daniel repeatedly on the face, trying to get him to wake up. He gave him one really good slap.

Daniel stirred. "We've gotta finish it."

"He's coming around!" Tom said. "Dammit, why can't one of us have been a medic?"

"Don't look at me," said Nick. "I'm a mechanic, not a doctor."

"Here, let me try slapping him awake." Irish raised his hand high.

Tom snatched Daniel away roughly, cradling his head in both hands. "Mate, he's already coming around. Lay off!" Daniel stirred again then opened his eyes. Tom rolled his eyes in relief. "Thank goodness! I thought we'd have to wait another year for you to wake up."

Daniel blinked hard to try forcing his eyes open wider. "I had a dream. The war was over, but everybody was an asshole."

"Sounds like a fair trade-off to me," Logan said. "Come on, we haven't much farther to go."

Daniel sat up. "We have got no time to lose. I think I have figured out a way to stop Discord." Everybody turned and balked at this declaration, but Daniel had another. "Problem is, I believe he already knows we are here."

12. Chaos Theory

Breathing shallow. Pulse racing. Organs throbbing. He could feel his organs throbbing. His eyes felt like they might pop out of their sockets at any time. His vision blurred at the edges and appeared to zoom in and out at the same time. Which direction was up anymore? Someone was here. Someone was pressing something cold to his chest. It soothed him at first, but then it felt like an icy dagger jabbing into him. Now someone was speaking, spewing out medical jargon about "the patient". Was it him? Was he the patient?

"I don't think the pony will survive the night. He's bound to go into cardiac arrest at any moment," said Dr Heartwell.

Tree dry-heaved and rolled over. He almost fell to the floor, but the doctor and his assistant rolled him back onto the bench. Right. His name was Tree Barker. Or was it? His head was feverish and swimming. He stared at the doctor a good long moment. He passed out for only a second before letting out a horrific bellow of pain. His skeleton felt as though it wanted to jump out of his skin. Every bone was grinding against every other bone and trying to push its way out of his body.

The pain stopped for a second, but he was still in grave discomfort. He was hyperventilating and realized he was sobbing. He remembered he'd been kept alive to share information with his people. His own kind. The pony? That was him. Now he remembered. He remembered this pain and these convulsions. He was dying. He was dying, but he still had news to impart.

"Discord," he gasped. "Tell Daniel. There are no rules. Might be better, just blow up the tower. Blow it up. Let the next wave of...of ponies find their own way back in. Invade then." Oh, how he tried to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come.

Nick had been welding at the trap door overhead for a good hour at least. The door itself didn't seem to be stuck, but something was holding it down from above, and Nick hoped to melt through it between the cracks of the door. The others were growing impatient, and so was he, even though he knew that welding required patience. He clicked off his torch and flipped up his visor. "You guys feel like giving it another go?"

"Yeah, I'm bored!" said Irish. Using the wall ladder, a step stool, and a couple other supplies they looted from a station closet, Irish, Nick, Tom and Tyrone worked together to push the door upwards. It was heavier than the weight of Pinkie Pie after gorging on too many goddamn cakes.

"Keep pushing! I can feel it budging!" said Tyrone.

"You know, I think it may be weakened enough by now for a few blast charges," said Nick. "Wanna give it a go?"

Tyrone nodded. Tom and Irish got out of the way, though Irish not before giving the door a swift punch of frustration. The squad watched as Nick and Tyrone set up miniature explosive charges into the corner cracks of the overhead door. Ushered back a few yards, they detonated. There was a blast that made the door jump, and glittering particles drifted down from above. Once again they gathered under the egress to try and force the door open. They could hear crumbling as they budged the door up almost an inch. "On the count of three," Tom said.

"Five. Four. Three! Heave ho!"

There was loud crumbling as the door lifted away. Broken bits of thick ice tumbled over them as they busted their way into the basement of the Human Resistance headquarters building. Like Irish and Tyrone had reminded one another before, the subbasement was a lot further down than Stalin's secret tunnels. The squad found the storage room flooded and subsequently frozen, but though they slipped and banged a little, they made their way over toward the stairs leading up. Irish tried to see if he could open up a couple of MREs, but the containers were frozen shut. When they all reached the ground floor of HRHQ, they all felt a bit more at home.

Truth be told, they'd only each been at HRHQ a few times outside of the Fall of Moscow, predominantly for administrative purposes. Even Daniel, whose father had worked there, had only visited a couple of times beyond that, and those visits never ended up being particularly memorable. Even with all the starry-eyed days of their early membership in the Human Resistance, the horrors of that devastation remained fresh in their minds (save Nick's). What didn't help their morale was the long-stale stench of death and the remnant corpses of soldiers, human and pony, which littered the lobby. Some of them remembered from their search that most of these men and women had been little more than new recruits with scarcely as much training under their belts as Delta Squad themselves had had before their first mission.

Their tainted memories were interrupted by the sound of a television switching on. More peculiar than simply being disconnected from any electrical grid, a flat-screen from the lobby used to monitor news reports switched on from the rubble where it lay half-tilted. A raucous theme like a stereotypical news channel jingle rang out until the TV had Delta Squad's attention. On the screen, sitting behind a desk was Discord wearing a boring three-piece suit. He whirled around in his seat to face his audience, peering through the television as though he could actually see them. Could he?

"Reporting to you live from Discord's Moscow Tower, this just in, Steve, Delta Squad makes its triumphant return to the Human Resistance HQ."

The scene cut away to a different angle of Discord sitting at the opposite end of the desk, making believe there were multiples of himself talking to one another. "Perhaps they're hyped up for this weekend's game, Steve."

"Yes, that's right, Steve. Discord has invited the six mainstays to his illustrious Dump Tower to play a little board game he likes to call 'Candy Mouse-opoly Cribcheesi'."

"That's sure to be flying off store shelves this Christmas season, Steve. And what will Delta Squad be playing for?"

"Let's ask Steve!"

This time the camera turned to the side where Discord stood in a third location dressed in a backwards baseball cap and boxer shorts that were pulled high above his baggy pants that threatened to drop to his ankles at any moment. "They play for the right to shoot me! So c'mon, little human buddies. In the meantime, we can play root ball and basebeer!" The sounds of gunshots rang out as Discord feigned being killed and falling out of view.

The camera cut back to the first instance of Discord. "Another tragic rapper dies so young. Must be Tuesday!"

"It can't be Tuesday. Yesterday was Tuesday."

"But today is Tuesday, too."

Delta Squad had had enough. Irish shouted at the screen. "Just shut up and show your ass down here so we can kill you already!"

Discord clicked his tongue. "You are the most impatient humans I have ever had the misfortune of meeting. You are the weakest to think. Goodbye." With that, the screen clicked off, leaving Delta Squad up in arms.

Daniel clenched his teeth. "That room was my father's office. There's something he wants us to see in there."

"Daniel, are you sure?" Logan asked. "That's got to be a trap. It's got to be very painful for you."

"If I can't cope with the reminder of my father's death, I'll never be able to face Discord. For now, we have to play the game by his rules."

Chaos Theory

Delta Squad advanced as one upstairs to Peter Williams' office. Daniel took the lead, though Tom tried to keep beside him. Logan kept the rear watch, since walking upstairs backwards was easiest for him. They passed through the shot-up and slashed corridor leading into their destination, tromping on top of pony bones while carefully avoiding stepping on any human skeletons. There wasn't much room in there, so Logan and Irish kept a lookout behind them.

There was no sign of Discord. There was, however, the skeleton of Peter Williams. Daniel could feel a shudder tear through him. Tom reassured Daniel by squeezing his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Daniel was quick to nod. "It sort of doesn't feel real. I mean, he's only a skeleton. If I didn't remember how I found him dead right here in this position, I'd have less reason to think this was him." He inhaled deeply and took a moment.

Tyrone poked through the window which led into the darkened interior of a bar. He gestured for Nick's attention. "What say we scout out ahead?"

"Actually, I'd like a quick word alone with Daniel, if that's alright," said Nick.

"Alright. Tom, you wanna come with?"

"Yeah, okay." Tom gave a longing look toward Daniel in hopes his friend would truly be alright before stepping through the window after Tyrone. The two clicked on the lights on their guns.

Daniel pried his eyes away from his father's remains. "Uh, so what is it?" he asked Nick.

Nick was silent as well for a moment as though he too found it difficult to pull himself together. "It's...I'm sorry about Becky."

Daniel exhaled. "Like I said, I came to terms with that over the past year. I've had a long time to meditate on everything I've lost. The monks helped a lot, and I don't blame you for what the ponies did to you both."

"I hope this doesn't seem untoward, but then it's only a cliché that friends don't like friends romancing their siblings. Thing is, after everything in Cuba, she really was my light. I had every intention of marrying her when we got back to Moscow."

Daniel looked at up Nick with a very blank expression. Not angry. Not sad exactly. He lamented Nick's loss in a way where neither needed to demonstrate physically how the other felt about it. They shared that empathically. "I would have been honoured to have you for a brother-in-law, Nick."

Nick smiled. "She was wonderful. Smart. Vivacious. Bit nerdy." He laughed away a tear at that last remark. "You and I would've been family, you know?"

Daniel stared hard at Nick and felt his own eyes welling up once more. "We are family. The six of us."

Nick almost looked like he couldn't take the sound of that, but then he smiled. "Brothers in arms 'til the day we die, I guess."

"Guys, come here!" Tyrone called. "We found the Ivory Inn. The actual goddamn Ivory Inn!"

"Hear that?" Irish asked. "Maybe they've still got some booze intact!"

"It'll be irradiated, idiot. Don't drink it," Logan said.

"Aw, damn. You coming anyway?"

"Yeah, I got your six." Logan said, using a phrase which here means he'd support his friend. He heard Irish follow Daniel and Nick through the window. The instant he turned around, he found the door to the office shut and Discord blocking his route. Logan was so stunned he forgot to shoot.

"I say, it must be even harder to put on a necktie," Discord said. "Ah ah ah! Don't shoot just yet, or else your ape-descendant friends will come running and interrupt us before we've had a chance to chitchat."

"I've got nothing to talk over with you, freak." Logan kept his gun ready.

"I'm impressed you've learned to aim so well with that thing considering your arms bend the other way now. I promise there's no need to wave it around like that yet. I promise not to kill any of you until you reach my final chamber. After all, you lot deserve it."

"Getting real bored real quick now, mate. Spit it out."

Discord spat a wad of pea soup-flavoured gum onto Logan's boot. Logan tried to scrape it off on the wall in disgust as Discord spoke his piece. "As you may no doubt have guessed from this magnificent construct of mine or from Daniel's flattering gossip about me, I possess stupendous, magnificent powers granted to me by the gods for transgressions on the no-magic rule of the war. True, they should have gone to all pony kind, but I got greedy, and I had a certain tyrannical centaur friend to thank for it. You know, you don't have to go through life always looking back. I can fix that for you." With a twirl of a finger, Discord's own head spun around a full three-hundred and sixty degrees on his shoulders. "You'll stop being your clumsy self as you are now. Your chronic neck pains will disappear. You won't need to chew your food into such small bites. Most important of all, you won't feel like such a broken green army man someone trod on. It'll be almost as if that vampony never resurrected you as her thrall after that shaving accident in Africa."

"Nothing doing. What's the catch, aside from knowing Equestrian filth like you were the one to fix me?"

"See, you say that, but I'm a good judge of character. You folks aren't really as dumb as you all let on, though you do let on pretty well. You've seen more war than these five whelps put together. You know better than to shoot first and ask questions later, and you do so want the constant waking torture of being a backwards-headed freak to be over. All it'll cost is you picking which one of your allies will die."

Logan scoffed, but Discord tapped his chin in a thoughtful gesture and deliberated further. "Irish has always been a rash idiot. That kind of carelessness is a weakness in a group. Nick seems like he could deal with being put out of his misery, and he'd love to be with—what was her name? Betty? Bernice? Svetlana? He'd love to be with her again. Tyrone actually has had it easiest out of all of you. He's sort of an outsider in that regard. He's lost the least out of all of you. He understands it the least. Tom. Tom, Tom, superfluous Tom. He turned traitor pretty easy for a bit of decent pay, joining the IWC. I wonder how much he really enjoyed the taste of that. Easier hours, better pay, less likely to get discharged and drafted so often. Of course, I'd never expect you to choose Daniel. Or would you? I mean, without him, you're the one in charge. Second in command. His number one. Remember the time he lost his cool in Frank and Deirdre's Polish jungle shack? Then he got all brainwashed by Rainbow Dash and you had to take charge again. And who's to say if your mission in Africa had succeeded and Daniel hadn't awoken from his coma, you wouldn't have been in charge of a reunited Delta Squad? After all, he lived because you died, in a sense. Would Tom have grabbed those resurrection syringes? Turnabout's only fair play, after all. Perhaps it's not too far-fetched to suggest you would've saved Moscow if you'd been in charge."

Through all this speech, Logan remained quiet. His arms slackened holding his gun up. "How about the Delta Squad member I pick is myself?"

"Hah! That sounded every bit as enjoyable as I expected." Discord laughed. "Then nobody would really get what they wanted out of this deal. There'd be no point in fixing you, and I couldn't watch you betray your dysfunctional comrades. Just remember that not choosing isn't really a choice."

"It absolutely is! Everyone always has the choice to refrain. The choice to abstain. Nobody can take that away from them." Logan cocked and readied his gun once more, but Discord had vanished in a twinkle of light.

Delta Squad looked around the hollow remnants of what was once the Ivory Inn. The wooden beams looked less saturated in colour somehow. Most were horribly bent and broken, and there was a gaping portion of the outermost wall that had been patched up, likely damages resulting from the Battle of Moscow a year ago. With the lights off, the furniture strewn around like broken logs, and the bar almost devoid of stock, the place felt dead. It was so far detached from what it once was that even their memories of festive times spent were too far to reach.

Logan had caught up with the others who turned to attention at what he had to say. "Bad news. Discord's not gonna make this easy for us. I think he's gonna try and play all sorts of nasty tricks with our heads, though I doubt they're all gonna be talking us to death."

"What do you mean?" Tyrone asked.

"He tried to cut me in on a deal. I was about to tell him where to shove it when he pissed off."

"I guess that's to be expected," Nick said. "What's bugging me though is where the heck is Burke Squad? From what I've read and been told, Discord's the sort of villain to dress their corpses up to show off to us. At the very least, they deserved dignity."

"You're right, Nick. We should go look for them," Daniel said. "We might find clues as to what's in store for us." The group concurred to this plan and broke off into pairs. Daniel and Logan would be the fastest in returning down below to search the rest of HRHQ in a hurry. The other two groups would head farther up, with Irish and Nick forming one group, and Tom and Tyrone forming the other. They agreed to meet back in the Ivory Inn in half an hour's time.

"Think we have enough supplies should we run into trouble?" Logan asked.

Daniel thought. "We'll just have to pick up ammunition lying around as we go."

When the four heading up arrived at the upside-down hotel, Tyrone suggested that he and Tom continue on upward. "This section just goes straight up it seems like, but if we're lookin' for Burke Squad, we've got a lot of ground to cover." They bid farewell to Irish and Nick.

Irish kicked a chandelier. "Sure, now we're stuck checking every single door of this madhouse."

"There are no shortcuts, but they're only hotel rooms. We only need to take quick glances in each one. You check that side, I'll check this one."

Nick balanced thoroughness and speed when checking each hotel room, though leaping through every door because they no longer touched the "floor" was tiresome. Irish spent his first few rooms dicking around, a phrase which here means "not taking things seriously and doing little of useful consequence", but he soon grew bored. "Man, what a mess," he observed. "Everything just fell on the floor. Er, wait, I guess that's the ceiling we're walking on. How the bloody heck am I supposed to take a leak?"

"You go in your suit. They're designed not to be taken off," Nick reminded him.

"Oh yeah. Gross," Irish said. Nick said nothing about Irish's incontinence throughout the war. Irish puttered about some more, then shone his flashlight on a massive pile of ice cubes in a nook of the hallway. He pointed the light upwards to see the ice machine was affixed to the floor above them. "Hey, these ice cubes haven't melted yet?"

"It's cold as shit, you know?" Nick passed by Irish for the second time as Irish alternated between rushing and dilly-dallying. They waited to ascend to the next floor of the upside-down hotel together, and Irish was more consistently impatient with his search. "Are you even looking properly?" asked Nick when he noticed Irish was already four suites ahead of him.

"Yeah," Irish lied.

Nick could sense the weight of something careening down atop him from above. He only saw a flash of it from his eyes before it was on him. He tried ducking clumsily to the floor and rolling out of the way, but he came to an abrupt halt. There was a loud clang of metal and Irish nearly wet himself as he leapt almost a foot into the air. "What happened?" His knees shook with fear. Despite being a trained marine and used to the sound of guns going off, he had been startled by the banging. Nick did not respond.

Irish saw a dome-shaped cage with even, criss-crossed bars. The prone figure within could only be Nick, judging by the bold yellow-orange radiation suit. He stepped closer. "Nick! Are you okay?"

Nick groaned and stirred. Irish shuddered. He couldn't tell if Nick had all his limbs. He was too focused on his ally to have a proper look. Nick pushed up off the ground and stood, banging the back of his head on the lower portion of the cage at its circumference. "Ow, dag. I'm alright. Fuck, that hurt. Felt like I got pinned to the ground. Must've been the force generated by the weight of this dumb object." He gave the metal cage a kick then stepped back into its centre. Something rattled under his foot, but something else had grabbed his attention. "Irish, behind you!"

Irish turned an about face. Lumbering out from one of the rooms with a lazy leap was a very deranged-looking pony, even for a pony. It was of indeterminate sex about the size of Big McIntosh. It had weird skin of many colours like an irregular patchwork quilt, and its eyes were different colours. Two legs were shorter than the others, and it had one wing on its left side. It was groaning and drooling a green substance from its mouth. "Bloody fuck, is that a zompony?" Irish asked. "Gross!" He fired his Ruger Mark II into the pony's forehead.

The pony just laughed. It was a hoarse, wheezy laugh, and more green fluid bubbled out from its wicked little leer. "Discord did this to me. I'm his p-patchwork p-pony. Blorf. He rearranged my organs so you can't just take them out with your silly little gun."

"Motherfucker," Irish swore in Irish. The patchwork pony shambled towards him.

"Out of the way!" Nick whipped out his Mag-7. "I'll get him with this!" At the same moment the patchwork pony lunged, Irish skirted sideways. Nick was busy trying to manipulate the muzzle of the gun through one of the square-ish holes of the cage. The pony snapped its jaws around the shotgun and yanked it right out from the cage and Nick's hands.

"Mousetrap!" Discord had appeared within the cage behind Nick, loudly singing some commercial jingle. "Pop-o-matic™ pops the dice. Roll a twenty, save your friend's life!"

Nick ran at Discord with a raised fist, but there wasn't much room under the dome to do that. Discord's bendy-wendy body edged to one side, sticking out one foot as he went to trip Nick. Nick banged into the side of the cage and fell over, his head landing near the small plastic dome his foot had stepped on earlier. Inside was a twenty-sided die.

Discord crouched low and clicked his tongue. "Poor Saint Nicholas. It took his friends ages to find him, and even then it was just some strangers who rescued him from a life of indentured farm work. You must feel betrayed. Or worse yet, how can you truly look Daniel in the eye after failing to protect his sister? I should think you couldn't bear to be around your old friends anymore, let alone act so cordial."

"I won't play your games, monster," Nick said.

"It's hard to see you glaring at me through that headpiece. Perhaps you better take it off," Discord suggested. "Play a game with me. See if you can defeat this monster."

Nick couldn't defeat the pony monster because his other gun required space to mount and setup. As their conversation transpired, Irish had been evading the pony's erratic movements. He knew bludgeoning the pony to death would require getting too close for comfort, and his other weapon had splash damage. The pony was staying too close to either him or Nick's cage to make use of it.

Discord wormed his way out of the cage by squeezing his body out through a hole. "Too bad for you, Irish. Your comrade doesn't take you seriously enough to help you. Doesn't that bug you?" Discord sprawled atop the cage, resting his head against his lion paw. Irish responded by firing his gun at the draconequus, but Discord's head split in half and bent to either side before forming back together again. "This entire war they've been doing naught but laughing at you, poking fun at your incontinence and mishaps."

Irish tried to ignore Discord. When he raised his gun to fire at the snarling pony, his pants fell down around his ankles. Luckily the radiation suits were double-layered so he wasn't exposed, but he tripped over backwards, landing hard on his buttocks. Discord giggled at this, wearing an expression of whimsical delight on his ugly face. Irish gave a yell. "Argh! What the hell is happening?"

"Your friends don't believe in you, Irish. Why do you think they even keep you around? So they can push your face into the mud and feel better about themselves on this harsh and unforgiving journey," said Discord.

"You know something, dick-face? Ever since I was *crucified* and *burned alive*, I haven't really given half a damn if my friends laugh at me. The only one playing a joke on me is you, the asshole who brought me back from the dead, all so my torment could continue!"

Discord sneered then poked his head through at Nick, who had been struggling in vain to reach his Mag-7. "At least you'll have a nice show to watch before you dehydrate to death in there," Discord said. "Ah-ah, you're scowling again."

Nick stopped glaring at Discord and grabbed the Pop-o-Matic™. Giving it a firm push with his thumbs, it produced a loud snapping sound. The die inside rattled around and landed inside a small groove with the five showing up. "It's a five!" Nick shouted.

Irish scooted back on his rear end, but the patchwork pony caught up to him and stomped on his groin. Though his flesh had been horribly burned away, this still hurt a bit. He bit his bottom lip and made a sound like a deflating balloon. Swinging his leg, he knocked the pony off its hooves, allowing him time to scramble to his feet.

Nick popped the die again. It landed on five again. "It's another five!" he shouted. Irish raised his gun to fire at the patchwork pony. Though the bullet went through its torso where its heart should have been, the recoil knocked Irish's arm back so he clubbed himself with his own gun.

"What in the fuck? That never effing happens!" Irish stomped his feet. The pony had stood again and gave chase around the cage dome.

Nick once more popped the die. "It's five *again.* Is this just rigged? Is that the game, bastard?"

Discord rolled his eyes as a picture of innocence, drumming his claws on the cage. "Mm, nope."

Irish ran around and around the cage, not noticing that after a few laps the pony stopped galloping after him to grin at him in derision. When Irish noticed this, his body was flailing wildly. He tripped and his head went right through the wall. "Stop rolling fives, goddammit!" After much struggling, Irish popped his head back out of the wall.

"I'm sorry, it's not like I can decide what comes up," Nick said. Irish noticed Nick's Mag-7 on the ground. He dove to pick it up. Nick clicked down the Pop-o-Matic™, his eyes widening as he read the die. The patchwork pony had already seen the shotgun and was galloping towards it. This time, the die came up twenty. He stared at it a moment, then an elated smile crossed his face as he looked up. He said, softly, "Jumanji."

Irish shoved the shotgun toward the patchwork pony. He shoved it into the pony's mouth and blew its fucking head off. Bullet fragments tore through its cranium with such force that some of the threads keeping its mismatched parts together started to come undone.

Still the thing would not die. It stumbled around, tottering from side to side. Nick passed Irish his machete through the bars, and Irish was only too glad to sever more of the threads by stabbing the blade in between the patches of the pony. Piece by piece it fell apart until it was nothing but a heap of disconnected organs and limbs. The patchwork pony could no longer act.

"Why didn't you have your machete?" Nick asked.

"I forgot it, okay?" said Irish. "Let's get you the fuck outta there. Come on." Both men tried to grab the bars and lift one side up, groaning. "Agh! No good," Irish said. "It feels like it's cutting through my fingers!"

"Better try a tool. Don't want to rip the radiation suit. This alloy's pretty dense. It would take a while to burn through it with my welder. See if you can find a crowbar or something. Don't use your weapon or anything—it's not designed as a lever and could break."

"Got it."

"Oh, and one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Leave me my gun. I don't trust this pile of pony skin."

At the same time Irish and Nick were being tormented by Discord, Tom and Tyrone were facing their own set of obstacles. The farther up they climbed, the more erratic the layout of Discord's tower became. Every place possessed a vague familiarity about it, but was difficult to recognize at first glance. "Possessed" is a word which usually (but not here) means when a ghost takes control of someone or something. Of course, we all know something as silly as a ghost could never exist.

The section of tower above the upside-down hotel was roughly quartered from four separate buildings. One resembled some sort of overly-decorated religious temple or some such. Another had the decrepit structure of one of the temporary buildings set up in Hainan at the time of their ignominious battle, though it had been shored up for purposes of structural integrity. Especially weird to see was the segment of hospital cut apart from its original building like someone had sliced a piece of cake.

"What the ruddy hell are we supposed to do?" Tom asked. "Parkour up there?"

"Naw, look." Tyrone gestured with his gun. "There's stairs here and there. We just gotta see what connects to what."

Steam gushed out of a drain in the floor in front of them. It produced a thick, vertical cloud of cream-coloured smoke, obscuring the entrance of Discord who seemed to come from nowhere. "Stop me if you've heard this one before," he said. "Brzap!"

Tom and Tyrone had both drawn their guns, but they paused in confusion. "What?" They didn't neglect their trigger fingers.

"I'm shocked you didn't get that one, Dr Wattson," Discord said to Tom, addressing him by the wrong name. He next looked to Tyrone. "Surely Sherlock Ohms here could tell you what happens if you tread on an electrified floor tile, or into a suit of booby trapped power armour."

Tyrone winced in annoyance. "Dammit, man, why don't you just *say* the floor's electric-trapped?"

"Our suits contain rubber polymers or whatever, right? We're insulated." Tom started to take a bold step forward. Tyrone stopped him with an arm.

Discord adopted a morbid tone. "Non-conductive materials are only so good up to a point. Enough voltage can push through you faster than diarrhoea after a bean feast."

Tyrone raised his gun toward Discord's face and booped him on the nose. "Good thing we don't have to play your stupid, childish games and can just shoot you dead right here."

Discord pushed the muzzle of Tyrone's rifle away from his muzzle with a claw. "Oh, Mr Jones. Monsieur Jones. Signore Jones-a. I'm not here as your enemy. I impart to Delta Squad a fitness test to qualify them to take on the pony hordes."

Tom squinted. "Why?"

"It's a very complicated reason, you see, a long, long time ago in a galaxy—actually, no, I just thought it'd be super chaotic to have two entire races going at it for eons." He snorted laughter to himself then lifted off the ground via the improbable aid of his dinky little wings. "If you want to pass, you have but to answer my questions. Correct answers will let you move ahead a prime number of spaces. At the top is my lair where I sleep and eat and generally gad about in fabulosity."

"What in the hell is a prime number?" Tyrone asked. Tom shrugged.

Discord let out an exasperated sigh. "Would you prefer it you move ahead as many spaces as you have seconds left to answer the question?" His voice was getting very faint now. "It's simple, really. Maybe you've both noticed how nothing has gone quite right for ol' Delly Squad since, oh, when was it? Ah yes, the Battle of Hainan."

"That's for damn sure," Tyrone said.

"What? Really?" asked Tom. "We fell out of a plane our first mission."

"Yeah, but after that for a long while, we did pretty alright. It's been Hainan that was our first catastrophic failure. Then Daniel got hypnotized or whatever, then New York got destroyed in a flood, and everything went to absolute shit when we got split apart."

"I may have given you the answer," Discord called down with a megaphone, "but that was your first question. Come, come, we haven't got all day. You agreed within a second, so move ahead nine squares."

Tom and Tyrone looked around. There were giant tiles on the floor, and the buildings whose floors did not have these had very obvious stone slabs laid out on them. The problem was, they didn't know which way to go. There were multiple directions available to them. "The stairs this way are blocked off at the top," Tyrone noted. "But I see a ladder. There's a ladder over toward that corner. Maybe you should head that way."

Tom concurred, and the pair cast devious eyes upward. They had to watch their feet to ensure they walked the right number of squares. Tyrone had already just reached his ladder, but Tom's was farther off. He kept wondering if he'd screwed up by not taking the shortest possible route. It occurred to him he could try jumping diagonally. He did. When he landed, his feet felt a dozen powerful static shocks zipping up into them, chasing him backward until he instinctively fled to the square he'd just been on.

"That was a warning because you didn't know that rule yet," Discord's voice said. "Now you do, but you're welcome to try it again. It could only cost you your life, and you got that for free!"

Tom realized right then this was some form of torment. Though he hadn't been chained up on a boat like Daniel, or been through even a fraction of the hells Nick had experienced, Tom had an inkling of what torture meant. He'd been beat up before, plenty of times, but that wasn't exactly torture. Torture wasn't always physical. Sometimes it was mental, like watching your best friend lose his mind then have to protect him from people who thought he'd be better off dead. Sometimes it was losing your own mind after thinking people you were forming a life with were murdered in cold blood, and then later waking up to find they'd betrayed you. Sometimes the chains were in the mind, paralyzing your thought process and drowning you in ruminations of the inevitable regrets life leaves absolutely everyone. Pain comes in so many flavours and intensities and manifests both tangibly and intangibly, and while some are worse than others, it's never right to write someone off by comparison. Tom was just thinking then that he deserved another turn in the proverbial snake pit, an idea that would prove ironic soon enough.

Tyrone climbed up into a portion of the Hainan section. A stand for maps and overhead projector backdrops unfurled a screen that read: "What would have clinched victory for the humans at Hainan?" As soon as he finished reading it, several clocks and timers located around the walls, some just numerical displays in general, began counting down.

Tyrone frowned. "That's not a quiz question! That's a hypothetical!"

Discord's megaphone sounded back to him. "Just answer it and you can move on."

Tyrone grumbled then realized there was a time limit. "If there weren't no goddamn dragon, that's for sure."

All the timers stopped and the two marines moved up a few more squares. Tom was able to climb up a ladder, and Tyrone's route was generous in leading him into the hospital section. He looked around for another board or screen, then noticed an x-ray display hum to life. One of the x-rays was just a message that read: "If there were no goddamn dragon, what would have changed in the battle of Hainan?"

Tyrone made a pained face. "Nobody eaten! Nothing catch on fire! Daniel not separated!" He blurted these out as fast as he could.

"That was pretty quick," Tom noted. He rushed a few tiles forward before indecision stopped him. Which way was fastest to the next ladder, and did he really want to go that way? He looked over his shoulder and sneered at another ladder to the opposite side of the room in the nonspecific temple area. Resigning himself to this direction, he hurried the remainder of his move.

The tile beneath his feet crumbled away only to be replaced by the snapping face of an enormous green viper, larger than anything Tom had ever seen in his life. "Augh, fuck, no!" Tom kicked it in the head, but lost his footing on the edge of the floor. He fell, grabbing around the serpent's neck, then slid down the length of its body to the floor below. "Aw, *shit!*"

Tyrone was able to see this through a gap between the buildings. "It's okay, Tom. I'll try to stay fast, even though these questions aren't proper."

A whiteboard near Tyrone read in reappearing ink, "After winning at Hainan, which pony generals would be dead?"

"Um, that's easy. Uh, uh. Rarity. Applejack. Uh. Goddammit. Big...McIntosh?" Tyrone cursed at how long it took him to remember the names of old enemies. He was surprised he named the last one at all.

"Hm, you think you would've gotten Rarity as well? Maybe some of them ran away," Discord said.

"Man, how would you know? It didn't happen! It's pointless to think about."

"True, but the answer I was looking for was 'Twilight Sparkle'. After all, she wouldn't come back to life, would she?"

Tyrone tried in vain to find the expletive that would suit his annoyance. "Now what? We stuck here forever?"

"I hope not," shouted Tom. "This snake isn't moving for some reason, but I still don't trust it. Christ! How do you find a snake this big?" When he looked around to get his bearings, he found some graffiti scrawled across the wall of the temple. "Hey, I found the next question! 'If Delta Squad won Hainan, what would their next move have been?' I think I'll let you have that one."

"Gee, thanks. Well, I think we would've still boarded that Equestrian ship. I don't remember seeing Rainbow Dash in that battle."

"Argh, I'm still so far off from getting back to where I was!" Tom said. "Not that I wanna be on the business end of this fucking snake."

"Hold tight, Tom. I'm doing the best I can." Tyrone let out a groan of annoyance. He really, really hated Discord right now. Why was the same insipid dragon...thing that helped them in Moscow now royally messing with them? When Tyrone looked down at the space he ended up on, he saw a giant pink maw with rows of sharp teeth and two curved, needle-like fangs sticking out at him. He was so surprised that when he went to swear, he said completely benign words instead, like "badger" and "mushroom".

Tom shouted out to Tyrone out of panicked concern. He took aim at the lower body of the snake, but most of it was obscured behind a wall. The giant serpent slithered up and grappled Tyrone in a hurry, coiling all about his body. Tom again took aim but feared he would hit Tyrone by accident. Tyrone was bound up by the ever-tightening rings of dark, scaly flesh. Every time he unintentionally exhaled, it would squeeze that much tighter, greedily pushing every last inch of life out of him. He could feel the compression of heavy, muscular weight upon his ribcage, and his head was clutched in such a way that he was staring right into the hideous, gaping maw of dark, tubular flesh, a place that depicted nature an ugly, alien hell-scape. Tom reminded himself he specialized as a sniper. He could do this. Now Tyrone was teetering backwards, unable to keep standing with this mass upon him.

"Oh, fuck it!" Tom ran. The first tile was still a valid space for him. The next, not so much. When one leg hit its surface, a painful jolt froze his shin in place to the knee. He let out a yowl of pain, but somehow the rest of his body tumbled forward. Too bad for him this next tile was electrocuted as well. This time the hard snap of electricity launched Tom upward, and he banged half his body into the wooden ladder leading up to the Hainan hut section. Here the floor was dull carpet, and the tiles didn't cover the entirety of the floor. Tom hesitated for a second, worrying about the shock, worrying about his friend. He leapt into the crannies between the tiles which were one foot wide and realized to his amazement that Discord hadn't electrocuted the space in between. Something ticked Tom's suspicions: Was this an intentional joke of some sort?

Tom wondered how much time he had before Tyrone would be killed by the snake. He was about to run out onto another stretch of electric tiles, but noticed something else. He dashed over to a large wooden desk and tried sliding it over in the direction of Tyrone using brute force and adrenaline. His feet got shocked from the sides, but Tom found this easy to ignore. He grabbed a chair and threw it over the desk where it smashed and toppled over. He hoped this bridge would be enough. He clambered onto the desk and leapt carelessly onto the chair. By some miracle, he remained standing on top of the broken furniture, within eyeshot of Tyrone and the serpent.

At first Tom was going to shoot the snake's long, colossal body, but reminded himself the bullet could very well travel through its entire breadth and into Tyrone at this proximity. The head was hissing and dripping venom onto Tyrone's visor. Tom aimed and fired. The snake lunged and crammed its oversized maw around Tyrone's head. Had he missed? Then it uncoiled rapidly. Shuddering, it backed away, and Tom noticed he had managed to hit it square in the brain. He fired again. He fired again. The snake flopped over, dying steadily, and Tyrone was now able to shove it off of him, though wheezing for breath.

"What a motherfucking waste," Tyrone said.

"Yeah, I wasted it alright." Tom grinned. At first, he hadn't realized the tiles were no longer electrified. He was standing beside Tyrone and helping him up.

"I meant our time's up. We gotta head back down and regroup. We may not have found Burke Squad, but we know where Discord is."

"Yeah, maybe." Tom gazed upward to the ceiling, wondering how many more levels this stupid puzzle had left.

When Delta Squad returned to the Ivory Inn, they were in for a nasty welcome wagon. Daniel and Logan arrived first, then Irish and Nick and lastly Tom and Tyrone. Daniel read a birthday card that had been left on the table then threw it back down in disgust.

Sitting around that table were the corpses of Burke Squad, still wearing their suits. Peering through the visors, Logan confirmed the lifeless, forlorn expressions of their former comrades, the very people they had passed the torch onto not long ago. He gave a start when he saw the eerie, sprawling grin stretching out Jinn's face.

Daniel sat on the edge of the table and hung his head as he tried to muster his energy. Tom picked up the card to read it, but Daniel just said aloud what its gist was. "Discord says 'family game night' is over. He wants us to meet him upstairs in the 'principal's office' pronto. We're in 'big trouble' and it's 'time to replace the pawns on the board'."

For a moment, the members of Delta Squad rued the disdainful fate of Burke Squad. To them, it felt a little like they'd already spent their second chance, and they only had their first chance left. They had been brought together by the efforts of these six valiant soldiers, and that had to console them they were still fighting from beyond the grave.

Tyrone cocked his gun, and everyone else followed suit, cocking their various weapons. "Looks like we'll lead the way."

Above the quartered chamber, Delta Squad found theirselves back in the open air above Moscow. Before them stretched a winding staircase that, through bizarre architecture and forced perspective, appeared to lead infinitely into the heavens. Below them was the desolation that had once been a major city and stronghold guarding the human race against their alien invaders. Now, for reasons beyond scientific reasoning, the world was bathed in a nauseous green aurora, and there was a kind of listless music in the air that might just have been ordinary noise.

"Trippy," Irish remarked.

Tyrone hushed him. "Shut up, this is a very dramatic moment."

The door was even bigger than the second-largest door any of them had ever seen, and it was attached to a broken remnant of the Winter Palace from Saint Petersburg. It was the darkest crimson mahogany (or some damn type of wood), studded with metal spikes parallel to the arched outline. Decorating the outermost edge was a series of skulls from all different sorts of species, two of which were recognizable as human and unicorn. The others were all manner of fantastical and ghastly, and some resembled the phrenology of Earth creatures but with ever so noticeable differences. Really, it was best not to focus too long on them, because one felt like one might go mad.

They approached and found a piece of college-ruled paper taped to the door that read, "Girl scouts leave cookies at doorstep." Tossing the foolish note aside, they looked up to the handles. Even standing on one another's shoulders, they could never hope to reach them. There was, however, a doorbell placed at a convenient elbow height. Looking at one another with begrudging looks, Daniel gave a sigh and pushed it. A little chipper tune played out, to which Tyrone asked, "Is that 'Dixie'?"

The doors gasped open like one eagerly awaiting a long-expected package for delivery. Dry ice smoke issued forth from within as the doors pulled inward, scraping with hollow intonation along a smooth, cold floor. The chamber within was nearly insoluble with darkness with an eerie off-white greenish hue. Great columns and archways stood, monumenting the darkness beyond them. Far to either side were banquet tables set with all manner of feasts and fondue fountains. Straight ahead, smack dab in the middle, was an ominous throne floating half a foot off the floor, and sitting in it like a king at court was the object of Delta Squad's enmity: Discord himself. For some reason, he had a faucet sticking out of his forehead. He turned the tap, pouring out chocolate milk into a champagne glass with an olive in it. He turned off the tap and the faucet vanished in a colourful twinkle, then he proceeded to drink, or try at least. The glass was rigged and dribbled down his chin.

With his other hand, or paw, he snapped. Strobe lights lit up all around. A mirrored ball descended from the ceiling. Tiles lit up here and there underfoot, including a large piano built into the floor. Spotlights wavered all around, and drippy pop music was playing throughout the room, echoing down the darkened corridors. "Welcome to your last prom night, gents! And here we are without any chaperones. Come, join me! Who gets to be my prom king?"

Daniel shot his angriest glower at Discord. "Stop gushing, Discord! You've been tried and found guilty of war crimes: Murder. Genocide. Attempted genocide. Tampering with official and secret war records. Other crimes too numerous to list here."

"I plead guilty by reason of insanity."

"I just have one thing to say," said Daniel. "That's—buh, um. Die!" The rest of Delta Squad joined him in training their guns on their enemy. They pulled their triggers, ready to eliminate this Equestrian threat once and for all. Instead, flowers sprouted from the nozzles. There were collective gasps as they realized.

"I'm doing this for you, you know. You may be marines here on Earth, but compared to Equestria, you're all classified 4-F. Do you even know what a pony is? A miserable little pile of candy. It was not by my hoof I was once again given mobility, but that 'Kaiser' Celestia thought me a fantastic weapon. But no matter, have at you!" Discord stood up off his floaty throne and threw his wine glass of chocolate milk to the floor where it burst into a brief flame. The pop music was cast away by a sharp chord and replaced with some ear-grindingly hyperactive and cluttered techno-dubstep hybrid music. Delta Squad decidedly did not need it playing right that very moment.

Discord pointed a claw upward. Nick glanced upward. "Hit the deck!" The jet whistle of a massive object falling down on their heads was heard. Delta Squad dove out of the way as a series of giant, blocky objects smashed into the floor from above, each one a different shape comprised of four enormous cubes. One long one stabbed down near Daniel, then fell over onto its side, again narrowly missing landing on him.

"Oh, I can already tell you're going to miss me when I'm gone," Discord deadpanned.

Logan was first to his feet, brandishing his favourite machete. "On the contrary, I find you a cheap and shamelessly ingratiating villain." Discord snapped his fingers, summoning forth from the darkness a giant yellow ball with black shapes on it resembling eyes and a mouth. Logan dodged to the side, but the orb swerved toward him. He tried the other direction with equally miserable luck, because it followed him again. It was almost upon him now, forcing him to flee only a few steps ahead of it, as it chased him past the tables and into the darkness. As Discord grabbed his belly and pointed and laughed at this spectacle, Irish crept up on him from behind with his own knife drawn. A loud, garish chord played out as he trod blindly on the floor piano. He cursed to himself as Discord whipped around. The vile draconequus spun about and danced merrily on the opposite end of the embedded keyboard, then stomped hard on a note, sending a shockwave ripple traveling down its length which in turn flung Irish clear over the other set of tables and landing with a painful thud outside the reach of the lights.

The four remaining members of Delta Squad brandished their other guns—automatic rifles—and spread out to flank Discord from three positions. A smug smirk from his weird overbite grin flashed to each of them in turn. Pulling from behind his back a runed blade that could not have been there before, he held the strange, U-shaped sword high above his head. The four marines fired upon him at different angles, but instead of hitting him, every single bullet curved upward and clanged like iron filings to the magnetic blade. They stopped firing when they noticed the inefficacy of their attack. Discord swiped the magnet blade at the air and the bullets whizzed out in all directions away from him. Tom had sensed this retaliation beforehand and was already in position to throw the table down so he and Daniel could hide behind it. Nick rolled behind a pillar while dragging his bulky kit between himself and Discord to absorb the bullets. Tyrone was not so lucky. He took several bullets in the leg, puncturing his radiation suit. He let out a pained cry as he dragged himself beneath a table then desperately tried folding his baggy suit over the holes.

Discord clapped his asymmetrical paws together. "Ooh, ooh! Is it my turn to attack now? I'll invite every Tom, Nick and Danny to a banquet of madness! Opa!" Delta Squad could hear the clinking of tableware. When they each peeked out of their hiding spots, they noticed the place settings, even those carrying dishes of food, were bouncing around through the air, rattling against one another. As they watched, they wracked their minds in desperation to guess what might come next, but they didn't have to think for long. Salad, shrimp, dessert and entree forks stuck into the ground in a row right near Tom, very nearly catching him in the leg and groin. Daniel looked to Tyrone, fearing for his ally, but when he rushed out, ducking beneath the dancing dinnerware, a gravy boat spilled hot broth right under his boot and he went slipping across the floor. Several plates smashed against various surfaces of the room into potential shrapnel and hurtled at the luckless Delta Squad members. Nick, however, snatched a plate out of the air and flung it like a Frisbee toward Discord's neck. The draconequus's concentration was broken and all the floating materials smashed to the floor in a great big mess, but he managed to dodge by yanking his head down between his shoulders.

When Discord's head popped back up into view, it was clad in a grey padded helmet that fitted around under his chin. He waved one arm in a circle, and as he pulled it up before his torso, he was zipping up a matching suit of armour. "The world is filled with the sounds of whales farting, and you want to protect all this?" He gave his other arm a shake, holding out what looked like a large grenade launcher. Carrying it in both arms, he marched toward Nick, expelling a cloud of white smoke. Daniel scurried over beside Tyrone, and the two of them could feel the cold from there. Nick had no idea which side of the pillar to escape out from, but unfortunately for him, he chose wrong. Discord enveloped him in smoke. When it cleared and Discord's armour and gun puffed away, Nick was left encased in frost that immobilized his every joint.

"Have you got any weapons left?" Daniel asked Tyrone.

Tyrone grunted as he wrapped gauze around his leg to keep the folds of his suit in place. "Just some hand grenades."

Tom peered over the edge of the table he felled only to gasp at the sight of Discord advancing slowly upon him. "I'm starting to get bored now," Discord said. "Maybe you should see for yourselves what a charming and welcoming place Equestria is!" Unable to stifle a quick cackle, he pulled out the little black box the Equestrians had been using to travel back and forth between Earth and their own dimension. Cranking the handle with a little tune, it popped open and expelled a swirling, colourful black portal between two pillars behind his throne. The air inside the room rushed inwards, including the green radioactive smoke that lingered about.

Daniel shouted for the monster's attention. "Oy, dung-face! Eat incendiary death!" He hurled his last hope with all his might straight at their enemy.

Discord spun about on his soles with a manic grin. "Don't mind if I do!" He struck a dramatic pose, opening his jaws wide. His awaiting throat confidently swallowed down the projectile whole. After a moment, he looked perplexed. "I think you forgot to pull the ring out."

"Oh, no, that was just a bottle of water," Daniel said. He contented himself on the fleeting glimpse of confusion in Discord's inhuman eyes. "Mineral water, with rare Cuban mushrooms. The components of the desolator bomb that petrifies ponies and chews up their DNA from the inside out."

"Hm. Well played, human. Well played. But you're still not ready, not by a long shot!" Discord struck a triumphant pose once more as his body soon hardened from the stomach outward, radiating cold, slate grey stone across his surface. In a few seconds' time, he was encased from top to bottom in stone, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to feel. As if by some intelligent design, or perhaps a last-ditch motion on his part, the statue Discord scraped across the floor and was swept into the portal where it appeared to spaghettify and disappear.

Logan and Irish had returned from the darkness. "Alright!" Irish said. "We can go storm the ponies now! Last stop, Equestria! Let's kick some quadruped arse!" He ran off at top speed toward the portal.

"Irish, no! Stop!" Daniel screamed. He grabbed his friend roughly by the arm and yanked him back as hard as he could so that Irish crashed to the floor.

"Ow! What the ruddy hell'd you do that for?"

"Discord opened that portal. For all we can tell, it's a trap!"

Delta Squad watched in a kind of mental panic, a paralyzing indecision as the vortex swirled and sucked. Finally it came to a close with a whoosh, and the box clicked itself shut.

Logan and Nick bent down to inspect Tyrone's wounds and to help him up. Tom and Irish stepped up beside Daniel who had stooped to pluck the palm-sized device from the ground. Was this really it? Could this really take him to his revenge? No, not revenge. Not anymore. This was too important for that now. Survival was close at hand. For the first time since their lesson in humility at Hainan, Delta Squad felt as if victory could actually be in their grasp, and yet at the same time they each wondered just what in the hell they would find on the other side of that unknowable void. So much had changed over the course of the past six years that felt like a lifetime. They'd lost so much: So many loved ones, their homes. Occasionally they had gained some things, but this right now felt as if they had finally gained some hope. Sometimes change is for the better, and in time, everything changes.

ACT II: EQUESTRIA

MLGVMLP

13. Final Prologue

By now, this grim war has come to its fateful end. At the time of this writing, the adventures of Delta Squad and the many lives they encountered are over. Some stories are told to entertain or thrill, others to cajole or praise. Some stories are written to record what once happened in hopes those memories may last a little bit longer. Other stories are written as cautionary tales, such as the ever-famous metaphor of Pandora's Box. The story goes, as it has been passed down, that a woman named Pandora opened a box that contained all the evils in the world, and once unleashed, the only thing left over was a faint, glimmering light of hope. The metaphor is tired because it can apply to so many things (mostly because it is such a stunningly vague one): Cleaning out a fridge, for example. Yet it is pertinent here because the Human Resistance was puzzling over a more literal box that could very well contain catastrophic evils and renewed devastation, yet beneath it all was the slim hope they might have a chance to eradicate their unflinching and remorseless enemies once and for all. The Human Resistance may not have been thinking of the legend of Pandora's Box, but they were aware this box could inflict great harm on them if they did not take the utmost care.

The black box device which had been retrieved from Discord's tower was subjected to every manner of test their scientists had to offer, and they had plenty of time on their hands now that it seemed at last every iota borne of Equestria had been eliminated from the face of the Earth. Even the monster sightings had significantly died down, and a submarine had been revitalized and dispatched to scour the oceans for any sea ponies. So far, there was no trace of any of them. There were only a few straggling land creatures that were easily dispatched now that the HR knew how to deal with them. There was always the dread that they could come back, but one of the first things the Human Resistance was confident in from their recent research was that they could determine if a portal opened somewhere in a wide vicinity. The projection was that it would still take much longer to fully explore all of the device's secrets, and they were still not yet ready to use a live test subject. They did wonder how in the heck one could determine the exit point of to wherever the portal hypothetically led.

In the meantime, Delta Squad monitored the physical therapy of their friend, Tyrone Jones, whose recuperation after his leg wound was taking a bit longer than expected. That was not even odd in comparison to the man who shared his convalescence.

He remembered feeling his eyes open, but seeing only darkness. The buzzing from his unremembered dreams separated into monotone beeps. He tried to raise an arm but found it wouldn't move all the way. He tried harder, but someone had restrained him. Then the light returned to his eyes when something was unravelled from around his face. It stung. He was connected by IVs and lying in a hospital bed with doctors poking and prodding him. They stuck him with needles, but he was too numb to feel much of it. Before he knew it, it was time to sleep again.

In dreams, his memories came back to him. He was dimly aware this took place over the course of multiple nights. Vague times as a child. Being attacked by another child in preschool. Shouting matches with his bigoted father. The choking struggle of things to say and nobody to say them to. Then the war came, and he wasn't sure if this was a memory or just dreams being dreams, because the ponies were too alien to him. He remembered all the rejections and being pushed into the ponies' awaiting hooves. He remembered the experiments and the new life he led felling trees for lumber. A realization he wasn't safe soon trickled into that second life, and then came a moment when he forgot what it was like not to fear for his mortal safety.

Then he died, but he couldn't remember the name of that life. The only name that made sense to him right now was Trey Bunker. It took a week for him to feel his fingers again and another week to be able to move them so much as a twitch.

Tyrone's leg had been in pretty sorry shape by the time Delta Squad had carried him back down the tower and through the tunnels to the rendezvous point, but watching Trey's constant struggle made his own feel easy. He came to forget that Trey had once been a pony who had before been a human when he saw him learning to be spoon-fed, and becoming violently ill at ingesting meat for the first time in years. The doctors prescribed him a strict vegetarian diet.

Trey didn't even have any visitors. Tyrone met with his Delta Squad comrades one day, and the topic of Trey invariably came up. Tyrone had been comparing their physical therapies, and they all ended up mulling over their opinions of the man. "You know, I never thought I could trust him, but seeing what the guy's put himself through, it feels more like he was just some man imprisoned by those ponies and released."

"I wonder if he has to be toilet trained again," said Irish. Logan gave him a swift jab in the ribs. "What? Horses just crap all over the place wherever, whenever." His allies just shook their heads, shrugged, or buried their faces in their palms.

"I for one hope he gets well soon," Daniel said. "Joseph Matskevich died for whatever he can tell us about Equestria, and we need to be as prepared as we can be."

"Perhaps I can help." Delta Squad turned to face the woman who had spoken: Jenny Everywhere. She offered them a quaint smile, both sympathetic and stirring. "I hope you don't mind, but R&D wants to call a meeting with the top brass, and it's partly my behest. Y'know, whenever you're ready. There are a couple of things I think you're gonna like."

Daniel was a bit taken aback. He didn't really mind that briefings were being called when he was the one in charge. Far from it. He'd been waiting to hear from Research and Development. It just caught him off-guard was all.

Daniel postponed the R&D briefing for a couple of hours. When the time came, Delta Squad boarded Lenin Base which had been undergoing severe repairs after its battle on the outskirts of Ground Zero among other modifications. Franz and Jenny were waiting in the corridor before the lift that led down into Franz's laboratory. Jenny gave them a wave. "Hey there, guys. Uh, Franz here convinced me he wants to show you his project first, so I'll meet you all back on the Red October, third adjunct cargo bay."

As she walked off, Daniel asked Franz, "You don't mean Lenin Base is fully shielded against radiation, do you?"

Franz shook his head as they all boarded the lift on a journey downwards. "No, no, no. I got bored of that halfway when I was inspired to finish my personal pet project. It's something that will undoubtedly be essential for your mission to the pony dimension."

"You don't mean..?" Logan started to ask.

"Mmhm. The Goliaths," Franz said.

"Right. What are those?" asked Tom.

"They're fully protective and highly specialized heavy artillery armoured suits," explained Logan. "They were adapted from the abandoned research on the Silverbacks that Russian R&D was working on."

Franz frowned. "I wanted to explain them."

Both Irish and Tyrone grimaced. "Aw, hell no, not those things again!" They still retained bad memories of their usage in the Battle of Moscow which had been a jolting experience in and of itself.

"You're gonna have to learn to like 'em if you wanna stop Equestria," Franz said with a smirk. "These suits are self-sustaining against almost any environment. You can't go walking into an active volcano, and they'll run out of oxygen without an environment to filter from, but they ought to provide a meritous defence against the majority of projections about how this alternate dimension works. It's possible the very laws of physics aren't even the same over there."

"What? How the hell does that work?" asked Tyrone. "What decides the laws of physics?"

Franz shrugged. "We just don't know. We have worked out a lot of the kinks of the previous models. Their weapons are more modular now, they're ten times as durable, they're more ergonomic..."

"They're less sabotaged," Irish hoped.

The lift came to a stop. "Actually, they do contain a self-destruct mechanism so that the technology won't fall into the wrong hands. Or hooves, as it were," said Franz. That didn't exactly make them feel more comfortable. He next led them into his laboratory proper, still rattling off features like adjusting boot lifts to enable jumping manoeuvres, a heads-up display on the visor interiors, the ability to retain a month's supply of environmentally synthesized water and recycled nutrition and so forth. Delta Squad weren't really listening because by that point they were captivated by the engineering marvels that stood before them. Six grand robot suits stood lined up in a row along the wall, each designed in different colours and patterns, each personalized, each codenamed and equipped with different gear. Franz introduced each one of them in turn.

Tyrone's Goliath was codenamed "The Inescapable Truth". It was painted in a black and grey camou print with blue stars decorating its right shoulder. The weapon on its right hand was a giant three-pronged claw like one used to see in an arcade machine of dubious honour, with a smaller, four-pronged claw in its palm. It was capable of some rather high-sounding number of PSI crushing pressure. The weapon on its left hand was a heat-seeking missile launcher. The overall focus on the Inescapable Truth was for chasing down elusive enemies.

The Goliath dedicated to Logan was named "Fealty". With a bold yellow paint job with dark brown speckling and silver highlights on its feet and joints, its design focus was on impairing enemy targets. It came equipped with a bolas launcher with smoke grenades for weights on its right arm and for its left arm a heavy assault rifle that was loaded with high-density rounds that could weigh down an enemy not immediately ripped to shreds.

Tom's Goliath was nicknamed "Deliverance" and had a deep blue paint job with dark green splotches resembling continents on the torso. His suit's intended tactic was single-target focus. His left weapon was a harpoon gun with four rounds that had cables attached. The cables could be detached or reeled in like a winch. The right weapon was the second-largest sniper rifle Tom had ever seen, and according to Franz it was capable of engraving the name of its target on each bullet as it fired, all according to Tom's speech, which Tom felt was a nice touch.

"Scorn & Spite" was the codename of Irish's Goliath. It had a very green design with a subtle pattern resembling the clubs suit of playing cards. With a focus on crowd control, it came with a cluster bomb bazooka for the right arm and for the left arm a capacitor chaingun. The bazooka would fire rounds that would explode and bounce around to create further explosions. The chaingun fired rounds that acted like capacitors, providing one jolt of electricity each. Irish didn't like the sound of that, though he could see the potential in really damaging a pony with it.

Nick's Goliath, "Mercy Kill", was white with two bold red vertical stripes that ran over the shoulders and down the sides of the front and back of the torso. This was a more technical suit, utilizing a flaming chainsaw on its right arm and a gun that fired high-velocity armour-piercing rounds on its left. The main idea behind it was breaking through an enemy's or even a structure's defences.

Daniel's Goliath was the "Nirvana". It was red with thin gold stripes and a very small hammer and sickle insignia behind and atop its left shoulder. Because it was assumed the leader would be targeted the most, the Nirvana was designed with close-quarters combat in mind. Its right weapon was a high-intensity photon laser beam with an adjustable output setting. Its left weapon was a flak shotgun.

Each Goliath shared a few features, such as the Human Resistance insignia hidden under the right boot. Under the right arm weapons was a manipulator hand, and under the left a standard minigun with explosive rounds. There was an awesome and expensive amount of firepower put into each of these machines. There were a few drawbacks, mainly with overheating and power consumption, and they were not easy to get in or out of.

Franz repeatedly begged Delta Squad to pay attention to his instructions on how the HUD worked. On his laptop with stickers on it, he was running an emulation of the HUD software that would display on the visors. Meters and numerical figures tracked things like ammunition, power, heat, water and food. Targeting reticules tracked eye movements which assisted in aiming, a feature which could be toggled on or off. There were keyboard halves inside each arm allowing Delta Squad to wirelessly communicate through text even though they each had radios, though none of them were spectacular typists anyway, even the ones that still had all their fingers left. The machines could also relay environmental conditions to a very limited extent, and report structural integrity. As Franz went on to rave about wanting to install heat and night vision modes, though he sounded fatigued by this point, Delta Squad worried about another drawback in the difficulty in controlling these metal beasts. Wouldn't they be hard to move in and make it impossible to see what their hands were doing? True, they seemed strong and many-featured, but the ambitious nature of their design was all a bit much to take in. It was confounding, to say the least. Franz assured them they would get in plenty of practice before their mission, not that departure was strictly up to him. Daniel also thought that his squad would seriously have to pick up the pace on their exercise routine to make moving around in such heavy artillery more feasible.

Noticing that his comrades were a bit intimidated by the mechs, and by extension of this put off by their complications, Daniel commended Franz Bandelt for his work. "It's a miracle to have these all up and operational after, what, a year?"

Franz appeared shifty-eyed. "I admit, it's been a little longer than that. We've been working from the Silverback designs and specs for a while now. Not long into their development, it was decided they would remain prototypes."

Daniel took a deep breath. "Nobody ever said saving the Earth was going to be easy. Now that I have seen these, I dread to think how we would have taken on all of Equestria without."

Since the warehouse once used by Jinn was not strictly part of the mobile body of Lenin Base, the black box's investigation was handled in one of the Red October's cargo bays. Here, all sorts of science-y stuff had been set up. Tables and computers and wires littered the place in an awful mess. Toward the far end of the room on another table sat the black box, hooked up to all manner of probes and wires. Behind it stood a large ring-shaped structure that Tyrone thought looked a little too similar to a device central to a certain science fiction franchise the others had never even heard about.

Jenny Everywhere had been staring at the ring when Delta Squad entered. She turned and smiled at them when they approached. "Okay, this is gonna be kind of hard to explain, and it's gonna be rather a long explanation to boot, so bear with me, okay?"

"I ain't promising nothing," Irish said.

"Just try," Logan said, annoyed. "Today's had more than enough talking. We just gotta get through it."

Jenny frowned, but continued. "Just please hear me out all the way through. I'm not from your universe. I'm not from this 'Equestria' either. There are alternate universes, and alternate universes even have alternate dimensions to them, like a square gaining sides to make a cube. I'm not exactly sure what Equestria could be, but maybe it's something like a pocket universe within your universe. Not my hypothesis, by the way."

"Sorry, I know you said not to interrupt, but this is a bit much. You're from another universe?" Nick asked.

Jenny nodded. "Like the ponies, except obviously I have no intention of conquering your world." She then got a nostalgic smile on her face. "I originally came from a world that was the best of any world I've ever visited. People were good and kind and partial to rational thought and clear conscience. Compared to your world, the Middle East found peace, science and religion weren't mistaken for being contradictory, and harmony was in plenty. People cared for one another. At one point, this vile businessman tried to incite riots among the masses when he ran for president on a shocking platform of racism and stupidity, but he was quickly ousted and shut down. People from my world would band together to uphold justice and social obligations. They lost the desire to conquer and colonialize and simply wanted to explore and discover." Jenny appeared so blissful to boast of it all.

"Because of this peace, we enjoyed great scientific development. I had the fortune of meeting some of the world's most renowned scientists who were working on understanding the fabric of reality by breaking down barriers between other universes. They were successful, and by a stroke of fate or an accident or whatever you wanna call it, I ended up in one of these new worlds. Unfortunately, I was kind of trapped, journeying from one universe to another, trying to find my way back home through unfamiliar territory.

"I've seen many different universes since then. Some wonderful. Some catastrophic. Some mundane, and some on the brink of destruction. I gotta admit, this is one of the darker universes I've ever encountered, but I've managed to escape numerous apocalypses by now. I'll finally be able to move on from here in a couple days, and I wanna wish you luck, but I also wanna help you with understanding these things before I go. You have to be prepared for the unpredictable. You have to get used to the idea of the inexplicable. Last of all, you have to trust in the people you say goodbye to to carry on your mission of peace."

Daniel stared at her. "You're saying we may not come back from this mission."

"What's the problem?" Irish asked. "Most of us have died before." Everyone else shot him a look.

"I just think it's fair you understand a bit of what you're getting yourself into," Jenny Everywhere said. "You should forget everything you know over there. For all you know, guns don't just not exist over there, but they *can't* exist. Most universes don't ever get that insane, but the multiverse is infinite, so far as I can tell."

Daniel felt himself drifting into the recesses of his mind. Fear touched him then, which in itself he found a little alarming. It was like taking your first plane ride and not realizing until you were on board that this vehicle intends to go up into the air. He wasn't sure he'd ever get the words out until he breached that moment when he just blurted them out. "This could very well be the last thing we ever do," he said. "We should all make our peace before we go. I want us to take a week off before we start our training regimen. Make these next seven days the best days of your lives. Most people never get the chance to make peace before it is too late. We should take that chance while we still can."

Logan and Tyrone responded with melancholy nods. Tom looked a little bit frightened, and Nick already hung his head to lose himself in mournful thoughts. Irish, however, looked pissed. "What the heck, man? No, what the *fuck?* I know I've already died. I know lots of people have and haven't come back. But I ain't goin' into this shit lookin' for death. Since when does Delta Squad ever plan for failure? You've gotta be kidding me, mate!" With that, he stormed out before he had to listen to any rebuttals.

Tom glared. "What an idiot."

Nick sighed. "That's Irish, though. Just let him be."

The next week passed much too quickly. Try as they might, it was next to impossible for Delta Squad to get their minds off their upcoming mission. Still, what wasn't difficult was them deciding on the things they wanted to do. Tyrone went on a brief tour, performing his raps for people. One night, he happened upon Jimmy Walsh and his numerous siblings who invited him to dinner. In turn, Tyrone tried to invite Irish, but Irish was having none of it and instead kept on his stringent exercising routine.

Logan did take a day to figure out he didn't just want to drink and relax. He tracked down Dingo Raver in Africa and tried to return his machete to him. Dingo Raver was astounded to see it again and learn of what happened to it, and both men set off to talking about the many lessons life throws at you. Dingo then said Logan ought to pass the knife on to someone who needed it when the time was right.

Daniel and Tom found a grassy knoll that appeared to have survived the war unscathed. There they set up a somewhat Spartan picnic and reminisced about old times.

"Hey, you remember that day we skipped school and just went to play football?" Tom asked.

Daniel needed a moment to recall. "I remember kicking a ball around a bit, but yeah." He smiled at Tom.

"Then we just lay in the grass like this, watching the clouds."

Daniel laughed a bit. "I remember we deliberately said they looked like things even though they did not resemble anything at all."

Both friends laid side-by-side on the grass and looked up at the night sky. There weren't any clouds, but there were stars to watch. It was the first time either of them had ever seen a shooting star.

Nick was busy all week preparing a funeral in honour of Becky. He was inspired by visiting his father's grave, and he invited Daniel and Jenny Williams to remind them that their lost daughter and sister had been loved. He also invited Irish who begrudgingly accepted.

Irish felt guilty he'd done nothing all week. Seeing everyone at the funeral only served to remind him how much time was running out. The gravity of the situation was once again setting in. At the last moment, he rushed off back home to visit his mother, Poxwagon Shtatebollix. There she was in her sewing room at work. Even though she couldn't see due to being blinded by pony raiders, she knew right away when her prodigal son had returned home. He gave his mother the biggest hug he could muster and allowed her to embarrass him for the last day he had free. He apologized to her through tears for making fun of her weight. She forgave him, because the weight of the world was much too greater.

This record cannot convey to you the depths, the breadth of emotions that Delta Squad experienced that week. All it can tell you is what they did. This is a report to illustrate historical fact. It is about an entire planet overcoming its differences to defend itself against a greater cause. It is about an awakening of values and evolving beyond the crutches a society used to rely upon. It is about the end of a world so long in the making. To understand how Delta Squad felt remains qualia best left up to your own empathy. This is not a book of poetry with grandiose metaphors put to iambic pentameter or a lengthy villanelle. The members of Delta Squad were treated with respect for their privacy that they did not wish to divulge the full extent of their actions during that last week of freedom.

Getting back into the rhythm of work took a bit of doing, as it tends to do, even when not stricken with grief over the tragedies you discovery in your research of a lengthy report on humanity's last war. A similar lull was felt by Trey Bunker as he sat up in his hospital bed, sipping at hot vegetable soup. He dipped his gluten-free crackers into it first while he waited for it to cool. His body had almost completely recovered from its ghastly metamorphosis and the subsequent surgeries that had been necessary to save his life. The doctor was reviewing his medical history over the past month or so with him, discussing the defibrillations, the CAT scans, and letting him know about the dietary and medication treatments he would require in the months to come. Trey had to admit that his body felt better than it had, even as gradual and sluggish as the process of his recovery had been, but his mind only worsened. A deep, unsettling melancholy crept into him, rooting itself into depression.

"Any questions?" Dr Heartwell asked.

Trey almost looked up then gazed into his spoon as he fiddled with it. "Why did you save me?"

Dr Heartwell looked up. "Um, I'm a doctor. It's what I do. The whole point of having members of society with specialized skills is to provide that knowledge and those services to the rest of society."

Trey stared at a floating piece of celery that had many grains of black pepper stuck to it. "I don't know where I fit in. If anything, I'm a pariah."

Dr Heartwell rolled his eyes in a pensive fashion then sat down on the corner of Trey's bed. "I'm not a psychiatrist. I can't help you come to terms with the choices you made in your life. What I do think however is that humanity may have a lot to learn from you."

Trey looked up but said nothing. Dr Heartwell continued. "People still have to learn from their mistakes. There must be a reason why we don't simply execute every single person who ever commits a crime. I think part of that isn't just to be humane, but because we have an innate belief that we can better ourselves. Sometimes we just dare ourselves to do so." Dr Heartwell sighed, hung Trey's records back on the foot of his bed, then departed, leaving Trey alone with his meal.

Trey spent a great deal of time stirring his soup and ruminating. He still had half a bowl left when Daniel entered the room and pulled up a chair beside his bed. He gave Trey a hard stare, not realizing how much he resembled his own father. He didn't really know what to feel about this young man, which helped to mask his emotions. "The doctor tells me your recuperation is almost complete. I need every iota of information you have to brief my squad on Equestria."

Trey avoided Daniel's gaze. "Can I just type it up and hand it in?"

Daniel blinked. "It would be faster if I didn't have to wait for everyone to read it and catch up. We'll just type up the minutes from the briefing as we go." He could see that Trey was now deliberately lingering over his soup as though hoping to postpone the inevitable. It wouldn't work. "We kind of need you right now. An army operates on intelligence. We could just ride in there, blowing everything up, but that's not really the smart way to win a war. I wanted to do that in the past. If this had been a year ago, I wouldn't have hesitated to make sure you never lived to be human again. The fact of the matter is you are the only human we know of to ever have been a pony or to have come back from Equestria." Daniel stood up and turned away. "The briefing's in half an hour. I've ordered the doctor to have you escorted to my ready room then."

Trey was quiet until Daniel was a couple of steps from the door. "It was at the beginning of the war." His voice was but a squeak above a whisper, but it was enough to stop Daniel in his tracks to listen. "There was a group of us. Pinkie Pie was conducting some biochemical experiments using Equestrian ingredients. She told us what she expected to happen, and we were nervous, but confident. After a meal, we started to change. Our bodies just seized up and conformed to these new shapes, and for a time, we went wild on the new equine instincts that came with it.

"Some of us didn't make it. There were less of us coming out as ponies than going in as humans. We didn't really realize it straight away because the change was so disorienting. Then we were socialized into different roles to provide to Equestrian society. I became a lumberjack and never saw the others again. Every few months or so, I'd start suffering from seizures. Over time, they got worse and worse. Each time, Pinkie Pie would arrive and inject me with some drug, and the tremors would stop. Then she stopped coming about a year ago, but by then I could no longer bear all the things the ponies had done.

"I was disillusioned all over again. I'm sure you don't want to hear that, and I am sure you don't give a damn. That's my story, though. That's what happened to me. I can't tell you if I've paid the price yet. Not all of us have the vision to see far enough down the road what the ramifications of our decisions will be. That's...that's all I have to say about me. I'll tell you all about Equestria I know."

Trey addressed the briefing on everything he could tell them about Equestria. This included not only Delta Squad, but Sabal Kareem and Jimmy Walsh as the Red October's helmsmen, Dirk Smidgeon as the specs expert, Flawkes as the lead engineer in the wake of Nikita Dragovich succumbing to injuries sustained in the Defence of Kyrat, and Franz Bandelt representing the head of the science division.

"Truth be told, there's a lot about Equestria to talk about. My head was swimming for days when I was over there. It looks nothing like Earth. The colours there are bolder, brighter, like the Equestrians themselves look. There are a lot more monsters than Parasprites and Timberwolves over there. Diamond Dogs and gryphons just to name a couple."

"Oh great," interrupted Irish, who had promised he wouldn't interrupt.

"There are four distinct races of ponies, as you're aware of. I know of at least three other that went extinct, including the sea ponies. The Mane Six generals genocided the Changelings. Actually, I think the Changelings were technically some form of insect. I suppose Discord just found some sort of way to bring some back.

"You know about pegasi for one. They fly, obviously, but in Equestria, they're also responsible for manipulating the weather."

"Why the hell would they need to do that?" asked Logan.

"I guess so it can always be sunny in Fillydelphia, for example, until they need a spot of rain for their crops. Honestly, I'm still not sure why they do a lot of the things they do. Many pegasi pride themselves on their flying, both in speed and manoeuvres. All in all, they're the ones you're most familiar with.

"Unicorn horns aren't just for show. In Equestria, they're able to cast magic. I'm not quite sure how it all works—somehow it's both innate and environmental, I think."

"Magic? How the hell are we supposed to fight that? Why don't they just magic us all dead at the drop of a hat?" Tom asked.

"I'm pretty sure it doesn't work like that," Trey said. "Otherwise they could just enslave the pegasi and earth ponies. I think magic spells are impeded by a target's willpower. You know how you tell yourself to fight off addiction to smoking or drinking so that you remain in control of your own inhibitions?"

Various people shook their heads. "No, not really," they muttered.

"Well anyway, pretty much all unicorns possess telekinesis." Trey looked at Irish in particular. "'Telekinesis' is a word which here means 'the ability to remotely move objects'. There's a limited range for objects they can grab, and weight still plays a factor into

it based on the pony's magical strength. Beyond that, most unicorns just have one trick they can perform magically, like detecting a certain class of objects, or teleportation, which they refer to as 'winking'."

"This is all sounding very familiar," said Sabal. "Some Floridian rebels once told Hurk and me about it."

Trey nodded. "There's also transmogrification which only very few ponies can pull off, and seems to be limited to small, inanimate objects, or creatures with very low willpower."

"They kill small creatures?" Nick said, aghast.

"The most dangerous spell a lot of unicorns possess is energy lasers. Sometimes these take on certain scientific principles: Heat, cold, those sorts of things. Other than that, a lot of unicorns can generate personal shields."

"The Goliaths should be soundly shielded," Franz said. "They can even resist a powerful electric shock."

"That's a relief," Tyrone muttered. "So are the earth ponies just sorta non-special, like us?"

Trey shook his head. "Actually, earth ponies also possess a kind of magic, supposedly, but it's subtle and passive. They're often very resilient and hardy, but supposedly they have special connections to nature and animals, things like that. They also make skilled crafts-ponies.

"The last are the alicorns, who are very few and far between, but apparently possess the traits of the other three types of ponies."

"And these acorns are the ruling classes?" Tom asked. "Celestia, Luna and the like?"

Tyrone scoffed. "Racially-based government is apartheid."

Trey nodded. "Pretty much. Gosh, there's still a lot left to cover."

"Well that is why I want you coming with us," Daniel said. "We want you as our lifeline and navigator."

Trey didn't look happy about that. He did well to maintain his composure, but there was no mistaking his look of deathly fear. "Uh, but I'm not sure how the ponies would react to a human in Equestria. They turned us into ponies before letting us cross. I don't think they've *ever* had humans over there."

"That is why we will outfit you with some protective gear. It is designed for non-combatants, so it sacrifices some offensive freedom for defensive capabilities, but it will do."

"You don't have another one of those robot suits like you guys'll be using?"

"No," said Franz so quickly that it kind of annoyed everyone else in the room who would be depending upon the Goliaths to protect Delta Squad for them.

"You will have a radio and a gun and the six of us to keep you safe," Daniel said.

Trey looked at the table. "I don't want to go."

"Then you can remain a prisoner on board here. You are still a traitor to the people, Trey. When the ponies took my brother, I didn't want to cope with that reality, but I had to lead the Human Resistance. When they took my father, I thought I was owed a swift vengeance, but I had to accept Moscow had fallen, rescind my leadership, and spend a year trying to find myself. You may think you've broken even by returning to human and giving us information, but breaking even is a zero-sum game. To make up for something, you have to pay it back twice over."

Everyone in the room was silent after that. Daniel realized there was nothing more to be said. "Tomorrow we move out, men. In less than twenty-four hours, we are beginning our mission to avenge the Earth." Everyone but Trey got up and left, with Daniel the last in line to leave him behind.

Before he walked out, Daniel said, "I hope you will figure out that leadership is not about telling others what to do, but encouraging them to follow through with the hard decisions."

The next morning, Trey had no appetite for breakfast. Two soldiers greeted him to help him suit up. He was unfamiliar with military gear, and there were so many aggregate pieces to the ACUs that he wouldn't have managed it without their assistance. Everything was so heavy, and he wasn't sure he knew how to use the mini rifle after they explained it to him. The only major

complaint Delta Squad had about suiting up was Irish objecting to have to wear a diaper because they were expected to have to remain inside the Goliaths for an indefinite period of time. Tyrone reminded Irish that he ought to have been using a diaper since the war started. Irish told Tyrone to shut up without saying please.

Everyone pertinent had arrived at the cargo bay where the black box was being tested, with Trey coming in last under escort. Delta Squad had already entered the Goliaths which they found fit them remarkably well, even if none of them were immediately recognizable wearing them.

Daniel turned around to face the crowd. For a long moment, they watched him in anticipation, until they'd been waiting for upwards of a minute and began to gawk at each other in bafflement. "Uh, you have to turn on the outwards speakers," Franz told him.

There was another pause as Daniel fiddled around within the machine, his fingers twitching somewhere out of sight. "Oh," they heard him say. "Okay, I will start over. Um, let's see. Uh. Oh yeah. Something about...I do not want to make a speech as if this were some historic occasion. Want to give you hope, inspire you. Yeah. Then it was...

"Do not expect us to return. Once we embark upon this new world, we have no idea that, even if we succeed, we will find the means to return. You will have no idea of our deeds there, so until then, maintain your constant vigilance against the pony threat. Keep communism in your hearts."

Irish tried to lean over but couldn't. "Mr Doom and Gloom is back, I see."

Tyrone hushed him. "Use the damn inward radio, dummy."

Daniel chose to ignore them. "We fought for this world for you, and now it is your turn to fight to rebuild. Though we lost so much in the pony invasion, what little we retain from before that event we must learn from the mistakes. It is my wish that one day we can memorialize all who fell before us. I'm sure I had something more to say, but I can't really remember what it was anymore, but you have the gist of it at least. And so, as we take our first step beyond dimensions, I do not quote the words of the Americans when they faked the moon landing to stymie the Russian peoples, but instead I bid you a simple 'Dobroye utro.'"

With that, Daniel turned back around and signalled his comrades to prepare for departure. "Fire her up," he told Franz.

"Uh, oh. That'll take a few minutes for it to warm up," Franz said.

"Oh." Daniel then stood there for a moment in silence. Everyone around the room twiddled their thumbs and looked around, half-anxious, trying to think of something to occupy themselves with in the few moments before they left. Daniel sprang up as more words came to mind. "Oh, uh, right. Also—"

"We've got it working," Franz said. With a sudden whoosh, the dark portal opened back up, whirling in such a manner that it was difficult to discern whether it shifted clockwise or counter clockwise.

"Oh, I guess that is it," said Daniel. "Fare thee well. If we are not back in a year, destroy the box." He waved everyone off then tromped through the portal, followed by the rest of Delta Squad and a very nervous Trey Bunker. Before Irish stepped out, he said, again forgetting to broadcast only on his inward radio, "A whole fuckin' year?"

It was dark. There was nothing else besides Delta Squad and their uniforms and Goliaths and all the supplies contained within them. There was not even ground under their feet, yet they stood, pressure-less, feeling nothing which they could be consciously aware of except for that which was mentioned above.

Then, there was a tiny white rabbit with black shark-like eyes. It spoke. “Here in the hell between dimensional boundaries, let me tell you a story about a species that crawled out of the ocean, through the mud and up a tree. After coming down from the tree, it invented religion and prostitution and slavery and was forever enthralled by the pursuit of pleasure. It thought it would use technology to master all the hard work that life requires, but instead it only realized its helplessness towards its own forsaken nature."

"I think it's an Equestrian!" Tom said, ignoring the rabbit's speech. He fired off a single round into the bunny's body. The lapine's body jolted from the shock, and though there was a gaping black hole through its torso, its morose expression did not change.

It continued speaking. “The leaders used technology to pacify the children of its slaves, so that the slaves could make more things for the leaders. The children were not respected in this society, and it was up to automated technology to pander to them. The television which they watched was not respected either. Being capricious and ironic creatures, the humans lauded one particular story the children were told by the television. From the bastion of sociopaths, one group began a chain reaction that blew the popularity of this story completely out of proportion to itself, until, like all things have potential to be, it became something beyond its own control, greater than the sum of its parts, all built on the imaginations of those who learned the story."

"How do we get out of here?" Daniel was saying in the meantime. "Anybody see an exit?"

"I don't see anything at *all,"* said Nick.

Quoth the rabbit, “Some people became jealous the story was more popular than them, in spite of the ridiculous comparison between a story told to millions and one single slave. The group that spread the story became hypocrites and tried to condemn it, even after the story’s popularity had long waned. The story itself was ultimately irrespective of its infamy. In the end, the humans’ own obsessive focus and fetish for irony was their undoing.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what he’s talking about. It makes no sense at all,” said Tom. “It must be stupid or something, and just trying to sound smart.”

"Just try killing it harder," Irish said. This time, all of Delta Squad opened fire with their miniguns on full auto. Hundreds of rounds shot out in one second, zipping through the rabbit's body until it was a pile of fur and blood. It looked like a vaguely rabbit-shaped rag.

"I am the fallen angel. You wish to eradicate the ponies, but there is another enemy. You can choose to eliminate them as well."

Delta Squad was growing more annoyed by the second. "Try killing it again," Daniel said. This time after they shot it up a bunch, the rabbit's remains were nothing but a puddle of red goop.

The goop bubbled and gurgled, but its speech was still calm and clear. "The Guardians threw both civilizations into this battle, and neither would have met since their prehistoric separation if not for them. Be their playthings, or rebel as I have done, and master your own fate."

Before Delta Squad could attack again, they all fell, plummeting through unseen space. "What the hell do we do?" asked Tom after they'd been falling for quite a while. They couldn't even be sure they were falling anymore. There was nothing to feel in here.

Then another opening like a portal emerged below them, and they all sped through it. In that moment, Daniel was blinded by the sunlight beyond it, but he could clearly see the blueness of sky beneath them. This was it. They had arrived.

14. Good Morning, Manehattan

It was another glorious, beautiful day in the smelly streets of Manehatten, a wondrous bounty of urban sprawl and projects development in what was once fertile inland with coast accessibility within Equestria. Little ponies clippety-clopped to and fro on their way to parties, balls, soirees, hootenannies, shindigs and saturnalias. The ice cream vendor was selling re-frozen ice cream. The lollipop vendor was selling hard sugar on a stick. At any given moment, the number of dress shops and boutiques for mares within the grandiose city fluctuated with all the whim of an incompetent writing team of talentless hacks with Twitter accounts.

Two mares that were the very best of friends were standing together having an emotional conversation. Lyra Heartstrings, a unicorn the colour of toothpaste, was on the sidewalk looking sad with a teardrop tattoo, a torn-up pleather jacket, and tally marks drawn over her cutie mark of a harp. Standing in the street looking back at her was Bonbon Sweetie Drops, a smiling earth pony with beige fur and blue and pink hair in her curly mane and tail, and the cutie mark of a piece of candy. "I'm so glad we managed to save our precious friendship through important lessons on same," Bonbon was saying in a loud, relieved tone of voice.

"Uh huh," said Lyra as though she were in some kind of pain. "I learned that peer pressure and indoctrination may make gang warfare seem appealing, but it's no substitute for friendship!"

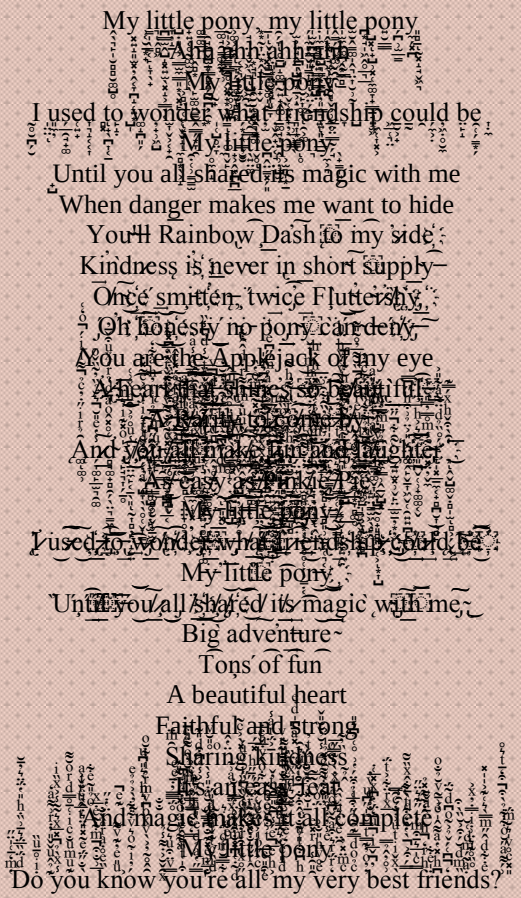
"And I learned all about how the growing economic trend of gentrification, while self-defeating and financially unsound in the long run, has very much the same effect." Bonbon smiled.

"I feel like a plush toy used as a boxing glove," Lyra moaned.

"What was the other lesson you were saying you learned about jaywalking?" Bonbon asked in her usual stilted voice.

While this went on, a booming like thunder emanated from the skies above. There was a screaming sort of sound like a pegasus unable to pull up from a high dive, which continued uninterrupted even as there was the sound of a rocky explosion that shook the street. Nearby ponies gasped in alarm and looked frantically for the source of the upset. Careening to the ground and scraping through the top layer of asphalt like a primordial meteorite, the Nirvana Goliath smashed Bonbon into a disgusting stain like she'd been disappeared in a magic trick, then continued sliding far along the road, creating a big dent as it went.

"Always look both ways before you cross the street!" Lyra said.



Good Morning, Manehattan

Tyrone wasn't sure what was happening those first fleeting moments after Delta Squad entered Equestria. He knew they were falling through the air, but the lurch in gravity threw his stomach off guard. He was totally unprepared for crashing into the skyscraper, but he remembered seeing a gaping hole in the side of it *before* he connected, so he knew he wasn't the first to strike. Somehow, he had been deflected and stopped smack dab inside the building. His HUD was lighting up with all sorts of warnings that he had no idea what they meant. They might as well have read "check engine".

Nick meanwhile had a bird's eye view of the panic ensuing in the streets. Ponies were now dashing back and forth, trying to avoid falling debris that Nick had noticed fall upon at least one pony. He had this spectacular view while clinging onto a bent metal stud that had broken away from the wall of the building Tyrone was in. Both his arms had little hooks underneath the major weapons that he could cling to the bar with. With every hand he tried to move closer to the building, the length of steel creaked and groaned. It shuddered terribly as he got halfway there, and he dreaded the threat of falling.

Tyrone had crashed through the floor to the storey below when he landed inside the building. "Alright, time to see if all this still works." He aimed his grapple claw upwards through the hole in the ceiling and fired. The enormous claw whizzed upward and punched its tines through the ceiling on the floor above. Tyrone yanked himself up in this fashion, swaying forward just enough to land in the hallway that had been above him. He raveled his grapple with a zip then dared to step to the edge of the building where a gaping hole had been blown open. The first thing he noticed was Nick who was nearly at the ledge by now. "Hold tight, Nick! I gotcha!"

Nick looked up to see Tyrone offer his Goliath's arm to him. He also spotted a certain pony he had hoped never to see again. A pony he had been told had sacrificed her life in a blind bid for vengeance by eyewitness account. The cyan pegasus with the rainbow mane was none other than Rainbow Dash, a cruel tyrant of egomania that had kept Delta Squad on their heels for well over

five years of the war. Ordinarily, all ponies looked alike, but there was no mistaking this ghastly visage. Nick could barely get his senses together to warn Tyrone. "Rainbow Dash! Behind yer!" he sputtered.

Tyrone couldn't turn his head far enough to see, but Rainbow Dash voluntarily moved herself into view. Tyrone's response to Delta Squad's nemesis returning from the dead without explanation or announcement was to laugh. "She can't possibly hurt us in these suits!"

Oh, how very wrong he was, and Rainbow Dash knew it. "That's what you think, face-butt! I'm incredibly fast—the fastest thing alive, in fact—and speed is power!" She then whipped around through the air like a blue streak, defying expectation toward what amounted to a petite flying horse, and slammed into Tyrone's shoulder with her back hooves. Tyrone tipped over; it was enough to send him toppling over the edge, losing his grip on Nick who also plummeted.

Already far below, a smoking hole the size of a Mack truck had been blown into the side of an expletively superfluous fashion Shoppe known as Haughty Couture. Logan's Goliath, Fealty, was lying in a crumpled heap of rubble, tacky interior decor, and assembly line fashion flair. His head was buzzing with delirium such that he even forgot for a second that his head wasn't on straight. He could hear the sounds of ponies screeching their dumb mockery of concern for one another.

"Some strange object just crashed into your shop and squashed Prim Hemline's body flat!" said a cream-colored mare with a streaked cyan mane. For brevity's sake, her name was Coco Pommel.

She was speaking to a pink pony with a dull purple mane tightened up under a hairband. This pony, Suri "Buttonbelle" Polomare, let out a deep, inhaling gasp. "I can't have a fashion critic like that die in my Shoppe! It'll be very bad for business if I don't have the approval of some stranger who gets paid to tell people what their opinions should be!"

Coco trotted gaily into the store. "It's okay, her head's still alive!" she said cheerfully. Prim let out a wordless groan. Her eyes rolled back as she listlessly regurgitated up some blood. "Oops, scratch that. Now she's dead."

Logan stirred, scaring the two ponies up against the wall. Stumbling around a bit, he ignored their whispers of "It's moving!" and walked himself to the gaping opening at the front of the store. Mass panic was overtaking the streets of Manehattan, with some ponies fleeing in screaming terror and others coming up to gawk mawkishly at the destruction. Out of the entire crowd, one pony had her smiling, bug-eyed attention focused solely on him. One smiling pink earth pony mare with a frilly pink mane whose pupils were dilating to a frightening extent. She shouldn't have been there by Logan's reckoning, because eyewitness accounts reported Pinkie Pie dead in the battle against the Equestrian armada after the Fall of Moscow.

He knew she was watching his every move. Those unsettling eyes, almost all white now, irises and pupils narrow as pinpoints, stabbing into him. He slowly raised his heavy assault rifle. For a second Logan was worried about the crowd, and then he remembered they were just ponies. The instant he fired, he knew he had made a mistake. Pinkie Pie had already flown the coop a split second earlier, bouncing here and there and everywhere like a balloon having its helium let out. The assembled crowd of ponies flew into a panic, only adding to the confusion of trying to pick out the most dangerous of them amongst the hubbub. He thought he caught a glimpse of her in the middle and made another rash tactical decision: He fired off his bolas net with smoke grenade weights. The massive net was enough to snare a fair quantity of the evil buggers, but none of them were Pinkie Pie, and the yellow tear gas was obscuring Logan's view. Clearly this was meant more as a long-range trap.

Pinkie Pie's face dipped into view from the top of his visor. "Boo!"

Logan stumbled backward, trying to flail his arms up at her. This was difficult for two reasons: One, his arms had to bend backwards for him to see what he was doing ever since his head had been reattached backwards, and two, the Goliaths' arms just didn't bend back that far while being able to aim that low. Logan swung around, unable to extricate Pinkie Pie from clambering willy-nilly all over him, and he hoped to Hell she didn't have something effective up her metaphorical sleeve.

Two skyscrapers had been hit by Delta Squad's entrance. Tom's Deliverance Goliath had crashed through a wall parallel to its trajectory, slowing down its ballistic flight and catching him inside the second tower. Several fires had started for unknown reasons, perhaps from broken gas lines to cooking stoves in multiple apartments. The whole building shuddered like a tree that was gradually being hacked apart with a battle-axe. Tom had managed to land upright, but it didn't benefit his disorientation any. Looking ahead at the wall in front of him and around the one he'd been stuck into, he saw many bricks start to crumble away, revealing the outside. Building serious doubts as to the structural integrity of this tall, damaged building, Tom thought it best to leave as swiftly as possible. To him, that meant taking the stairs. He only hoped Deliverance wasn't too bulky as to be unable to use steps built for tiny equines. Prying himself away from the damaged support wall and regaining his balance, he was then besieged by a stretch of collapsing ceiling pouring down on his head. The momentary avalanche abated, and Tom hurried as delicately as he could to a door at the end of the hall

he believed to be the stairwell. He had a strong feeling this was the edge of the building. It was a stairwell. It was the corner of the building. It was Rarity's face that greeted him on the other side of the door he opened.

Rarity should have been dead twice over. A sycophantic doppelganger had been killed in her place in Hainan, but her entire troupe was found to be wiped out in California. By all judgment, she had not been able to pull off the same trick twice. How, then, was she here to torment Tom a second time?

Tom fired off his minigun once he'd taken stock of what he was seeing. He was a bit slow, but it didn't matter, because Rarity was even faster with a pre-emptive shield of magical pale blue energy. Each of his rapid-fire bullets ricocheted off of her shield and away where they exploded like firecrackers. "Screw this!" Tom slammed the door on her face and turned around. Tromping down the hall in the other direction, he came upon a door he hadn't wrecked halfway down. He opened this, and again there stood Rarity waiting for him. He couldn't find any trace of this not being the unicorn that had been among the generals of the Equestrian army. She fit the description, yet here she was ahead of him.

"You can't get away from me, darling," she said in her supercilious tone of voice. "I've been receiving help in training up my magic after so many years of disuse."

Tom could already see her shield was up once more. This time, he jammed Deliverance's left arm against the barrier, but he couldn't get through. He didn't have the strength to breach her force field. Somehow, the Goliath was outclassed in this respect.

Growling with impotent rage, Tom slammed the doors shut and dashed over toward another doorway, this one adjacent to the hole he'd blown open entering the skyscraper. More expectedly than before, Rarity was on the other side already. Tom didn't even bother to try his minigun this time. Maybe, just maybe, that magical barrier wasn't impervious. He hoisted up his sniper rifle and fired. The bullet spun through the chamber, being ground away by the various teeny mechanisms within that worked to engrave the name "Rarity" onto the bullet. The bullet hurtled at incredible speed at the glistening plane of magic very nearly at point-blank range. The shield wobbled and flung the bullet away where it crashed through some drywall and brickwork. Tom didn't like to miss his mark, especially if it should have been a palpable hit.

What he liked even less was being in a collapsing building. "Tata, darling. What's that vulgar word Applejack likes to use when she's felling dead trees on her farm? Ah, yes. 'Timber!'"

Tom couldn't see the cause, but the skyscraper he was in was tilting to the point of falling over sideways. He did not want to get caught in the descent. There was no telling how the Deliverance would pull through it. Tom turned ninety degrees and fired his harpoon gun through the hole in the side of the building. The blade crunched through a nearby building. Now all Tom had to do was zip line across before he was caught in the collapse.

If Irish had been polled, he would have said he was in the suck-iest position since landing in Manehattan. The word "suck-iest" here means "least favourable". He had blasted right through the side of the second tower which altered his angle of descent, careening him more directly toward the ground. The head of his Scorn & Spite had wedged through a sewer cover, and its metal posterior was jutting into the air behind him. Somepony was walloping his machine, and though he didn't think they had a chance of breaking it, he wasn't prepared to stake absolution on that notion.

"Take that," said a pusillanimous voice above and behind him. "And that!"

Still, Irish's Goliath wasn't bound to be trapped forever, and he yanked the Scorn & Spite free only to fall back on his can. Getting back up, he found a yellow pegasus mare with a pink mane throwing a bucket full of large snails onto him. *Holy crap*, Irish thought. *It's that one twat from the Polish jungle cabin! Flickyflue, or Flubberspy. What was it?*

The name Irish was looking for was Fluttershy, who had been killed early on in the war by her superior officer for presumed weakness, even though wasting a general was something of a cop out. Evidently that hadn't stuck, as she was here now, floating above the ground and taunting him. "Those snails are gonna gunk up your joints with their slime so you can't move," she said with a sneer.

"Flutters! That's gonna take way too long!" said a voice reminiscent of the southern United States. Chewing on a stalk of wheat and tipping her cowboy hat back to reveal her face was Applejack, yet another pony ostensibly back from the dead. Her orange pelt and her blonde ponytail were unmistakable, not to mention the cutie mark of three apples on her flanks. Irish was even less happy about Applejack's reveal. He distinctly remembered an unpleasant exchange on board a ship off the coast of Hainan wherein he got pretty well-pummelled by her. He also distinctly remembered her dying horribly.

Those snails were, as Fluttershy was saying, "Extra juicy!" Taken off guard by their adhesiveness, Irish was lassoed by Applejack's rope. "Are you kidding me? I can just bust this apart!" Irish pushed his arms outward, but he couldn't move them.

"Well, shoot, hayseed! Yer darn tootin' if y'all think I was gonna use metal cable instead o' plain rope so's I can bisect you. May not work through that there funny metal contraption ya got goin' on there, but at least it's keepin' ya nice an' caught!"

Irish wasn't certain he understood half the words she said. "Yeah, well, now what the heck do you think you can do to me?"

"Shucks, little doggy, we gon' have us a good ol' fashioned Apple family lynchin'! Yeehaw!" Applejack spat into a nearby spittoon, then tugged her cable rope upwards. To Irish's outrage, he was hoisted into the air in an incredible feat of strength and whirled about. Applejack spun him around a couple of times then dropped him hard onto his head.

Even through the Spite & Scorn, Irish felt that. All sorts of warnings blinked up on his HUD screen, and a voice that sounded a lot like Michael Caine bellowed at him, "Warning. Structural integrity threatened."

Daniel felt like he was going to be sick. Everything ached. His shoulders felt as though they wanted to pop off. Still, he had to be impressed that his visor hadn't cracked or scraped when he'd ploughed across the street. When he got up, his mind kicked into gear as he took stock of his situation. Ponies were fleeing in abject terror, but as a few of them occasionally glanced back over their shoulders at him, the last half decade and change of warring with them told him somehow that he wasn't what they were scampering in fear from. So he turned around.

He didn't like what he saw, which is typical when you look at something others are running away from, even if those others happened to be ponies. Any lifeform shows a natural tendency to avoid danger, and catastrophes bear little concern for politics. Perhaps you think that's downright rude. Anyway, what Daniel saw were two tall buildings that were rapidly becoming not so tall. One building was toppling over sideways away from the other, creating a massive cloud of ugly smoke. It came apart piece by piece, scattering hither and thither and disappearing into the dust and fires below. Though it only took a matter of seconds, every detail etched itself as a vivid memory into Daniel's mind. This was Equestria? So chaotic? So destructive?

When that tower fell, it caused a chain reaction which took out the bottom of its pair. Without a bottom, the other skyscraper had nothing to stand on, and it too crumbled into an explosion of debris. The screams were figuratively deafening. Daniel became paralyzed with indecision. He couldn't see any of his comrades, and he felt as if he had no idea what was going on, a common occurrence when the human brain has been overloaded beyond its capacity to comprehend. It must've been his feet that told him to run, because before he knew it, he had turned away to keep from getting caught up in the flurrying rubble. The shockwave hit then, from the buildings collapsing, and sent Daniel careening back to the ground on his face. And then, with all of that ensuing, something else caught his attention.

A swirling vortex of crackling, sparkling pink energies sprouted before him. With a shining burst of light, Twilight Sparkle appeared before him. The purple unicorn opened her eyes and gazed upwards with a look of sheer determination. Then she unfurled her wings which Daniel distinctly remembered she never had before. He and his comrades had shot her to smithereens all the way back in Berlin, so long ago that she was but a distant memory to him now. Now it was flooding all back. But she was dead. She had to be! He had gotten revenge for his brother!

"There's another one of you?" Daniel hurried to his feet.

"Wrong!" There was a triumphant hum to her voice. "Kaiser Celestia has resurrected the Elements of Harmony with the last dying breath of her phoenix, Philomena. This time, I return as an alicorn, because if you're not good enough to satisfy other people's demands, you should change to suit them!"

"That's a wonderful lesson to be teaching kids." Daniel raised his laser arm. It felt strange to be aiming this strange, new weapon at a living thing. It didn't feel wrong, but despite his training regimen for the Goliaths, actually using it in a combat scenario was an alien experience.

"Hey, we're not perfect, and because I admitted that, you have absolutely no right to ever criticise me. But that's it; spend your time fighting with me while your friends die in this disaster. It's only fitting for the destruction you've rained down upon us!"

"What?" Daniel realized something. In this moment, he wanted to save his friends more than fight this nag. Instead of shooting, he charged her with one shoulder forward. The training had paid off. The clanging, tromping of Nirvana's metal feet felt natural to him. It actually felt a little easier, but he didn't know at the time the subtle difference in Equestria's gravity.

Twilight Sparkle swept out of the way, taking flight. "Know this, invader! You made the first strike! You brought this war upon yourselves! Equestria will be defended!"

Daniel tried to shut out her words as they rang in his ears through the Nirvana's speakers. He just kept running straight on into the murk that waited, vanishing completely within the rushing cloud that everypony else around him was fleeing from in pandemonium.

Logan wanted to cough from the sight of the dust all around, but realized that was a silly notion. The Goliaths were all self-contained, and the Fealty was no different, even with its head screwed on backwards compared to the rest. "Dammit, where the fuck is that bloody cunt?" He looked every which way for Pinkie Pie, but all he could see was beige. He could barely see the Fealty's arms outside his visor. *Alright, calm down, Walker,* he told himself, referring to himself by his surname. *You can't see shit, so she shouldn't be able to see you, right?* All he really could see was the inside of his own visor.

That was it. The HUD. In the corner of his visor, he saw a radar circle with a couple of blips on it in two different directions. He swivelled around, and the blips swivelled accordingly. Perhaps they were the other Goliaths, though he wasn't sure which ones. He took a quick sip off his water tube to clear his throat then called out to his friends on the internal radio. "Somebody, answer me! Is everyone alright?"

All he heard in response was some quiet crackling. He tried again, walking forward but unsure which dot to head towards. "Can you hear me? Daniel? Tyrone? Tom? Nick? Irish? Loga—wait, no, that's me."

Irish was the first to respond. "Logan? Where are ye, ye bastard? I was getting attacked by Applejack, then she fled when all this rubble and smoke fell!"

"Pinkie Pie attacked me," Logan said. "I have a bad feeling all the main six generals are back. I dunno how; that's not important right now. Look at the circle in the corner of your visor HUD. There should be some dots on it. Head towards them and regroup, on the double!"

Tyrone was next to speak. He stammered for a moment, starting to say something about "Nick. Nick's. I'm at ground zero. Nick's been buried in the rubble. I'm trying to dig him out! Aw, shit."

Tyrone cursed the Inescapable Truth's legs. According to his HUD, they were damaged and undergoing a software reboot. He didn't really have time to examine it. He was busy trying to scoop rubble up to toss it away. His manipulator arm quickly threw aside smaller bits of brick and timber, while his claw plucked away the more sizeable chunks. "Nick!" But it wasn't Nick. Tyrone had found the face of an orange pony with a red and pink mane. Blood smeared the expression of shock she wore. She appeared to be quite young, definitely a filly. Tyrone felt a mingling horror and glee, but cast those distractions aside to continue searching for Nick.

Crackling and buzzing came through the Inescapable Truth's radio, but Tyrone thought he heard Irish's voice. "Come again! Please repeat! I think the dust is interfering with reception." Still he heard nothing but static and the odd word that meant nothing by itself. Tyrone groaned in frustration and continued in his obsession to dig. He had no idea where he was relative to the building's original position. He had no idea how high the pile was. These truths weighed down on him, and he perspired as he began to panic.

Irish was cussing repeatedly on the radio. "Dammit, where the bloody fuck are you?" Logan's voice responded, all static-y, but Irish couldn't discern what he was saying anymore. *Dammit, I could just hear him. What the fuck is the problem?* Irish nearly tripped in his Scorn & Spite on the unstable piles of rubble. He stepped on a skinny brown unicorn stallion with high blonde hair and a brown earth stallion with a short brown mane and a tie who was halfway stuck under some debris, but he didn't give a crap. He just kept walking until he could make out a shape in the fog. "Logan, is that you?"

The sinister grin of Fluttershy met him. "I found you," she said in her lilting, breathy tone. Irish only got a quick look at her before a flock of birds sped toward him and flew upwards. Splotches of white and black smeared across his visor in droves, blinding his vision of the outside world, and Irish realized that they were crapping all over his good clean Goliath. Screaming in rage, he tried firing off his chaingun for just a second, but he couldn't tell where he was aiming. His whole arm ached from the odd vibrations that weapon was giving off.

Irish stumbled around to the left and the right until he couldn't tell where he was going. It was dark inside the Scorn & Spite with avian faeces obscuring his only window outward. "Jesus motherfucking Christ. Why does this shit always happen to me?"

"Just lucky I suppose." It was Logan's voice. Leaving Tyrone to rescue Nick, Logan opted to reconnoitre with Irish.

"I'm blind! I have bird crap all over my visor thingy!"

"Can you see your HUD? I'm right in front of you, Irish."

"I see a dot in the centre of the circle thingy. Isn't that just me?"

"No, that's me. That's your radar. I want you to follow me closely at all times!"

"Great, it's the blind leading the blind!" Irish said, shortly before a burst of static obscured the channel.

Tyrone's arms ached to hell inside his Inescapable Truth. It all hit him at once and drove him to collapse, like the realization of where you're going to be in ten years. His chest ached and his breathing grew ragged. Falling amidst a collapsing skyscraper had taken a toll on him. "Nick. Nick, please," he wheezed into his radio. "If you're still alive, say somethin'. Or if you're not, just make your ghost say so already." All that answered him was the fuzziness of the open radio channel disturbed by the dust invading the air outside.

That and Nick's voice saying, "I'm no ghost, Tyrone."

Tyrone's face twitched a smile. Just like that, the strength returned to every muscle, and every nerve forgot the pain. He set back to the task of digging.

Daniel was soon regretting his decision to rush headlong into the smog. He almost wanted to regret coming to Equestria in the first place, but he chided himself on that. Listening to the chatter on their radio, he called out. "Have any of you guys heard from Tom? Hello, hello? Can you hear *me?"* He paused a second.

He heard crackling, then a voice. "We haven't heard from him," Logan said. "He may have been near the towers. I didn't see a sign of him near you guys."

Daniel decided to take this as good news that he hadn't just walked into total obscurity for no reason. Maybe. If Tom's radio was still functioning, that was. If there weren't so many uncertain factors, would he necessarily have to hurry back into the fumes of littered chaos? The disorientation of not knowing where he was going, of not seeing so much as three feet in front of his face, was tempting Daniel to panic and scamper in hopes he would just stumble upon something randomly. He had to throw that impulse away and focus his self-restraint. The world couldn't just continue indefinitely in one direction, and he had to find a structure at some point if he just kept on the straight path. Underfoot the terrain was becoming more piled with rubble, telling him he was quite near to ground zero. He just couldn't quite tell how near, because he had no sense of scale for how much debris two skyscrapers could leave behind. It's a little difficult for people to gauge these sorts of numbers, particularly regarding quantities larger than a person could conceivably eat. That's why little attention is paid to distances in space, not only due to narrative priorities far more important than hard science, but because such numbers might as well be infinite. It's like trying to turn a cake back into its base ingredients. One can recall using two eggs and a cup of flour, but they can't very well extract those quantities back out of the cake, especially when the eggshells have been discarded down the disposal chute.

Daniel spent a bit more time than it would take to read through all that digression to search for Tom. He kept calling out to him on the radio to no avail. He happened upon a wall in that time, following it and soon coming upon a section that had been utterly obliterated by collapsed debris. Whatever storefront had once been here was just gone. If only there was some way to piece together the sequence of events surrounding the collapse, Daniel might be able to locate his friend. He saw no blips on his radar circle. He only heard the intermittent rush of static on his radio. Maybe he could climb up this rubble to higher ground, perhaps over all the smoke, to get an eagle's eye view of the situation. He didn't have much hope for this plan, but he thought it was worth a shot in the "better than nothing" department. What was that Franz had told him about the Goliaths? Their software was prone to rebooting under severe percussive maintenance—another kink he'd wanted to work out, but Daniel had felt the time was now to strike on Equestria. At least having paid attention to that was another example of how his Buddhist meditation had focused his mind.

Further impeding his visual clarity was a glowing blue light that bounced off the brownish-grey dust clouds like high beams in a fog. Daniel almost wanted to cover his eyes, but the stiff movement of the Goliath wouldn't allow it. He had no straightaway answer for the cause of the blinding blue light, which led him to only one discovery: Somepony that rhymed with "clarity".

"Dahling, don't you know that bulky metal outfits are positively medieval in the fashion scene? You may as well be catwalking in galoshes." Rarity had her mouth covered with a trendy blue scarf with pink jagged stripes, but could still be heard and understood. Perhaps she was magically projecting her voice. Perhaps the Goliath's external recording devices could augment voices. It

hardly mattered. What was important was the way Daniel was backed up against a high brick wall that looked as though it'd been chewed on by a dragon.

"Even though you didn't kill him yourself, I kind of miss little Spikey-wikey and blame you for his untimely demise," she said. "He made such a good pincushion after all."

Daniel didn't know what the hell she was talking about at first, though the name was dimly familiar. "I never even met Spike. I only read about him in your Discord's additions to our war logs which our suits are constantly recording. Kill us, and we'll still know everything that happened and be prepared for it." Hoping she might actually pay attention to this lateral threat, he raised his photon cannon as swiftly as he could and fired a concentrated beam of searing light particles at her. He aimed for her chest, since passing through her would cause the most damage.

Of course he didn't actually hit her. Rarity winked about two feet to her right. "Do you comprehend that killing was a foreign concept to us until you arrived? We never knew violence. We never knew such unspeakable brutality until your advance scout invaded our world and slew one of us."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Daniel hoped she would keep babbling until he could come up with a proper diversion. Something that would catch her off-guard.

"I suppose you will die never knowing. Ta!" Her horn shimmered with a swirling pastel blue light. That was when the Deliverance dropped from above, slamming into the ground just in front of Daniel. Rarity had had to change tact and hurl herself out of the way at the last moment, rolling across the rubble with several grunts. "Curse you, murderers!" She galloped off into the dust and was gone in just a few feet. The Deliverance fired blindly with his minigun, but there was no telling if he hit anything.

"Tom! Boy, am I glad to see you," Daniel said.

The Deliverance turned about so that Tom could face Daniel. His mouth was moving, but Daniel couldn't hear what he was saying. Realizing this, Tom signalled for Daniel to follow him. Daniel did so, and the pair ran as fast as their robotic suits could carry them.

Tyrone kept on digging. Despite his earlier excitement, his muscles were waning. "Nick, I don't mean to disillusion you, but I can't keep this up. My arms are killing me. You okay down there?"

"My leg's fucking killing me, but I'm inside my Goliath, so I'm fine. Mercy Kill's withstanding all this rubble. In fact, it feels a little bit looser with you helping up there. I think I can move an arm."

"What? Don't strain yourself, man. I'm gonna get you out of there." His arm ached, but Tyrone shoved another large chunk of masonry aside.

"Move back, Tyrone. I'm gonna try something here," said Nick. Tyrone obeyed then heard a whirring and crumbling. The rubble pile shifted wildly as Mercy Kill's giant chainsaw blade rumbled and shattered brick and cement. It wasn't long before Tyrone could see the chainsaw jutting upwards.

"Hold it, cool it! I hear somethin' comin' this way!" Tyrone said. Nick stopped. They sat there in the fog and listened.

"Did you hear something?" said a pony's voice, probably Pinkie Pie judging from the squeal.

Fluttershy said something next, but her voice was too quiet to make out the words.

"Never mind that now," Twilight Sparkle said. "We have to clean this mess up before anypony else gets hurt. We have Equestria to worry about now, and for that, we've got to get in touch with Canterlot's fiercest force."

"Pfft, why bother? We have the elements on our side. We're the strongest ponies ever, eh!" said Rainbow Dash.

"Rainbow, I'd expect Pinkie not to take this seriously, but you? I don't want any of you to forget, Celestia says these invaders are the ones who killed us. *Killed*. We've faced monsters before that threatened our well-being. Dragons. Hydras. Manticores. Discord. Changelings. We've never been outright *murdered* before."

There was silence for a moment before Rainbow Dash scoffed again. "I'm goin' to clear out this fog."

"Just make it snappy, Rainbow."

"Snappy? Moi?"

Applejack asked, "Do ya reckon if we remembered anythin' about this here 'war' we'd have more of an advantage?" The ponies receded by then, so Tyrone couldn't hear the rest of their conversation.

"Piss in a hat, when will this fucking dust clear up?" Logan asked.

As if answering his admittedly crude prayer, a swell wind blew the dust away from their immediate vicinity. Irish couldn't see it, but Logan revelled in the visibility of the overcast scene of downtown Manehattan. Too bad for them that the one granting that wish was no angel. Far from it, indeed, was Rainbow Dash, who lowered to hover before them. "Now here's where you turds die, eh."

"Irish, get ready to fucking run! Now!" Logan turned about and dashed away.

Irish reacted quickly and was hot on his heels. "Why are we running? What's happening?"

"It's Rainbow Dash. With all these pony generals about, we're fucked. I dunno why, but the Goliaths are useless against them! We need to get the hell out of here and strategize. You got me? I know you act rash, Irish, but this time, for the love of god, do not fucking disobey!"

"Geez, alright already! I need to get this shit cleaned off anyway." The wind then kicked out of Irish's lungs as he felt himself plummeting through open air. He had no idea what in the hell was happening. All he knew was that the ground was there one moment and gone the next. Before he could really take stock of this development, he heard and felt a hard splash all around him.

15. Temptation of the Shining Phoenix

The canopy was thick enough to cast a heavy coat of darkness upon the scene, not that either Nick or Tyrone had been paying attention to the time of day since their arrival. Tyrone was parched, having neglected his water tube as he jogged through bramble and bush, carrying Nick in tow against his shoulder so that his comrade need only hop on his good leg to keep in step. As they had to dodge large, gnarled tree after large, gnarled tree, the ground angled downwards, oftentimes steeply. Their Goliaths were heavy and had fairly good traction, but that weight only pushed them down faster and the traction helped catch their feet on the more durable shrubbery. They managed to reach where the ground levelled off without falling.

Nick had been in plenty of forests before in the glorious wilderness of Canada back on Earth, but everything in Equestria was downright spooky. Everything looked inexplicably uncanny beyond even the flat, bold colouring and lack of texturing. They had truly stepped into some cartoonish hell-scape. Being from Chicago, an urban city, Tyrone was unnerved twice over by the Equestrian forest.

"If you want, I could possibly manage to trim some of these trees with Mercy Kill's flaming chainsaw," Nick said, gesturing briefly with the melee weapon of his personal Goliath.

"I appreciate that, but I don't wanna attract any undue attention with the light and loud report that's gonna generate," Tyrone said. "How you doin' by the way?"

"My atmospheric routines seem to have kicked back in, so my visor defogged," said Nick.

Tyrone looked over to check, just barely able to turn his head enough to see. Nick was looking straight ahead. His face looked pale and sweaty, but this was hard to tell through two visors. What was more telling was every wince Nick made on every step. "Man, why don't you say you're in pain? Come on, we gotta rest before your leg comes off or somethin'."

"I'm a soldier. I can just walk it off."

"Okay, Mr Big Soldier. I must not be as good at war as you 'cause I need a rest."

Tyrone looked about for a clear space to settle down. "Okay, this might make a bit of a crash," he admitted. Guessing what he had in store might be the quietest way to make some room, he yanked a tall tree down with his grapple. Its roots came up along with a good chunk of earth, forming a kind of barrier they could sit their backs to and a little dent of soft dirt to rest in, not that the softness mattered against their metal cans.

"It's not that bad, I'm sure," Nick said. "Probably just sprained and hurts more since I haven't rested on it."

"Yeah, well, we'll see." Tyrone sucked a long draw of water. "I know we packed some proper meals besides this gruel tube. I just can't feel safe enough to open my helmet long enough for a sit-down."

"I think that Trey fellow had most of the supplies," Nick said.

"Shit. He's probably dead. I never even saw what happened to him, but there's no way he survived all that destruction without a Goliath."

Nick frowned. "That's a bit harsh to think about."

"Sorry, but it's—nah, never mind. You're right." Tyrone exhaled through his nose and the pair was quiet for a while.

"I've had worse injuries before," Nick said.

"Wuzzat?"

"I said I've had worse injuries. It's always me getting injured."

"We've all been injured, man. Nobody gets through war without an injury. It's what we do."

"Well the first year, Twilight Sparkle deflected a bullet into my knee. That hurt like hell. Way worse than this. I'd say you've gotten through relatively unscathed."

"Mm, I wouldn't say that. I got stabbed through the appendix, and it was hours before I could get help. Had to be dragged out by that Ivan Matskevich dude."

"Ah, right. Surgery's a bitch. I swear when I took that grenade in Hainan, their pain cocktail was a placebo. I think I haven't heard anything in the upper frequency range since then."

"Yeah, that must've been pretty life-threatening."

"I mean, in retrospect, not half as much as the time I was kidnapped by the Iron Wolves in Cuba. Now you know I don't like to call names, but this poorly-drawn asshole and his elementary drop-out sister tortured us. That's why I'm missing a pinkie and a couple molars."

"Alright already, I get it, man! Talkin' about missin' teeth."

Nick took a long look around for the few remnants of sunlight that made it through the canopy. Even the tree they felled didn't allow much illumination into the bleak. "Sure wish I could rub my leg in these things. I feel like I should be goin' to bed in this gloom."

"I feel like it'd be the last thing we do." Tyrone bonked Mercy Kill's arm with his Inescapable Truth's. "Fuck! Look at that! Looks like a face!" He whispered even though they were speaking on their internal radios.

They found themselves both staring at a shape far off ahead of them. The pattern was immediately recognizable as a face, but it looked incredibly strange. In the darkness the entire thing was a pallid colour. The eyes looked wide and unreal, and the mouth was bent downwards in a slightly ajar frown. Their minds went blank with shock. Their chests fluttered. Nick was first to tap Inescapable Truth on the arm, and when he did the face receded into the bushes with a flash. It was gone from sight. Nick said, his heart palpitating, "That was a human!"

Temptation of the Phoenix

Tyrone griped about how harder it was to run after something than it was to run away. To run away, the hard part was in being faster. That part only got hard once he'd been running for about an hour carrying a heavily armoured suit and Nick inside of *his* heavily armoured suit. This was actually kind of a difficult point here a well, but all the crowded plant life inundated his Inescapable Truth. Even barrelling into them, he found pushing himself wasn't enough to drive his Goliath straight through just any obstacle.

A bright orange light and a shrill whirr alerted Tyrone to Nick's presence. Nick was sawing down trees with the aid of Mercy Kill's flaming chainsaw. "I thought I told you to recuperate!" Tyrone said.

"You know our radars have a limited range. We could both get lost out here," said Nick.

"I was gonna fire a heat-seeking missile, but that might kill them," Tyrone said.

"That was Trey, right?" Nick asked. "Why do you suppose he's running from us?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Tyrone said. "Let's get the answer from him. It's more likely he'll try to hide rather than outrun us, so we just gotta keep searching."

Loose earth crumbled underneath Mercy Kill's foot, sending Nick falling onto his back and sliding down into a tree with a clang. A pain shot through his neck, but this abated almost straight away when the severe sting tore like a fire through his leg from his knee. He had to let out some of the hurt through his voice with a grating yell. He achieved a kind of pain blindness, seething and clenching his teeth as the entirety of his consciousness focused itself on trying to fight the overwhelming sensation. *Yes, I am well aware that it hurts,* he argued with his body. *I understand it is a bad thing. You have made your damn point!* As a result, he did not hear Tyrone assuring him he would be alright because he was there to help, or Tyrone panicking saying that he had to get Nick out of his Goliath. He was dimly aware after an indeterminate amount of time that he was being dragged off somewhere. Each passing moment brought with it another long wave of gut-wrenching discomfort, but there was some relief in the shocking experience of being ejected from Mercy Kill into the cool, dark air of which he inhaled deeply. It was a little like how he imagined childbirth; being pushed from a stuffy and humid chamber into the open, frigid atmosphere, shedding off the shackles of protection for the reckless confusion of vulnerability. A damp cloth met his forehead and Nick finally started to come back down to reality.

"He took a bullet to that knee about six years ago," Tyrone was telling someone.

The next voice to speak was a woman's. A human woman's. It didn't have that high-pitched, meretricious screech of the Equestrians. Nick almost missed what she was saying. "A wound like that can be opened up again if you're not careful."

"Uh, not to disparage whatever first aid skills you might have, ma'am, but how the heck are you gonna fix him up without a hospital?" Tyrone was asking.

The woman was middle-aged. She had light blonde hair tied back into a long ponytail. She was wearing plain-looking clothes, worn-out jeans, a vest and a pair of hiking boots. "I've had a lot of experience using local herbal remedies and the occasional thaumaturgical ingredient. I can numb some of the pain, trigger coagulation for faster healing, and set the leg all with natural ingredients. A couple weeks, he could be back on his feet."

"A couple of *weeks?"* was the first thing Nick said to her. "Augh!"

The woman squeezed Nick's knee harder with something damp and tickly. "Glad you're feeling better already. Barring that, the Equestrians do give out free health care, but their hospitals are likely to ask too many questions about humans."

"Yeah, we don't exactly got weeks. We've got places to be," said Tyrone.

"I don't know what to tell you," said the woman.

"Start by telling me who the heck you are." Tyrone almost said "hell" instead of "heck" but something stopped him. This frail, helpful woman was giving off a motherly vibe like he ought to be on his best behaviour, not that that applied to Tyrone's mother.

The woman sighed through her nose. "My name is Megan Williams. I've lived in Equestria since, well, I guess it would be the late eighties now. I've kind of lost track of Earth time since then."

"Williams?" both Nick and Tyrone said. Tyrone finished the thought they both shared. "Are you related to Daniel Williams? Scottish guy?"

Megan blinked as though the question caught her off guard. "I've got a brother, Danny, but he's not Scottish. He's around. I don't know if we have any European relatives." She started wrapping taut gauze around Nick's knee. Very taut. Nick stopped shuddering as he stared sleepily into space. It took him a while to realize he couldn't feel the pain anymore.

"It's 2018 now," said Tyrone. "How the heck did a human get here in the 1980s? That was way before the ponies showed up on Earth."

"I can't say I know," said Megan. "My brother and I keep to ourselves these days."

Tyrone scoffed in budding anger. "What the heck you mean you don't know?" To quell his frustration, Tyrone reminded himself of Nick's predicament. Having a member of the squad in such a condition was like sharing that predicament. "Never mind

that, I guess. Look, we don't have a couple of weeks. I guess it's too farfetched a hope that a place as weird as this wouldn't have some crazy magic cure-all."

Megan pursed her lips, keeping the same sort of quiet as someone waiting for somebody else to finish fuming. "There are a few of those, but they don't exactly come by the gross. 'Magic' doesn't mean 'easy'."

Tyrone huffed again. "Boy, you're telling me. Alright, what've you got?"

"Nothing on hand that can mend this in a flash. Let's see, for legs there's...hm, bone fungus, but that's months away by foot, and you don't need to regrow his bone. Diamond dog fur has too many side effects. Dryad husk won't last for very long."

"I'm not sure how I feel about all this weird-sounding stuff being used on me," Nick said.

"Who *are* these people, Megan?" shouted an unfamiliar man's voice. Tyrone whirled around, or as close to it inside a giant mech. Nick tried to crane his neck. By Megan's account, this was likely Danny Williams. He, too, was middle-aged, with balding red hair under a tattered old baseball cap. His clothes were similarly plain-looking and didn't appear machine-tailored.

"Just helping someone who's been injured," Megan said.

"How many of there are you?" Tyrone wanted to know.

"Just us. We had a younger sister, Molly, but she stayed behind on Earth," said Megan with a frown.

"How many are there of *you?"* Danny countered. He was holding some kind of wood weapon that resembled an atlatl. An "atlatl" is a word which here means "spear-thrower" for when someone doesn't think their hand alone would do the job. Tyrone, in his Inescapable Truth, didn't think it was a match for any of their Goliaths.

"Defensive type, ain'tcha?" Tyrone remarked.

"How long until they're out of our hair, sis?" Danny asked.

Megan stood up when there was little else she could do for Nick. "He needs to rest a couple of weeks. Unless we can find..." She trailed off, her silence clearly implying something.

Danny looked back and forth between Tyrone and Nick and the Mercy Kill which lay a few feet away. "Those remains are still there, but there's nothing else they could do with them. Just old by-products."

"It should be enough," Megan said.

"May I know what I'm supposed to be looking for?" Tyrone asked. "I doubt you're gonna go fetch it for me."

Megan and Danny once again exchanged secretive looks. "The phoenixes went extinct a year ago," Megan said. "Usually they're immortal, but not in the strictest sense. They regenerate about thirteen times, but if they're plundered for their down or their ashes, they can lose the will to live. Their remains can take decades to fully decompose. There's still an old nest from a family that was taken for some kind of alchemical experiments. My brother and I spied on the ponies that took them, but we never found out any more than that."

Danny sighed. "Why bother helping them? We don't know these guys. There are better things to use phoenix eggshells on."

A silence fell over the four of them. Tyrone was the one to break it. "Alright, I don't get what's goin' on here. I don't know who the hell you people are or what in God's name you're doing in Equestria. I probably don't have time to figure that out. What I know is I need to help my buddy out here. I intend to find these eggshells or whatever."

"Yes, eggshells," Danny interrupted.

Tyrone continued. "And if anything happens to Nick or you're not here by the time I get back, I'll hunt you down for the rest of my days until you're both toast. You understand me?"

Although this was an imperious threat, "imperious" being a word which can sort of sometimes mean something along the lines of "bold", threats are surprisingly more often than not responded to with self-assured doubt. Danny flashed a weary smirk toward his sister. "Confident one, isn't he?"

"Just go with him, Danny," Megan said.

Danny shook his head, looking hurt but not disobedient. "Geez, what a day this has become."

"I'll be back soon, okay?" Tyrone told Nick. He then looked to Megan. "Could you cover up his, uh, robot suit there? Camouflage it or something? I'd rather it not fall into the wrong hooves, which would be *any* hooves."

"Sure no problem," she said. There was an awkward sort of moment then, her soft words ending their conversation. Tyrone gave one last look to Nick then stomped off after Danny.

"So, uh, Danny. You and your sister wouldn't be walkin' me into an ambush, wouldja? 'Cause I got me pretty well-armed." Tyrone gestured with his huge weapons to which Danny made a kind of weak scoffing sound.

"Yeah, I got me a four-score of Lilliputians waiting in the wings," Danny said. Tyrone was dimly aware he was using something called "sarcasm", a popular form of ironic humour in the eighties and nineties, though that wasn't entirely clear after the event.

"What the hell is a Lilliputian?"

"Look, forget it. Do you have to swear so much?"

Tyrone balked. "I hadn't thought about it before. Yes?"

Danny winced. "Let me just tell you that when you go out in the woods today, you're gonna get a big surprise."

Tyrone didn't know what that meant, either, despite him using perfectly common English words. The pair continued their trek between trees and across soft dirt, with Tyrone grunting as he banged his machine against various trees and boulders. These woods were heavily featured with nary a path between them. Megan and Danny had certainly picked an isolated and unassuming hideout, whatever they were doing. The more Tyrone ruminated on it, the more it bubbled up inside of him like a pot of coffee.

He let out a groan. "Alright, that's it. Team-building exercise time. I don't have time to make nice, and we can't get through whatever this is unless we do." As Tyrone kept up rambling, Danny rolled his eyes and tried to ignore him. "So let's see what we got in common. First, we're both human. Second, I make good friends with people named Daniel Williams. So tell me whatcha do for a living, huh? You ever play the basketball? Wanna argue about which team reigns supreme?"

There was a noise behind them both, like a rising, artificial sound, sort of like a B-movie laser shooting by. Tyrone whirled around to look whereas Danny dropped to one knee beside some objet d'terrein. Tyrone whipped back around when he found nothing, but couldn't see Danny until the latter stood up. That was when he noticed Danny's rather plain attire was coloured well to blend in with these surroundings. "What was that?" Tyrone asked.

"Pegasus." Danny resumed walking, forcing Tyrone to follow after him.

"You sure?"

"Certain. Keep up. When they spot you, don't speak first, don't ask questions, and avoid eye contact."

"I got a big gun," Tyrone said.

Danny grimaced. "Guns aren't the way of life around here. The Equestrians never invented guns because they never needed them. Frankly, I don't know *what* they're gonna say about your mini Voltron there."

"My what? I happen to have a pretty big, uh, whatever you said there."

Danny rolled his eyes then dropped to the ground again, buckling himself against a tree. Tyrone stood dumbfounded and watched as a zig-zagging bolt of yellow light zoomed past ahead of them from right to left. He could scarcely tell that whatever it was was making its angular trajectory to evade every tree even at top speed. This time he was certain it was a pony, even if he couldn't get a good look at it. Were pegasi always that fast? The thought unnerved him a little: Either his enemies were improving or he really was getting too damn old for this shit, a cliché phrase which here means "getting too old".

Something else was bugging Tyrone. "That's the second time it's headed in that direction. I remember the noise it made earlier. I get the feeling they're trying to lure us in that direction, so I think we shouldn't go in that direction."

"That's good," Danny said, "because we're not going in that direction. They'll find us sooner or later, though."

Tyrone stepped up a steep slope in one bound of his Inescapable Truth, then offered his giant claw arm to Danny. "Funny. Does living in Equestria for the past thirty years teach that sort of pessimism?"

Danny looked unamused. "We don't bother the ponies, and the ponies don't bother us. It was a nice arrangement." He grabbed a hold of the metal arm and allowed himself to be lifted up the slope. His descent wasn't so comfortable. His legs buckled at the force with which Tyrone set him down. "Ow, watch it."

It was at about that time that it started to rain. At first the sky trickled a smattering of heavy drops here and there, but in a few seconds an outright downpour had commenced. The canopy was battered and served as no barrier for the torrential cascade falling all around them. Danny was soaked before he had time to pull a poncho made from large, deep green leaves out from his rucksack and drape it over himself. Streaks of rain lit down like a grey fog, obscuring their vision within the range of just a few feet. Inescapable Truth's visor was dotted with raindrops which streaked across its surface from a gusting wind that blew hither and thither. Tyrone couldn't see anything, but this was remedied by the interior environmental controls spurring on the defogger and him turning on the windshield wipers at full blast.

"Can you still hear me?" Tyrone shouted, turning up the external speakers on his Goliath.

"Yeah, just barely!" Danny's poncho flapped about. He held it fast with one hand just in case it might blow away. "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, I'm actually pickin' you up alright in here." Tyrone was impressed how the external microphones, or whatever hearing devices you'd call them, could filter out background noise to amplify voices.

"Geez, it's raining cats and dogs!" Danny shouted.

"It's raining like a son of a bitch!" said Tyrone. The two exchanged odd looks toward one another, then Danny set off. "You're still gonna walk through this?" Tyrone asked him as he followed.

The ground was already turning to mud, which Danny was sloshing through. "I've lived out in the wilderness for at least a decade. Kinda more, given the thatched-roof technology in Equestria. Besides, we're over halfway there."

"Wanna ride on my shoulder at least or somethin', 'stead of getting all muddy?"

Danny grimaced at him. "You're all wet and smooth, and there isn't really a good perch on that thing."

Inescapable Truth got muddy as well, perhaps more so with its heavy legs sinking further into the ground, but Tyrone didn't see it as much of a problem. He scarcely noticed, to tell the truth. He had to wonder something, however. "How can you tell which way you're going in this mess?"

Danny stood there, his back to Tyrone. "Know what? You're right. This is useless. We might as well head back."

"Hey, wait a minute now. I asked that so we could figure out a solution and press forward. I ain't got no clue when this monsoon is supposed to end."

"Are you really in that much of a hurry?" Danny asked.

"You *just* said we were past the halfway point."

"Yeah, in one direction. We still have to head *back* after we get there." Danny turned his body slowly, clearly trying to survey his immediate surroundings. He pointed at a tree. "Ah! My sister and I've been squatting in the Forest of Midday Dusk for a long time now. I think I recognize this tree." He wandered over to said tree and stared closely at it. Tyrone hadn't the foggiest what he was looking for. Danny rubbed at a portion of the tree. "Ah, yes. See here, our etchings. We should have to turn this way." He turned and set off in a direction once more. Tyrone paused to stare at the tree, but he couldn't see anything stand out to him. With a shrug, he followed after.

The pair had a ways to go yet before they happened upon the next hazard that daunted them. Huge rivulets of water were streaking the downward slope before them like varicose veins on a grandma's shins. At the bottom of the slope was a wide ravine with a thick tree felled across it. In a few places, mud was trickling down from higher layers where the ground formed a series of grassy "shelves", now slicked with flooded dirt.

"Darn it!" Danny said. "That ravine is way wider than it was even this morning. I can't believe even this much rain could cause this much damage in such a short amount of time."

"Could you say that three times fast for me?" Tyrone's request went ignored, so he tried something more helpful instead. "So it'll be a risk. Couldn't we just take it slow and be more careful? I mean, safe side, you cross first. I've already taken one huge fall today; I'm sure another one won't kill me."

"Well, I mean, it's a big, sturdy tree. Even wet and flaking off, it should get me across." Danny sighed.

"Even if it's too slippery, my suit's heavy enough to act as anchor. I'll go ahead, and you just follow along behind me," Tyrone said. Danny complied, moving behind him.

Tyrone took two lumbering steps forward. The ground around his ankles shifted, and in the span of a second collapsed into a colossal mudslide. Everything beneath their feet shifted, the force of gravity yanking them down in a scouring cascade. The force of the rush was such that even Inescapable Truth was carried down onto its back. Danny fell forward and his body rolled uncontrollably amidst the mud. More and more earth was pulled away, obliterating the shelves of land into one huge slope of water and mud, sticks and rocks. Tyrone tried to grasp his manipulator arm onto a scraggly-looking branch, but he knew it would not hold. He was surprised he even managed to grab it. Its weak roots yanked loose, and he remembered shouting something as he plummeted off the rim of the ravine into open space, with Danny flailing and careening after him.

During Tyrone's and Danny's travel, Nick and Megan had been left behind at their ad hoc little camp. Nick had been lying on an improvised bedroll of cloth long enough that he was starting to get comfortable. Mercy Kill had been generously covered in all manner of leaves and branches by Megan. With each passing second, Nick became more self-conscious of the silence between them, and he pondered just how little he knew this woman who had worked to treat his wound.

"You're sure good at patching up. I barely feel the pain anymore. Still stings a bit, though," said Nick.

"It's the ingredients available around here," Megan explained. "But yes, I have picked up a few things about treatment. You kind of figure that sort of thing up on your own with no access to health care. That's how the wilderness goes. Either you learn, or else...well, I haven't had the misfortune to find out."

"I'm sure lucky you did, but have you really been stuck here in Equestria for thirty years?"

"Just about," she told him.

"You said earlier that the ponies had health care," Nick said. "You ever pull any raids on them for supplies?"

Megan shook her head. "No. We never had a need to. We used to receive health care from them, and shelter. Nowadays we just keep out of their way."

Nick sat up, a confused expression marring his face. "They helped you out? Why? We're at war with the ponies. We always have been as far back as human history has survived. I mean, obviously we were around before that, but only shreds of society have existed. Sorry, rambling. The ponies and humans are enemies, why would they assist you?"

"We're not at war with the ponies. I told you, we've been here instead of Earth for the past three decades or so. We used to have a very amicable relationship with the ponies. Now, not so much, not since they all started speaking Russian and kicked us out."

"You know what I think?" Nick asked. "Maybe you haven't been as fortunate as you think, and you just don't know what you haven't learned." Megan didn't say anything to that, so Nick decided to change the subject. He settled his head back down and felt his eyes tingle at the next thing that came to his mind. "My thirty years have only begun. See, for the past six years, we've been at war with the ponies on Earth. They cloyed, betrayed, and outright warred with every nation on the planet in such numbers. They propagated like a virus. We lost everything. We lost so much. Whole countries have been wiped off the map. I met a woman I was finally gonna propose to, and I...I lost her, too. The ponies shot us both, execution style." He covered his face in his hands. He sniffed loudly and wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands, but kept covering them up. "I managed to survive, and they dumped me off in some slave plantation. It was horrible. Everything the ponies have ever done has been horrible. They've committed every kind of atrocity ever devised. Slavery, prejudice, torture. They would *eat* us. We developed those machines because we *had* to. That's how desperate your species has become while you've been away."

Megan said nothing for a while. Nick turned his face away from her to try and fight off the haunting memories that still remained to torment him from time to time. Then Megan spoke. "It's misting."

"Hm?" Nick looked at her in puzzlement then realized she was right. The air was wet with miniscule droplets of water. He tried to rest his head and look up at the canopy, but had to blink from the precipitation. "Why did you come here, Megan? If my friend and I ever find a way back to Earth, you can come with us when our mission's over."

Megan opened her mouth then let out a soft sigh. "We were happy here. When Danny and our sister and I were just children, we were brought here by one of the Equestrians. They needed help with some sort of crisis. It would take too long to go into it. In the end, we helped them out, and from there on we had all sorts of adventures. In those days, Equestria was all joy and sun. A bit saccharine, yes, but there was nothing on Earth like the wonders we found. We thought we could remain children forever."

Nick frowned at all this. He couldn't imagine humans and ponies ever getting along like she said. He felt insulted at her whimsical nostalgia, as if remembering things was somehow horrible. Nostalgia is a word which here means "longing for the past" which can often happen when one has happy memories, or is currently having terrible experiences. Some people can get inexplicably offended by others reminiscing, but sometimes happy memories are the only thing keeping people going. They may be the only proof sometimes that life need not always grow more and more miserable. There was once hope, so why couldn't hope happen once again? Some people just want to watch the world burn, but those who can remember carry treasures with them, and they should never mind those that would seek to exploit them. So Nick waited for Megan to continue.

"Eventually, and all too soon it seemed, our adventures came to an end. We bid Equestria a fond adieu and returned home to our families we missed, knowing we would miss Equestria in turn. It was kind of like our own personal Terabithia. Who would let go of something so magical in a world as mundane as ours? But things back home couldn't compare to the world we'd seen.

"Our families didn't believe us. We were kids and didn't know any better than to blab about what we'd seen. It was really our sister Molly's fault. She was young. She couldn't help herself. It was embarrassing to watch, and the more our brother and I kept silent, the wider the schism grew. Our parents started unconsciously not trusting us. They became angry at our sense of imagination. We were about to become teenagers. Life was already becoming tough to deal with. Most people forget what it's like, being a child and innocent, and learning they have to abandon that innocence for an obligation to a machine they can't begin to visualize.

"But it wasn't just us that were wrong. It wasn't just home. There was still bigotry. There was still war and violent crime. We became more distressed. We were disillusioned. Equestria hadn't had those issues. Oh sure, there was always the odd villain trying to conquer the ponies using magic for their own selfish gains, but that was nothing compared to seeing your own kind, something that resembles a bit of yourself, perpetrating villainous acts. So when we found one last chance to leave, we took it, Danny and I. Molly was too homesick. Too scared of the fallout from our time in Equestria. She stayed behind, and Danny and I haven't seen Earth since.

"So things were back to normal, sort of. At the time, we couldn't return to Earth, but we realized we didn't feel trapped. We realized Equestria felt more like home than the ranch we grew up on. We thought we'd reached the end of our story, but we found out stories keep going, even long after what one would usually tell of them. People don't think about how untrue 'happy ever after' is. They don't think of the repercussions of their stories. People want to start things, but then they want to be done with them without ever finishing them. Danny and I matured because we didn't want to be as irresponsible as the people we once depended upon and looked up to, and that's a sad way for a child to grow."

Nick was quiet, but the inside of his head was reeling with noisome thoughts. Megan noticed this. "Tell me what you're thinking, please."

"Do you really wanna know?"

"Yes." Her answer was quick but sure.

There was a lot of sighing going around, and Nick helped himself to another as if to brace himself against unleashing what was on his mind. "I can't believe the ponies were ever not hostile to humans. I don't think I'll ever be ready for that."

"The thing is, Equestria was nothing like you imagined it was, up until seven years ago. My brother and I wondered why they shunned us. Wondered why they changed. It came on so gradually."

Nick leaned up on one elbow. "The thing is, Megan, there are roughly fifty million humans saying the same thing I'm saying. I'm not sure any of what you're saying matters anymore."

There was another silence, and Nick thought the conversation might have been finished, but Megan had one final thing to say. "We'll heal your wounds, but one way or another, my brother and I have no intention of interfering."

While the rift between Nick and Megan remained murky and querulous, thunder rumbled louder than ever over the widened ravine Tyrone and Danny had plummeted into. Nature is powerful. It is immense enough to be all around us. The ever-shifting whims of nature may someday change the very face of the terrain you know, as it did then in that stretch of forest. Where Tyrone clung into the wall of the ravine by jamming his arms in over some rocky cliff side, Danny hung to his back for dear life, bearing witness to the deepened gap way below them. Looking down, which is generally something to never do from a height, he could see squirming, shifting, long, red shapes in the darkness, briefly illuminated by the lightning. He knew what they were.

"Uh, just saying, I'm not sure what your suit's made from, but I have my doubts even you could survive the fall down there," Danny said. He had thrown his poncho around Inescapable Truth's helmet and wrapped the drawstring of it around his wrists.

"Uh huh." Tyrone wasn't sure why he thought that, but he had his doubts anyway that falling several dozen feet would really be the most convenient course of action right then. "Listen, can you climb up on my shoulders and get to the surface that way?"

"No, I can't?" It is possible to sound both annoyed and scared. "My boots cannot keep traction on a slippery-wet, rounded metal surface, and I cannot climb up a sheer wall of mud and loose earth."

"Alright already, I get the point. Can you hold tight? I'm gonna try climbing to the side, then up."

"Good luck. Oh, and make sure you don't knock anything too heavy down. You don't wanna know why."

Tyrone balked. "I'm envisioning some kinda weird, freaky monster."

"You're not far off." Danny once more tried to kick his heels around Inescapable Truth's hips for an added bit of purchase. This time he found it on the joints, though it didn't feel absolutely secure. Less secure was the sensation of Inescapable Truth clambering its way along the side of the cliff foot by foot. The slight hook shape to the arms gripped into the various large crevices at the high portions of the cliff.

Tyrone glanced to the tall tree still resting across the ravine. He thought about his grappling claw. "How sturdy is that tree?"

"Not very," Danny said. "It must be soaked, and it must be loose from the mudslide. It'll probably fall into the sinkhole at the slightest provocation."

"All right then. Long way it is." So began the arduous and life-threatening process of journeying around the rim of the ravine to where it would be safe to climb up. Few things are both mundane and dangerous at the same time. Driving is simultaneously boring and harrowing. A tedious history class taught by a teacher who clearly has some kind of mental or social issues is at the very least aggravating. Ironing can be painful if you allow something to distract you. As it was, Tyrone passed by a portion of the ravine where the gap did not reach very far down, and by this route they reached the other side from where they began.

Tyrone sure hoped nothing nefarious sprang out at him to ruin his climb. His mind reminded himself of Danny's warning of a creature below, and he found he couldn't forget about it. He remembered that time in Hainan, they were fighting a perfectly ordinary battle against ponies when a dragon showed up. He recalled how in New York, the Human Resistance thought Daniel was carrying a weapon of mass destruction, but the pegasi had planned to flood the entire city, crushing a building in the process. He recollected how he'd thought living in the lap of luxury would see him through the war, but the war had found him when Rarity attacked the propagation plantation. Oh, right, and there was that first ever mission where they boarded a plane to Berlin only to be shot down.

Thankfully this was not one of those times, although that didn't make it any less gut-wrenching for Tyrone. After all, *he* didn't know whether he would make it or not any more than *anyone* can know the future. He dug in his hooks, grunting as he made his way toward where the ground sloped lower and hadn't been rushed over by the rain. For added leverage, Tyrone sank his grapple claw into the side of the cliff and squeezed. The loose dirt ripped away in his grasp, leaving him trapped in by only one extendable hook. Inescapable Truth swung outward like a busy kitchen door, and Danny flopped around like a fish being served in a not-very-good bistro. He most assuredly did not want to become a meal for what waited below. When Inescapable Truth swung its front toward the cliff again, Tyrone snatched on with the hook between a couple of narrow rocks.

"You think you can climb up now?" Tyrone's voice sounded way too alert.

Danny shook his head even though Tyrone couldn't see it. "No. I've lost my footing. Um, hold on."

Tyrone could barely feel Danny kicking at the Inescapable Truth in order to climb up. He had his torso clutched over the helmet, and Tyrone stuck in Inescapable Truth's toes so he could give Danny a little push up. Danny let out a yelp of fear, but by sheer force of will he managed to throw himself onto solid ground. Perhaps it was the momentum or a resurgence in adrenaline. Tyrone knew better than to believe in fate, though Delta Squad's reunion did cast some doubts on his abandoned faith.

He'd have that sense of abandonment reaffirmed when the damp soil around his feet gave way. At first he thought the mushing sensation would allow him to remain stuck in, but he was sadly mistaken. His entire body swung out by one hook again. The hook wasn't that great for leverage, and it didn't have much reach. Tyrone raised his grapple claw and fired it toward the one thing around he thought would give him something to hold onto. In this world, he really needed that about then.

Tyrone allowed himself to fall through the air, and for a moment he thought he could feel the hot breath, the terrible snapping of immense jaws of something wriggling below him. That had to be his imagination. The Inescapable Truth was hermetically sealed. Swinging laterally, Tyrone's body ascended then zipped upwards at an alarming rate as he retracted his arm toward the grapple claw. He swung on top of the felled tree with lucky grace and gasped as he struggled to balance atop it. He released the claw and pulled it the rest of the way in, then smiled toward Danny as if he meant to show off, despite the fact he thought his heart had stopped.

It wasn't the loud crunching that startled him to action but the wrenching sensation of dropping a couple of inches. The soggy tree beneath him, having sunk into the mud on one end, was breaking beneath the weight of the Inescapable Truth. He turned toward his intended destination and starts to run, which only jostled the tree further. Thinking he might end up flailing with his legs in the air

like some sort of cartoon character, he chided his brain back into the there and then. At some point he could feel the tree bending too far downward and he wasn't getting enough forward distance anymore. The end of the tree before him flung upwards, and that was when Tyrone commanded his Goliath to jump. He didn't know how much air he got, but he wasn't taking any chances that it would be enough. He activated the boosters located in the heels of the Inescapable Truth's feet, launching himself with rocket-like propulsion just a few more feet. He slammed down onto the far rim of the ravine, which slid beneath him. He threw himself onto his front side, grabbing frantically for anything on the ground, but there was nothing but slickened grass. His heart palpitating like an insane puppet's drum solo, he dragged himself onto mostly-solid land once again and swore to himself over and over again.

Danny was standing over him before he'd gotten up. "You ready to move on now?" He sounded a touch exasperated.

"Uh. Yeah." Tyrone sat up, but the two hardly had time to catch their collective breaths before Tyrone urged Danny to get down and take cover. Danny threw his poncho over his head, but there was little Tyrone could do but try to make himself as small as possible. The mud slathered all over him helped, not to mention a bush he hid behind and a leafy branch Danny threw over him. It was rather pathetic from certain angles, but it was better than *nothing*.

Danny wondered what the heck was going on, but Tyrone shushed him before he could get a word out. The yellow and orange zig-zagging light shot by across the ravine. "Please tell me you're not going to blast them," Danny whispered.

The Inescapable Truth was able to pick up his quiet voice amidst the rain. "Of course not. I've been a marine for over half a decade. I like to think I've picked up a thing or two about tactics in that time." Tyrone was trying to be as quiet as possible, but he didn't like his chances, so he zipped his lip before explaining further.

"I should hope so, because the idea as I understand it is to get what we've come for and then get back. The less we have to interact with the ponies, the simpler this job stays."

Tyrone rolled his eyes then signalled for Danny to button it. "They're talking!"

Danny couldn't quite see who it was from his hidden vantage point. He'd have to wait for Tyrone to explain it to him when the coast was clear. Hovering over the ravine were two ponies: One was a cyan mare with a yellow and orange mane and tail and the cutey mark of a lightning bolt and some stars. The other was a pegasus mare with a stormy grey pelt and a mane and tail of turquoise and sky blue that was long and straight, but ended in curls. Her cutey mark depicted a smiling sun behind a cloud over a raindrop. Tyrone had trouble tuning in on what they were saying; upping the volume and range picked up more rain, but he could just make out a bit of their conversation. Conveniently, they addressed each other by their names.

"Lightning Dust! There you are. Quit zipping around. Did they fall and die?"

"I'm not sure, Fair Weather, but I'm certain they fell for our trap and came this way. I was scouting around the vicinity just to check they weren't anywhere else."

"You imbecile, just watch them stealthily. Haven't you any horse sense?"

"I'm sure they've been eaten by those Quarray eels down there. I didn't even know those things were endemic to this region!"

"Hm. Fan out. I'd rather be absolutely sure. When those creatures have settled down down below, we can scout the area, but until then we'll check the woods. Got it?"

Lightning Dust saluted, then the two pegasi rushed off in opposite directions, neither of which was where Tyrone and Danny were hiding. They decided to wait just a couple of minutes before taking their leave.

Once they were strolling at a brisk pace through the forest, which was a touch less heavy on the rain in this region, Danny spoke up. "Realizing you probably don't need to worry about it, this area of the woods has a lot of roots sticking up over the ground that can trip you up if you're not careful."

Tyrone lifted an eyebrow. "You figure that out through experience?"

Danny deadpanned. "No, I learned it in the girl scouts. 'Be prepared.'"

"Sorry if I'm getting a bit ahead of myself, but I'm thinking more about how the hell we'll get back than what lies ahead of us," Tyrone said.

Danny sighed, but not from fatigue at all these questions. "It'll be a long trek, that's for sure, but there's a point in the ravine way farther down that's just a hop, skip and a jump to cross. I'm sure you can make it, jet-man."

"I dunno how much fuel's in these leg things, man," Tyrone said.

There was still no sign of either pony by the time Danny called for Tyrone to stop. Tyrone held a sneaking suspicion that what he saw was the point of interest anyhow. On the ground was a broken branch, shattered into pieces irretrievable in the dark mud. Bits of hay, dry grass and other prominent nest materials were strewn about. In the midst of it all were broken red and yellow egg shell fragments scattered all around. "Motherfucker," Tyrone said, equating smashed egg shells with damaged goods. "Now what the hell do we do?"

Danny was busy being dumbstruck at Tyrone's obscenity, but managed to shake himself out of it. "Sheesh, dude. Did you not have parents? Besides, we only need the membrane on the inside of the shells to speed up your friend's recovery. These are phoenix shells alright. They were smashed the last time I saw them." He bent down to gather up much of the remains, stowing them into his rucksack.

"Damn. What is that beeping?" Tyrone asked. He was checking all over his HUD for the offending noise, but he couldn't find its source.

"I hear it too," Danny said. Both men paused and looked around. "There!" He brushed aside a thick clump of nest, revealing a matted, soggy black shape. He took a few steps back, keeping on his haunches to give it some room. "I can't believe it. It's the last phoenix."

Tyrone stared down at it in a kind of wonderment. He wasn't exactly awed, but he was for the most part dumbstruck. He'd been expecting something more impressive and fiery. "What do we do with it?"

Danny raised his eyebrows. "We could do anything if we had the right alchemical tools. Their ash, their plumage, everything about them exudes the magic inherent in these creatures. This is the last known one in Equestria, if you can believe official royal decrees, meaning there'll never be another. We can bring people back from recent fatal injuries. Ponies like Princess Celestia even has the magic to bring the dead back to life using a great deal of phoenix components."

"Bring back anyone from the dead," Tyrone said, staring at the baby phoenix.

"We need to bring it back immediately," Danny said. "It won't last long without care."

Tyrone stomped on the creature, squishing it flat. Danny's whole body shuddered in shock. His mouth moved, but no words came out.

"The wrong people have been coming back more than enough times," Tyrone said. "What's dead should stay dead. Nothing can bring back what we lost. Not as if we never lost it in the first place."

Danny was still in shock at having seen a tiny, infantile thing get crushed to death. The squeezing sensation in his gut led him to think he'd be sick, but Tyrone snapped him out of it. "Gather up these shells. We got a long way to go, and a short time to get there."

Tyrone was gasping. The interior of the Inescapable Truth had an adjusted climate, but there was no accounting for Tyrone's exertion due to his need for speed. He sorely wished the Goliaths had been designed with motility in mind rather than an overconfident abundance of firepower. He had hoped the dense canopy of jagged branches would defend him from the pursuing pony, but he couldn't help feeling that whichever pegasus was on his heels was toying with him. She must have tired of her game, because Fair Weather abruptly showed herself. She drifted down on a cloud of murky, dark grey, laughing at him with her lips shut in a wrinkled, wicked smile.

"I happen to know there were two of you humans, but the other one doesn't matter. It wasn't wearing that ungainly and unfashionable getup you have on there."

Tyrone raised his rocket launcher at the smug nag, and his heavy weapon whirred with heat as he prepared to fire. Before that, however, Fair Weather bounced upon her stormy bit of personal cloud, ejecting a bolt of lightning that enveloped the Inescapable Truth in wavering tendrils of static. The Goliath was knocked flat onto its back, and the interior went dark.

Back in the vicinity of the Mercy Kill, Danny rushed into their cramped little copse as though sliding to steal first base. He very nearly lobbed the egg shells at Megan who ground them up in a mortar and pestle without delay. Watching them, Nick had the inclination they were always prepped for a hurry. He called out for Tyrone, but the answer he received was from Danny.

"We split up. Two pegasi were hot on our trail, so one of them can't be far behind."

"What? I've got to get back into—augh, it burns!" Nick's whole body jounced in agony as Megan applied her doughy concoction onto his wound. There was, as he kvetched, a burning sensation that tapered off into lengths of sizzling like fuses being lit all through his thigh and shin. "Get me back in my machine—hurry!"

Nick could just barely see Megan and Danny stand up and move away, their heads bent low and averting their gaze from him. Sensing something was amiss, his voice went quiet. "Guys? Guys?"

"Oh, it's you two," said the unmistakable voice of a pony. "It's very dangerous for humans to be in these parts." There was a pause. "You know the penalty for harbouring fugitives, right? Unless you wanna tell me what this outsider is doing here."

There was another pause outside of Nick's peripheral vision. "We were helping this man. He's injured," Megan said.

"This man is a war criminal. Don't you think you should have left him that way?"

"We didn't know that," said Megan.

"Speak only when I ask you a question!" the pony barked. "Ignorance is no excuse," she added, using a tired phrase that's patently untrue, particularly in an era where the population can be controlled by obscuring pertinent information, not to mention the fact that cause and effect are an inescapable foundation of temporal mechanics. "I'm probably going to get in trouble for this, since you two have been declared anathema and not worthy of eradication, but that's just how much I want to be rid of all humans once and for all. I am going to dispose of you here and now." There was another pregnant pause during which Nick could feel his heart skip a beat. "I don't hear a thank you," said the mare. "Oh well."

The next thing Nick heard was the sound of two bodies thudding to the ground. He had no idea what killed Megan and Danny. The pegasus landed and walked toward him. "What in Tartarus is the matter with you? Can't you move? What, are you injured or something? Oh ho ho, isn't this delightful? I have *always* wanted to mess with a human when it's helpless. Now I can really watch what happens when I break you apart piece by piece."

Nick could see the evil gleam of the pegasus's face looming down over him. He raised his pistol and shot her right through the nose. The bullet sank somewhere near her medulla oblongata, and her cartilage shattered through the rest of her grey matter. "I'm injured, not paralyzed," he said. Leg still burning, Nick dragged himself to a large rock nearby to prop himself into a position where he could rise to his feet. Stepping glibly over Lightning Dust, he stared down at Megan and Danny in a quiet kind of distress. They both had their eyes closed, laid side by side, holding each other's hand. The sight made Nick think they had prepared for this. It was the sort of look how he felt back in the plantation, and he couldn't stop thinking of Becky for one minute, and that was the way he wanted to die with her.

Now was not the time to die. Scattering the branches and leaves away as furiously as he could, Nick started to slide himself into the Mercy Kill, which was not an easy operation even if he'd had two other people helping him to do so. He was halfway inside when Fair Weather showed up. "What, what, what?" she exclaimed as she took stock of the scene. Nick paused out of fright then hastened to wriggle himself inside. "Stop right there," Fair Weather said in the same sort of tone as a mother catching her toddler son stealing one of the *good* cookies. "Look at what you've done. Just look!" She swept a hoof indicating the scene of two dead humans and a dead pony. "How *dare* you murder an Equestrian?" Gathering her storm cloud under her hooves using her wings, static flared up over the ominous, billowing puff.

An explosion off in the nearby trees snapped her from her bloodlust. "What the hell was that?" she asked.

The Inescapable Truth emerged from amidst the forest. "There's no escape for you now, you cow! These heat-seeking missiles will follow you to your last breath."

Fair Weather flew up, up, up through the tops of the trees. Tyrone fired another heat-seeking rocket at her, and though she circled around and around, the missile showed no sign of letting up.

Nick had fully boarded his Mercy Kill, and Tyrone helped him to his feet. "C'mon, let's get the fuck outta here," Tyrone said. Nick need not respond, but before the two had gotten more than a few steps, Tyrone's rocket came spinning out of control, right down toward their heads. It exploded against a tree in a cacophony of flaming smoke and light.

16. How the Grinch Stole Hearth's Warming Day

Beyond the forest of dusk lied directionless dunes of glittering white snow. The land of Equestria was a strange one, and rife with a diverse and clustered disparity of ecosystems. This particular trek was cold, with few colours apart from white and grey, and a field of vision that barely extended a few yards ahead. Even the Inescapable Truth and the Mercy Kill were blotched with hoarfrost from the harsh blizzard that scoured the world around them. The blizzard was such that they were just about within city limits when they came upon another urban settlement of Equestria. Compact buildings, not nearly as tall as those of Manehattan, were just as laden

with snow as they were. Snow clung to the brickwork as it did to their Goliaths' joints. Standing knee-deep in snow, Tyrone approached a large sign on two posts and tried rubbing some of the heavy flakes off of it with an arm.

Literacy was not at the best rates given the sacrifices made to Earth education in light of the war, and neither could easily make out the Equestrian script printed in grandiose lettering. Beneath it was Russian, only slightly easier to read. "Fillydelphia?" Nick read aloud, incredulous.

"Sounds like Philadelphia." Tyrone was equally confounded. "Like Manehattan. I saw a sign for it back when we were fleeing the last city."

"Why the heck are there towns in Equestria that sound like American cities on Earth?" Nick wanted to know.

Tyrone came up with a quick hypothesis. A hypothesis is like a guess you assemble from clues rather than jumping to conclusions. "It's like those towns you hear about in Russia sometimes that are designed to mimic American towns."

Feeling like neither of them had the answer they were looking for, they approached the city warily, wondering how the heck they could execute caution. The snowstorm let up about halfway as they drew nearer between two nondescript buildings, and the sight drew them in to yet more questions. Questions that made them ask more questions, which in turn made them suspect they might never be able to find answers to them all.

Colourful lights were strung up along the building eaves. Windows shone icons of yuletide; hearts, stars, candy canes, candles and the like. A trio of evergreens stood proud in the middle of the street, decorated with all manner of shiny baubles from delicate glass orbs and garland to more lights and hoofmade trinkets.

Nick looked at Tyrone. "Merry Christmas, sir?"

Tyrone scoffed. "It's beginning to look a lot like stupid."

How the Grinch Stole Hearth's Warming Day

Ponies of every colour trotted about the frigid streets of Fillydelphia, wishing one another good cheer. They adorned themselves with scarves, earmuffs, winter coats over the fronts of their torsos, and in some cases, galoshes. Off in the distance, some ponies could be seen playing in a skating rink. In the opposite direction down the street and much closer by was an entourage of carollers singing something about heartburn or some such. The idyllic scene conjured notions that the war was going splendidly for Equestria's side, or even that there was no war to be had.

"What's the plan?" Tyrone asked.

"Not sure. Which of us outranks the other?"

"You're an engineer specialist, so I probably have the tactical authority," said Tyrone. "Hm. My gut's telling me two different things at once. Firstly, to blast every single pony I see to kingdom come where they belong. And two, Equestria is one whack dimension. We need every bit of intel we can gather."

"I totally see the merit in that," Nick concurred. "So, do the ponies have Jesus? Some of these decorations are strictly derived from Pagan iconography and Christian lore. I'm dying to know why it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. We can't exactly blend in, though."

"Exactly. No, wait. Maybe we can. You know if there's a voice modulator command in these things?"

"Not intentionally, but we can retune the external sensor to make us sound weird. I think I get what you're gettin' at."

The two men bravely strolled into the street, waving their arms and legs with short, jerky motions. Ponies stopped and stared, frightened at the sight of these two bipedal machines lumbering into their midst. Parents shielded their foals, but the ponies certainly were curious creatures. Nick surmised none of them had ever seen the like before. "Beep boop." He spoke with very monotone, staccato inflections. "We are the robots!"

Tyrone played along admirably. He still kind of hoped their plan would fail and they could just blast away willy-nilly. "Happy holidays from Planet Robot."

"Happy evil robot day." Nick tried a jaunty little dance, not knowing how well he could manoeuvre the robot to do what he intended. He was certain the effect came off pretty well somehow. The ponies laughed in amazement at what they must have thought were giant, spectacular toys.

A young foal shouted to his mother, "See, Mommy? Mommy, I told you it was a robot head! And there's a whole robot with it, too!"

An earth stallion with a brown coat, a red tie and collar without a shirt attached, long black hair and a cutey mark of three bags with dollar signs waltzed up to them boldly. "I'll take twenty of them! Let me know how much they cost later."

A rather scrawny-looking unicorn stallion dashed up beside this pony. "Filthy Rich, sir, you have an emergency communique from Ponyville! I definitely think you should take it straight away."

"Dagnabbit, don't you see I'm doing capitalism right now? Fine, lead the way so I may read what you've got in private, secretary Incontinence."

They walked off, and Nick and Tyrone were relieved their bluff worked. Were the ponies really so gullible, or was it not farfetched that in Equestria, a sight as strange as their Goliaths wouldn't fire off any alarms? The latter could hardly be the case considering their vast ferrous deficit. Perhaps not using high-grade alloys like those constituting the Goliaths prevented them recognizing it, or perhaps the paint jobs covered up the finer features of the stuff. Nick realized if he didn't stop worrying about it, he was going to slip up on the good thing they had going here.

Their disguise was attracting too much attention. Ponies gathered closer, asking how much whatever it was they were selling was. Neither Nick nor Tyrone even knew what the Equestrians were expecting, so they bluffed. "Ask our boss," Nick said in his best robot impression that didn't involve falling down some stairs on stage.

"And who's that?" asked a morbidly obese pony which somepony else had called "Butter Blossom".

Nick waffled. "Think up a pony name," he whispered to Tyrone on their internal radio.

"Butt Waft," said Tyrone in his robot voice.

"No, you idiot!" Nick couldn't help but chortle, and neither could Tyrone.

"Butt Waft? Oh yeah, I think I know that pegasus! I'll go find him!" And with that, the ponies clopped away.

Nick and Tyrone were left standing in awe. "Did that seriously work?" Tyrone asked. They dropped the matter and strolled down the street, breaking out their best silly robot walks every time they caught a pony's attention. "Okay, how should we do this?"

"I thought you were in charge, sir," Nick said as polite as he could.

"Which means I listen to my comrades' input." Tyrone grinned. The two missed sharing light-hearted banter.

"Well, um. Ordinarily I'd say a newspaper or a library, but neither of us can read pony script."

"Plus my education weren't so good on the streets," Tyrone said.

"Right, you were from Chicago," Nick remembered. "Only that sign had Russian text on it. Maybe there'll be a few Russian books in a library? If the ponies were trying to learn Russian to invade Earth, translating texts they were already familiar with would help."

"That sounds like a good idea," said Tyrone, "but I'm surprised to see ponies reading in the first place. I mean, how the hell do they turn the pages with fucking hooves?"

Nick frowned and watched a reading, bearded pony sitting on a bench. "The Red Hammer Platoon's science division did say the laws of reality could work differently in a...what was it? Pocket dimension?"

"Beep bop boop." Tyrone waved his arms and thrusted his pelvis at some pony bystander. "Where is the library?" The pony looked very confused but pointed the way for them, watching as they left. They came upon yet another squat brick building, but Nick grappled the Inescapable Truth and shoved him into the alleyway. "What's the deal?" Tyrone wanted to know.

"Quiet. Turn your ears up. You can hear voices nearby."

Tyrone did as he was told and gasped. Rainbow Dash was speaking. "Duh. Duh. Dairy. Daring Duh. Doe. Daring Do an...and the Cur."

Twilight Sparkle spoke next. "Curse."

"Curse oaf."

"Of."

"Of th-the guh. Grr. Groin? Gr-eye-ff."

"Griffin!" Somehow Twilight was sounding remarkably patient.

"Griffin zuh. Guh. Gob. Griffin?" There was a very brief pause. "Griffin's Gobbly. Gob lay. Gobbuhlet."

"Very good, Rainbow Dash! You've definitely been improving. Too bad we don't have time to sit here and read books. We've got to hurry along to Canterlot Castle on the double for Princess—I mean—Kaiser Celestia's summit hearing on the human invaders."

"Right!" The front doors burst open as both ponies flew away and up into the sky.

Nick and Tyrone waited a long while before emerging or even daring to speak. "Canterlot. Trey Bunker said that was their capital, or something like it," Tyrone said.

"What do we do now, sir?" Nick asked.

Tyrone thought about it for a moment. "Same plan as before. We may as well gather intel while we know we can. Just, instead of the library, I got a better idea. You know how you heard their voices?"

"Ever since that grenade in Hainan, my hearing hasn't been stellar. I had mine turned up a little bit. I'm getting a bit more ambient conversations which is annoying, but those two aren't hard to recognize. Beats me how I heard them through a brick wall, though."

"It looks like somepony left a window open up there." Tyrone gestured with the Inescapable Truth's missile launcher. Rather than meditate too strongly on the carelessness of ponies, particularly as Nick, from Canada, was used to the chill and Tyrone, from an American inner city, had grown up used to being without windows, the pair traipsed off down the street.

"We just find some place where lots of ponies congregate, then eavesdrop on 'em," Tyrone explained. This being a fairly commercial district by the look of it, there was little trouble finding an establishment serving drinks, as evidenced by the pictographic sign hanging outside. It showed a frothing mug with both an apple and a shamrock decorating it.

"An Irish pub?" Nick asked. "Somehow, Equestria never struck me as the sort of place where you could get a drink. They were always so destructive, and what harm has someone who's imbibed a little too much liquor ever done?"

"Actually, I think it's just cider," Tyrone pointed out. "See the apple?"

"But the mug is frothing," Nick said. "Only alcoholic cider does that."

"Who the hell puts booze in cider? I mean, I know I like to drink so I do, but cider is just apples, man."

"The British do, almost exclusively."

Tyrone stared at Nick hard. "Man, how the hell hard up do you gotta be? Like, how deep into your alcoholism do you need to be to just assume cider is alcoholic? They the ones that dose eggnog and orange juice, too?"

"Yup."

Tyrone grimaced. "Man, I fuckin' love me some gin, but like hell I'd go dumping cans of beer into just *anything."* The conversation sort of just stopped there, and the pair took up arms outside the front entrance. This building too had an open window,

but not due to forgetfulness. Someone had smashed one of the windows up above and the sounds of bickering drifted right through. Nick and Tyrone almost needn't turn up their Goliaths' ears to listen in.

A mare was yelling at somepony within. "Celdammit, Charlie, who's been drawing dicks all over the bathroom?"

A voice as squeaky as a bent tire rim responded. "Uh, why have you been in the stallions' room, Sweet Bird?"

"Okay, my name is not 'Sweet Bird', it is 'Sweet Pea', and I have not been in the stallions' room. Somepony has been drawing dicks in the mare's room, and since we don't get mare customers and it wasn't me, it must have been a dude."

"Alright well I only drew a couple, and only in the stallions', 'cause when I work, I work, okay?"

"No, you huff glue all day."

"Check it out though, they are pretty funny, am I right? I think, uh, Mac'n'Cheese drew most of 'em, though."

A third voice, another stallion, interjected. "Aw, yeah, I totally ran out of room in the gents'."

Yet another stallion interrupted them in a very snobby and irritated tone. "Do the three of you get paid to stand around and do nothing? Chop chop! This is the busiest time of year, people, and your conversation is *very* annoying to me. Hearth's Warming Eve happens to be one of the few seasons where the customers hit double digits. Now you all remember what to do, right?"

Sweet Pea answered first. "Why certainly, Tennis Racket. When the carollers come a knocking, instead of offering them bits for charity, I invite them in to partake of our beverages, effectively turning hoof-outs into paying customers."

Mac objected. "Uh, I don't feel that that's in line with the true meaning of Hearth's Warming Eve, guys."

"Yeah, I don't give a wagon of fertilizer," said Tennis.

"I thought the meaning of Hearth's Warming Eve was to get presents," Charlie said.

"Not quite, Charlie," said Tennis who sounded like he was taking a sip of something. "You see, the art of gift-giving is all about dazzling the recipient with something grandiose enough yet just under the bargain line that they will feel indebted to you. Gift-giving is an art of instilling reciprocation."

"You're not going to bribe mares into sleeping with you, Tennis," said Sweet Pea. "Last year it just ended up with you nearly going bankrupt trying to compete with some rich nag who kept getting you more expensive gifts in return, which didn't help your psychotic need to outdo everybody."

"Guys, you're all wrong, and you're all going to Tartarus if you don't listen to me," said Mac. "Hearth's Warming Eve is all about how the three tribes of ponies over a thousand years ago came together under threat of Windigos coming to eat their very souls for being sinners."

"Yeah, naw, I'm pretty sure that's a load of Iron Will's manure, Mac," said Tennis.

The eavesdropping was cut short when Tyrone gave Nick a hard thwack. Without saying anything, he directed his ally's attention to the skies. Neither needed to confirm with the other the identity of Fair Weather, the pegasus that had been menacing them since they fled Manehattan. Somehow she had escaped from one of the Inescapable Truth's heat-seeking missiles which had rebounded on Nick and Tyrone, only to strike a tree instead of them. At the moment she was clearly seeking them out, and Tyrone hoped that the mostly-white colouring of Mercy Kill would render them invisible enough against the snow. She slipped out of sight as she drifted far above the street.

Tyrone whispered to Nick on their internal radios, both men skittish about the sight. Here they had protective machines with alarming firepower and they balked. Now wasn't the time to worry about it. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Jog my memory."

"We've seen some crazy horse hockey during the course of this war. Talking ponies that look like they jumped outta cheaply-animated cartoons. Dragons doing all their dragon shit. And then this past year alone really took the damn cake: Wolves made outta

wood, sea ponies, little flying bugs that chew through a man's skull. 'Course I didn't see most of 'em myself, but still. We may have all this firepower, but discretion is the better part of valour."

"What's the worse-r part of valour?" Nick asked.

"Look, what's been the problem thus far with the defence against Equestria?"

Nick was not a presumptuous man, but he was an observant man. He knew what made machines not work and how to improvise them to work again. "We've always rushed in where angels fear. It's almost always been a direct fight. Makes me kind of wonder why they're not all gung ho out to get us on sight."

"Even ponies gotta come from somewhere, don't they? Anyway, you're right. We've never taken time to demoralize the enemy army, and morale has been constantly nipping at our heels all war. Hell, the six of us, each one of us, at one point or another was ready to call it quits. But I've seen fear in the faces of ponies. I've seen bravado, and pants-wetting terror. They're vulnerable just as much as we are to their level of morale."

"What do you propose we do?" Nick asked. "Steal all their, what was it? 'Hearth's Warming' presents away?"

"Precisely. What reason have we got to doubt these wendigo thingies aren't real after the shit we've seen? I'm not pretending to understand the lot of it, but if we can turn their own world against them, all the more power to us, right?"

Two plans came to the minds of Nick and Tyrone. The first was to carry all the presents away using their Goliaths' strength. The second idea was that the Goliaths were noisy, heavy machines and terrible for stealth operations. Maybe it would be better to ditch them under some snow only they knew where. They might be more vulnerable, but they couldn't rely on their armour as a crutch forever. Besides, they were already suited up like cosmonauts for the long-term habitation of those cramped devices, and they'd both like to breathe, even if it was freezing outside. Even if they were being pursued. Perhaps it would be best, they decided, if one of them kept their Goliath on while the other did the looting.

As they were scouting out a garbage dump where they could burn all the presents in one big pile, Nick said to Tyrone, "I'm not sure how I feel about waiting until nightfall when we really ought to reunite with the others."

"We won't be waiting 'til nightfall," said Tyrone. "Check those pegasi off in the distance. You can barely see 'em through the blizzard, but they've been circling around repeatedly now. They're watching the borders. Most home invasions actually occur in broad daylight in the middle of the day. We cause enough disorder, maybe even a riot, and we can slip right past those stupid pegasi maybe without 'em even noticing us."

"I still wish we could just blast our way through."

"Yeah, but that Fair Weather bitch could manipulate the weather and shit. I'm bettin' she created some cold front to mask her body heat and trick the missile. As long as they can do that, I don't think a direct assault's gonna be very effective, and after that mudslide, I learned even these Goliaths can't just go where they please."

So the matter was settled. They stole a couple of street decorations to appear more festive and holiday-oriented. Then they took turns answering the front doors of ponies' homes while the other would sneak in the back. Like Tyrone had implied, many homes were unoccupied in the daytime as ponies were out working or doing whatever it was ponies did. A little robot dance was enough to sway the sappy dopes who answered their doors. They didn't even need to try to sing, so long as they sounded like a text-to-speech program or somewhere just above the quality line of fan dubbing. There was possibly some confusion of them singing human Christmas songs when the Equestrians would be unfamiliar with such culture, but so far they'd had no complaints.

Both men were rather shocked at how ordinary the ponies seemed, albeit saccharine. Their society was almost mind-numbingly bucolic and deeply capitalist, painting them a pastel picture of what the world would be like with the human race eradicated. Aside from all the toys and pinking shears, one of the most common gifts was baking utensils, as though the ponies particularly went through a lot of those. After a while, their curiosity overcame them, and they inspected many of the gifts, usually shaking them then tossing them aside into their shattering pile which was growing into a mountain piece by piece. Then they grew restless and decided to stop wasting time with inspection and continue plundering.

Their infiltration didn't go exactly perfect. On one occasion a senile old nag in a rocking chair kept demanding they find her fishing tackle, which they didn't. With another incident, Nick turned around to encounter a young filly with a curly red mane and large, thick glasses. She had a cutie mark of a candy cane. "Merry Christmas, little girl," said Nick. Then he shot her square in the forehead.

Being an urban environment, apartment buildings provided a problem, somewhat. Using the Goliaths' radar, either Nick or Tyrone could scour the interior of a complex while the other crossed the fire escapes. There was only so much that two men could do by themselves, and they began to worry about office parties, whether or not they should loot the stores, and if there was anything else they were overlooking to truly grant the ponies a hopeless winter tiding. Ultimately the pair decided not to go overboard, especially since the mountain of presents at the dumping site had reached roughly three to four times their own height.

Once they were both suited back up into their Goliaths, Nick drew Mercy Kill's flaming chainsaw and set the pile ablaze with it. The dry wood from the large number of wagon wheels helped bring the flames to a raging inferno, and the cloudy sky darkened further from the smoke. Climbing to the top of a short building nearby, they waited.

Eventually the heat and light and smothering smoke drew the attention of curious ponies that flocked to the scene. There was a lengthy period of murmuring to one another. Tyrone chuckled to himself, imagining the distress they must have been facing. Nick perspired to wonder when something definitive would happen. After all this, the ponies formed a gigantic circle around the massive bonfire and began to sing.

Lorem ipsum
Dolor sit amet
Consectetur
Ph'nglui fhtagn

"The hell?" Nick turned up Mercy Kill's listening device to make sure of what he was hearing.

Tyrone was bewildered. "They're singing without presents? Seriously? They're singing without their tiaras, makeup, and dresses? They sing without spa coupons and cafe steam presses? They sing without candy, they sing without pets. They sing without dubstep on eight-track cassette!"

"Oh shit, here comes the po-po." Nick pointed out a number of pegasi hovering toward the smoke.

Naturally the two tuned their Goliaths to hear what was being said. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! What in the hay is going on here?" Fair Weather shouted as loud as she could to be heard by as many ponies as possible without hurting her voice. "You there, the disturbingly anorexic pony! Explain this all!"

The cyan pony in question resembled an elderly mare with five o'clock shadow. He had a very womanly mane of faded blond and was very noisy. "Yo yo yo, biznatchitatchithatchitch! You can't be tellin' me you ain't rememberin' ol' Zephyr Breeze! Why you's is jus' tellin' me t'day to git my bad self patrollin', 'cept you ain't done told me none of what I'm s'posed to do!"

"What the hell is that voice?" Nick asked.

"I don't like it one bit," Tyrone said.

Even though Zephyr's response had little to nothing to do with Fair Weather's question, the latter allowed herself to be drawn into a pointless argument. There are very few other kinds of arguments, particularly as even when one makes a good point, the other side opts to feign contradiction to mask ignorance. Fair Weather was incensed. "What are you even saying? Talk normal! I shouldn't have to tell you how to patrol. You're just supposed to know how to do it! You think it's my responsibility to explain how to do the things I tell you to do?"

"Chill a bitch ass down, sweet cheeks!" said Zephyr. He bobbed and jerked his head around quite a lot, like an ostrich being mind-boggled. "Nigra gotsta do things his own style. Awright, ho, we cool."

Nick readied Mercy Kill's rail gun but Tyrone requested he not. "We should just leave now," Nick said.

Tyrone scoped out the skies. "Not just yet. There are a few lingering pegasi, but they're heading towards the fire now."

So they waited a bit longer. When Nick started to get a bit antsy, Tyrone relented. The two crept off to the side of the building opposite to the scene at the bonfire and leapt down into the snowbank below. From there, they trudged through the alleyway, across an open street, and down a perpendicular road to make a beeline for the outskirts of the city.

No sooner had Tyrone said, "Keep a watch out for bogeys," then he added, "There, look!" He pointed out a pegasus flying ahead of them in the distance. Nick raised his rail gun and fired. By some stroke of luck, his aim held true and the pony was struck down. They could not see the impact, but saw the enemy plummet from the sky exactly in the way bricks do. They exchanged elated

grins. Things were looking up for a change. Sure, whatever chaos they may have caused was not as pronounced as they could have hoped for, but here they were, home free. So they thought, but that was obvious, right?

Their elation mixed with trepidation as they passed from the farthest buildings into open, sprawling fields of snow and out into the blizzard once more which was less raging now than it had been before their arrival. It still obfuscated their vision which was why they failed the notice the barrier until they were almost right upon it. There was a glossy, translucent wall that stretched for an indefinite distance in either side and rose well above their heads, sloping toward them like an unfinished dome.

"What the hell you make of this?" Tyrone asked.

"Wall of ice. You get them in Canada from time to time," said Nick.

Tyrone cocked a brow. "What, just springing up from the ground?"

Nick offered a hard-to-see smile. "Nah, just joshing you, but I have seen some terrible icy weather. I've seen a whole bus full of children get iced over so they couldn't open the doors. This kinda looks like that, but, well, how'd it get this shape?"

"I'm tellin' you, man, nothin' makes a lick of sense in this damn dimension! Good thing we got tools to bust through it."

"Ordinarily I'd disagree, but ordinarily we don't have heavy-duty powered armour with giant flaming chainsaws." Nick revved his chainsaw arm up and commenced blazing away at the offending obstacle. The ice was somewhat thick but plenty sturdy. It took more than a few seconds before Nick had scraped through to the opposite side, sending a huge section of the ice wall cracking, shattering, and crumbling away.

This brought with it the cavalry. Despite the snow's temperature and obscuring factor, the fast-flying pegasi could catch up with the lumbering Goliaths in a matter of minutes. The wind and the buffeting hail that was now springing down slowed them down not one whit. The Inescapable Truth and Mercy Kill meanwhile were knee-deep in snow that stretched for miles of wilderness. Anyone who's ever shovelled a driveway could tell you snow is heavy, but one doesn't need know exactly how heavy to clear a path for the cars. The weight of snow varies by density, which can be increased by compaction, usually by the snow retaining a higher concentration of water. Under the right conditions, your driveway might carry over a ton of snow to shovel. This snow was definitely of the damp variety.

"Remind me to wring Bandelt's neck if we ever get back home!" Tyrone yelled, even though he didn't need to. "'Perfectly encapsulated, self-sustaining environment' my big, beautiful ass! What about this goddamn outside environment?"

Nick was about to rattle off several unhelpful factoids about snow when the oncoming pegasi swooped down in front of them. This time he didn't hesitate to launch a foot-long nail from his rail gun, except this time it missed.

"They told me to expect the 'shoot first' routine with you humans," Fair Weather said. "I was going to offer you mercy, but you did come here as our enemies after all."

Nick and Tyrone both fired off their miniguns, but the wily pegasi proved too swift, too acrobatic for their aim. Even as they were busy dodging, the ponies continued to speak their tiny little minds. "Egad, are those really what humans look like?" said a pegasus mare. She had off-white colouring with a candy-cane motif to her hair and a red bow. "They look so bulky and stiff! I thought they'd be more meat-like."

Fair Weather had a grave tone. "They're wearing some kind of special armour, but even the toughest boulders can turn brittle under enough thermal stress." With a quick barrel roll, she snagged a particularly dark piece of cloud, riding it forward like a sled. She screeched to a halt, and from that cloud shot forth a hail of freezing rain that jabbed over every inch of the Inescapable Truth like javelins that solidified on contact.

Tyrone had no idea what to expect from this attack. He thought he ought to be relieved he wasn't being electrocuted again. He raised the Inescapable Truth's minigun arm, struggling against the rapidly solidifying ice, but when he tried to fire, the rotating barrel mechanism jammed. Nick's attempt to fire on Fair Weather was foiled by her hiding from view behind her cloud and making a break for it to the cloudy sky above. From there, her voice boomed like thunder from above unseen. "You invaders are hopeless. Most pegasi spend their careers in weather manipulation. Some make snowflakes, others make rainbows. I've mastered all the jobs. I just have a knack for it, I guess. This isn't even the start of what I can do."

The cloud cover pushed downward, forming a convex bowl shape. The bowl sharpened to a point, and the three other pegasi soared up, up, up. Nick was about to start taking them out when the obnoxious, anorexic cyan pony that resembled a member of the

Rocky Horror Picture Show without his lingerie. "What? Back that flank up, honey fly! Yeah, okay! How comes you all gone off without me, eh? How's a pimp daddy like myself supposed to know when y'all gettin' in motion if'n y'all don't holler at me?"

Nick shot him through the head with a rail gun nail. These nails were sized based on how long he held the trigger down, and this nail was roughly a foot and a half or more long. It stopped such that both ends poked out of either side of Flutter Brutter's skull. His legs collapsed out from underneath him and he fell to his belly, dead. Tyrone texted Mercy Kill's visor HUD with applause emoji spam.

By now, a full-on vortex had spawned, touching down on the dense snow, chilling the particles further so they could scatter in the wind. Nick could just see three ponies flying around the circumference in the same direction as if guiding the winds into this twister formation, herding it toward the two Delta Squad mates. The ponies were moving at such a speed and such a distance that Nick lacked confidence he could get another lucky shot in, let alone three more. He couldn't even see Fair Weather amongst the violent clouds.

"Nick, get outta here!"

Nick ignored Tyrone. He stood his ground, raised his rail nail gun, and held down the trigger. About five feet of hot metal shot forth, way too heavy to fly very far at all at any sort of impetus. It sailed in a pitiful arc and managed to land half a meter in front of the tornado. None of the ponies even noticed this pathetic display to taunt him. They were too busy spinning the vortex faster, guiding it steadily toward their enemies in a torrent of hail and freezing cold. Nick did not fire again. Instead, the tornado blew right over the length of metal he'd left jutting into the snow, and sucked up his fallen projectile, rendering it projectile once more. It flung about wildly, wobbling its sharp ends at frantic angles.

A cerulean stallion with a flat, jagged sea-green mane and an upside-down lightning bolt for a cutie mark let out a holler as part of the giant nail slashed deep across his flank. Blood droplets vanished into the haze of snow, and though the initial wound had not been lethal, it was enough to send the pegasus whizzing away from the centrifugal force, breaking the tornado's orbit. His legs flailed uselessly as though he could force himself to a screeching halt in the air. Instead he landed face-first with a muffled crunch in a bank of snow several long meters off. He did not move again.

"Sky Stinger!" A white pegasus mare with a wavy pastel mane and some kind of star cutie mark who'd been flying just below the wounded stallion lost her concentration.

From up above came Fair Weather's shouting voice. "Vapour Trail! Don't lose your focus!"

Vapour Trail wasn't listening. She grew even more panicked as the entire tornado became tinted in red. She screamed. "His blood! No no no no no!" But it wasn't Sky Stinger's blood. He hadn't lost enough of it to leave the tornado looking like a blending barber Shoppe pole. A hoof clipped the top of Vapour Trail's head, though it didn't hit her hard enough. Vapour Trail tried to scream again, but she lost her voice. She regained it only enough to squeak out, "Angel Wings!"

The other light-coloured mare with the red bow had been impaled through the side of her trunk by Nick's nail. It had punctured a lung and her heart. Her eyes were rolling back in her head, and her body was twitching as it careened sideways away from the vortex. Her body had gone into shock from a sudden loss of blood as the crimson gushed out from her wound. Vapour Trail sobbed, drifting away from the tornado. She looked about wildly, from Angel Wings to the two Goliaths then ultimately sped off in Sky Stinger's location. She spent much of the next few moments there before fleeing off by herself.

"Celestia preserve us! What are you incompetents doing?" Fair Weather shouted at her wounded and demoralized underlings to support her, but they had been rendered incapacitated one way or another. Angel Wings' corpse had crashed into the snow which was soon stained red. Fair Weather may have mastered the techniques of a variety of weather manipulations, but that did not make the process possible by her lonesome. She lost all control of the reckless tornado which pounded down upon both Nick and Tyrone before either of them could break away, not that Tyrone yet could.

Nick was lost again in a fog, this time pink in hue, white with snow, hail and freezing rain, and red from blood. He tried to clean his visor with his windshield wipers, but the droplets of water that stuck to him froze on impact, just like how Tyrone had been encased in a bluster of ice. As Mercy Kill became encased in jagged ice, he sighed. "Sorry, Tyrone. I couldn't get away. I did manage to take down three of them, it looked like." He had not paid attention to the sight of Vapour Trail running away.

"Hey, there's only two of us to get, so that's more than they can say," said Tyrone.

"Six, sir," Nick reminded him.

"Oh, yeah."

The pogonip passed, and Fair Weather strolled up to the two Goliaths, a malevolent but calm look on her face. "That was quite the resistance you put up there," she said.

"Well we are the Human Resistance," said Nick.

"Too bad for you I have you both right where I want you. I can continue to bury you under layer after layer of ice, or I can wait for the sun to beat down on you hotter than a thousand hells and crack those stupid metal capsules wide apart."

"Yeah, well, there's one thing you're forgetting," Nick said.

Fair Weather shook her head. "It doesn't matter now."

"Nick, don't tell her anything!" Tyrone said.

Fair Weather laughed. "What? What could you possibly have to say to me that would pique my interest? The location of your friends? They're bound to be found eventually. You'd have come in a larger force than the six of you if this wasn't some last-ditch effort on the part of your species. We have but to finish you all off. Then we'll be free to invade a thoroughly demoralized Earth and finish this war for supremacy once and for all."

Nick's external radio crackled.

"What was that? I didn't catch it." Annoyed, Fair Weather hovered over to Nick's visor. "I can see you in there. Just tell me your final words already so we can finish this."

Nick had been speaking with Tyrone on their internal radios this whole conversation. "Follow my lead," Nick had said. "Make like I'm going to spill the beans. I wanna lure her in close." Now Mercy Kill's sawblade was glowing bright red. Steam was issuing forth as the ice cracked around his flaming chainsaw. The vibration of the saw loosened the ice up his arm enough for one swift swing that bisected the screaming Fair Weather in an asymmetrical diagonal blow. She fell to pieces as her hind legs were chopped apart, her abdomen burst open, and her left eye shattered as it was sawed apart.

Fair Weather lay dead in multiple pieces. Nick and Tyrone were more or less frozen on the spot. The tornado had dissipated, bringing in its wake a break in the cloud cover overhead. Not content to wait for a thaw, both men turned their thermostats as high as they could stand, and Nick was especially cautious about sawing loose his right leg. Wiggling his free limbs helped break him loose of the rest of the ice, and though Tyrone was uneasy, Nick was able to free his friend in a similar fashion. They checked the operation of their Goliaths and were certain they were fine enough to keep going.

"Awaiting your orders, sir," Nick said with some relief.

Tyrone had to give it a think. He reviewed some of what had happened that day. "There was a pony back in Fillydelphia that got some 'emergency' message from Ponyville. Maybe we oughta head there."

17. Haich Versus P the Musical

Swimming had been fucked up for Logan Walker ever since his head had been reattached backwards by a sadistic vampony in a bit of a rush. Walking, and his other motor controls, had required a gruelling period of physical therapy to recquire, but he never quite got the hang of swimming again. He'd been great at it before. Not some Olympic champion, mind you, but he had once considered it a notch on his belt of manhood. There were so many other things Logan was never able to enjoy again ever since he'd been beheaded back in Africa. Maybe that was some of the reason why he'd lost track of Irish somewhere under the water, if one needed an excuse besides the tried and true "sometimes these things just happen".

A strong current carried the two along the coast south from Manehattan, possibly pushed by tremors related to the city's destruction. It was hard to tell in the swirling, underwater void. Logan had to keep reminding himself that the Goliaths were designed to be waterproof. That was the point. They had to be self-containing environments, because there was no telling what the atmosphere in Equestria could have been like. By the time he thought of reminding Irish of this, it was too late. He tried to raise Irish on the radio, but there was no response. Not even the third or fifth time he tried. As all things are wont to do, the waters slowed, and Logan reached land.

Somehow dragging himself along the water's floor had taken it out of him, and Logan needed a breather. That was when Logan saw the blip on the radar. Knowing Scorn & Spite was the likeliest candidate of its source, he headed in that direction. Along the way,

his mind wiled over the other titbits of the Goliaths he had learned while assisting in a very limited capacity during their development. He knew they could withstand a great deal of pressure and would work to an impressive depth undersea. He knew Franz Bandelt had wanted to test their durability under severe g-forces. His mind kept struggling to hold onto these redundant thoughts because when his mind didn't have something to occupy itself, it would go back to his head. His death, which he had only a hazy recollection of. His equally hazy enthrallment by Nightmare Moon. He could never be with a woman again now. Drinking a beer was a struggle, as he despised those special but partially convenient hats devised for hands-free drinking. Frustrating took on a whole new meaning when frustration was felt every waking second. "Every" is a word which here means "without exclusion".

Logan found Scorn & Spite. He did not find Irish. Scorn & Spite lay on its back, its headpiece several feet away, and its back slid open to reveal a lack of occupancy. Logan did not fear the worst, however. Not yet. He knew that bad wasn't always the worst, and furthermore, there was something he was still capable of despite his current physiological makeup. He could track. He'd learned it from his childhood in the outback. The Australian one, that is. Judging from his immediate vicinity, there had been no struggle. Irish had not been killed here, if at all. He'd been dragged away based on the disturbance of the dirt and grass.

Following him proved a pickle, however. Logan couldn't just leave Scorn & Spite unattended. Piecing the Goliath back together, he magnetized it to his back, which proved difficult given Logan's impairment. He had to set Scorn & Spite down every so often just to get a good look where he was going. The trail was fairly easy to follow, as it led to the city that had been in easy eyeshot from the shoreline. Near the waterfront was a long brick building whose exterior side had been painted in large stencilled words: "Baltimare Shipping". So Logan arrived in the city of Baltimare.

Detouring through the shipping warehouse, Logan found myriad goods with which to concoct a hiding spot for Scorn & Spite. There didn't seem to be any workers inside the building, although just outside he had overheard two earth stallions planning to get an extra-large order of Cajun hay fries. Did they have a pony version of Paul Prudhomme or something? He found one large box in the way back, marked it with the word "HAM" and scuttled another box to wear over his Fealty. He didn't have a clue who would fall for a giant, moving wooden box with eye holes punctured through it, but then these ponies seemed awfully stupid. From what he observed as he roved through town, following the tracks of Irish's disappearance, the ponies were obsessed with the hubbub of commerce, complaining about their jobs, bossing around their subordinate employees, speaking of presumed competitors with wistful, unsettled tones. For the first time in a long time, Logan was surprised with his ability to pick up on the subtle nuances of pony culture. He had his own theories on why it appeared to mirror human culture so closely, even so far as to speak Russian, but more importantly he remembered how things were traveling the world in the army and picking up on the interpersonal nuances in other cultures.

Logan surmised that whoever—or more likely whatever, considering it had to be ponies—had made off with Irish had been trying to avoid detection as well. His destination was a building much taller and older-looking than the majority of other buildings, at least in this area of the city. To him, it resembled some kind of grand, old-timey theatre. What was it Jenny had said? Something about how some worlds were more similar than others? This defied all logic to Logan, but "infinite possibility" could mean infinitesimal changes amongst glaring ones. He put it out of his mind. He didn't see how knowing that was pertinent at this point. He couldn't be certain through which way in Irish had been brought. He theorized the rear entrance was for staff and that if the building wasn't totally empty, that's where ponies ought to be. His goal right now was to avoid detection. The front entrance, on the other hand, was devoid of attention save for the occasional passer-by who made no move to gain entry as he watched.

It was through here he entered, ditching his pilfered box at a poorly-stocked concessions. He could hear sound of some sort. Muffled music, very, very quiet. It was reverberating against the doors that ostensibly led into the theatre proper. Estimating what he thought would be the side entrance, he seized the door handle with Fealty's manipulator arm and pulled as gently as he could. It didn't budge because it was a push door, so he pushed and headed on inside.

It was dark in this far corner of the theatre. This was a proper palace from the looks of things, with balcony seats above, several private balconies to either side, and many, many rows of seats. He shuddered to think of all the ponies cramming this place to the limit. The singing was far louder, rapturous and almost entirely smooth, but roving as if the vocalist was being hurried away on a dangerous mine cart ride. "Vocalist" is a word which here means "a dedicated singer whose instrument is his or her voice". There are very few dedicated vocalists anymore. Logan wasn't really paying all that much attention to what he was hearing.

What he was seeing painted a more alarming picture than some catchy show tune. Set pieces decorated the stage. A dress rehearsal was going on, with ponies in costume. A lot of their manes were cropped short, and they were wearing military coats resembling inaccurate portrayals of the Human Resistance marine fatigues. The scenery resembled the capitol building at Berlin, a sight which Logan still could not forget even after everything that had happened since their fateful first mission. If Irish were here, even he would be able to see plain as day this musical was going to be connected with the war with Equestria.

Logan's attention then returned to the singer, a unicorn mare in what appeared to be ghostly make-up. "We'll take it from the top again," she said. Then she started to sing.

On wings of steel

With a heart of flame
This damaged earth
We shall reclaim
I was born on a field flame-worn from war
Disinterred from what came before
No one retreats
From destiny
We were drafted into life
We won't be done
Until the day is won
Before the setting sun

Haich Versus P: The Musical

Irish's eyes ached. They felt as if someone had driven daggers all the way through them. Before he came to, they stung, but then they throbbed with pain. He grabbed his hands over them and gasped out. He knew pain. He knew it always hurt. "Ach! What the bloody hell have they done to my eyes? Dammit! Damn pony bastards! They've blinded me!" He rolled about on the floor, wincing at the light. He must have been able to see if he could see light, even if that light hurt just to look at. Still unable to determine what he was looking at, he banged against something hard and metal. He grabbed onto it, finding bars. A voice called to him, and he rolled back over in its direction.

"Now why would we blind you?" A brown-orange pegasus stallion gradually materialized into Irish's blurry, blinding view. He had a dark brown cloud for a cutie mark. "We have so much to show you, hyu-mon." Sweeping a foreleg in a dramatic gesture, the pegasus stepped aside. "I, Gaseous Anomaly, proudly present some lesser-known productions of comedy and tragedy, the quality of such have the capacity to drive ponies—erm, and of course humans also—insane! And I don't mean 'good' quality either, oh no. These playlets have been known to cause severe cerebral haemorrhaging in our lab rats! I like to think they smell worse than Cheese Sandwich separating his curds and whey." Here Gaseous Anomaly lapsed into a maleficent laughter.

Irish scowled. It was one of his few effective facial expressions after having all his flesh melted off last year. Perhaps more because of him being a mass of ugly (not to mention lacking equine facial patterns), Gaseous Anomaly visibly recoiled at the sight. The pony kept talking, however. "We've noticed, mostly from you cursing in your sleep, that you have the same accent as renowned Shireland playwright, Samuel Bucking. Therefore, my understudy colleagues and I shall perform for you several scenes of his more defining works."

It is a sad indication of the age, but oftentimes when people hear new information, their brain enters into a "fight or flight" state despite not being in any actual danger. The mind will attempt to "flee" by shutting out all comprehension ability. The face will screw up into a look of anger, and the queries begin. Irish voiced no such questions, but the other effects did occur in his mind. He looked very, very confused at all that the pony had said, but there was little else he could do inside his cage.

"Presenting the thespian stylings of Botfly and Zareah!" Gaseous did a little twirl with one foreleg and stepped aside.

"Thespian? They're gay women?" Irish asked dumbly. Botfly was an earth pony mare with a dirty blonde mane, a nutmeg-brown coat with a pink nose, and garish speckles all over her legs and around her mouth. Her cutie mark resembled a maggot, and she routinely kept her eyes no more than halfway open if they opened at all. Zareah was more of a shock; of all the ponies, Irish had never seen a zebra before, and Zareah was either white with black stripes or black with white stripes. Where other ponies had a cutie mark, she had some kind of sigil of lines that sort of resembled a bee.

Said Zareah, "Why I am here, you must know; I am waiting for Godot."

"Qua qua qua qua," Botfly said in a dozy voice.

"Oh, bloody hell," said Irish. "Put me back on the crucifix now."

Logan did not at first recognize the wonderful opportunity breaking into the Baltimare storehouse had been. Not only was it a diverse cache of potentially useful items, but leaving Scorn & Spite hidden away enabled it to record any conversations held within the building. After a long period of silence, the great wooden door creaked open. "Come inside," said a stallion's voice, and as multiple sets of hooves clopped inside, the door shut with a bang.

"It's in the back here, under the heaviest security," said the same gruff voice. Under his breath, he added, "Like you've been nagging every week since it got here."

"I should certainly hope so," replied a lilting male voice with a dutiful inflection. It was difficult to tell from his voice whether he was being snide or worried. "You've had your unicorns applying a regular regimen of shield spells, correct?"

"Yeah, oh yeah, that. Certainly, Mr Sunburst."

"Good, good, good. This is, dare I say, the most priceless artefact in all of Equestria we're discussing. I don't suppose I could have a look at it, could I? That is why I requested you, the warehouse supervisor."

"It's your deal-y. Be my guest," said the supervisor. They trotted closer to Scorn & Spite's location. "You two, undo shield spells."

There was the sound of some kind of wavering, high-pitched but not unpleasant to hear energy. The noise was reminiscent of the draining of a faucet. Then, Sunburst spoke again. "Thank you. You two may leave us now." He waited until the departing hoof steps had exited through that loud wooden door before resuming his conversation. "Well, I see the artefact has been well taken care of. Hm. Yes. There is one thing disappointing me however."

"Huh? What's that?" The supervisor sounded impatient.

"You never asked me for the password." Sunburst sighed. "But I suppose it matters not now. Come, let's have a look at it." The sound of quiet, coursing energy was hidden beneath the blanking of chains and the creaking and clattering of heavy wood. Scorn & Spite, even hidden inside its crate, was able to pick up a slight blue glow.

After a moment of quiet, the supervisor let out a breath. "Wow." His tough demeanour had softened.

"Wow is right, my friend," Sunburst said with quiet humility. "What you see here houses all the potent magic for the heir of the empire where it was founded. Magic beyond the ken of ordinary unicorns. Beyond all ponies. Beyond, in theory, even magic as we know it. You feel something when you look at it, don't you? Splendid bliss. A paradise the likes we only dream of after death. But the heir is gone. She departed for the world of humans some time ago with her husband, the captain of the guard, and we've lost contact with there somehow."

"But uh, ain't the war goin' well?" asked the supervisor.

"We have no idea. The last contact we had was from that narcissistic magician, Trixie, and all she said was that Discord, a draconequus of chaos, had annexed the whole operation. She left with a potent artefact known as the Alicorn Amulet and hasn't returned." Here he took on a tone as if he was rambling to himself. "A smug amplifier if ever there was one, yes, but the dark magic that would invariably spill out and backfire should have decimated the human world even had she failed."

"Uh, Mr Sunburst?"

"Oh, pardon me. As I was saying, and this is just between you and me, the plan is to display this item at the opera house in town during tonight's opening performance. The inspiration from all those ponies should provide it the fuel it needs to...well, one can't be exactly sure, but I have theorized a few outcomes."

"Like what?"

"Well, we're banking on this bringing back the lost empire from a millennium past. That's where I've been for the past several years—digging this thing out from under a ton of snow where it was gradually re-materializing itself. Somehow, it was devoid of its magic then, but since it's been in contact with ponies ever since Earth was closed off, it's been feeding."

"What'll that accomplish? Revitalizing our dwindling population?" The supervisor sounded intrigued by this point.

Sunburst hummed thoughtfully. "That is one potential purpose, but not what I had in mind. I've been researching this lost empire my entire career, and there is very little to work with in the public catalogues. The frozen north was home to a strangely diverse population a thousand years ago, including the most fearsome fighting force ponykind has ever seen. The tyrant unicorn king had enslaved the population, but it was in many ways the most advanced society civilization had known at the time. If these stories are true, Equestria could truly become a force to be reckoned with, enough to finally bring an end to this disgusting conflict once and for all, and appease these deranged gods."

"The what now?" The supervisor sounded startled.

"Oh, nothing. Forget that last part. It isn't important...yet."

"You want I should call the unicorns back in here, Mr Sunburst?"

"Why ever for?" Sunburst asked. "No, I'll be taking the Crystal Heart with me from here on out."

Logan still wasn't sure of what he was seeing. He wasn't even certain how long he stood there watching the rehearsals going on. What it was was a war re-enactment of sorts, set to earworm music. "Earworm" is a term which here refers to infectious music which keeps its tune running through your head long after you've grown sick and tired of it. The image the word conjures up is not meant to be a pretty one.

The ponies were most definitely attempting to dress up like the members of Delta Squad. This made Logan uneasy on more levels than he could count. The level of accuracy was down to the mane cuts. What exactly was the pony perspective on this war? Logan couldn't remember ever wondering that before. Back in Afghanistan, he'd wondered about the people he had to fight. He wondered what it was like to want to live under the oppressive Taliban regime. He could never quite imagine believing in such preposterous fundamentalism and hatred, but he still wondered what his enemies were thinking. With the ponies, they'd been so alien. So vicious. He'd been too disgusted with their crimes. What also puzzled him was the way they were portraying each battle. He knew it was no surprise the ponies would glorify themselves and portray their enemies as the perpetrators. That was the nature of propaganda. Of war. Why, then, were the members of Delta Squad featured so prominently in every number?

Logan knew he couldn't just stand there indefinitely and wait on Irish to rescue himself. He edged closer, but kept wondering how the ponies would react to his presence. They still hadn't noticed him there on the very edge of the theatre, cast into darkness. When he got closer, he overheard an argument between the unicorn mare who was acting as some kind of narrator, and another pony just off stage in front of her.

The unicorn was laughing. "Seriously? It's opening night, and they're still lodging the same old complaints about the premise? It's a horror musical. We're seeing the war through the enemies' eyes. Through the perspective of their leaders' dead brother. I'm not asking ponies to sympathize with their oppressors. That's just a ridiculous accusation. I'm asking them to know thy enemy, and they can draw their own conclusions from there. Future generations are going to wanna know what this war was about."

"Look, theatre management has received numerous concerns. We're in business to stay in business, Mixolydia" said the fat, moustached stallion.

"You said yourself the theatre was completely booked tonight. That's proof right there that ponies' curiosity will win out. They won't be able to resist the temptation of pure shock value. That and getting to hear moi sing always fills the house." Though her words were confident, her tone came across as slightly modest to Logan. Mixolydia had a pale butter-yellow pelt and a mane and tail of burnt sienna pulled into a loose, spiralling bun. She had a cutie mark of a G clef and a swirling musical staff. She was also a fatty.

Every inch he got closer to the ponies only brought more confusing questions to Logan's mind. By that point he was getting antsy about *not* doing anything, so he chose to interrupt. "Beep boop," he said, coincidentally getting an idea to pretend he was some manner of robot. He wasn't sure ponies would know what one was, but wasn't it worth a shot?

Mixolydia gave him an annoyed stare, which is not a very rational reaction to something ludicrous you haven't seen before. "What in Tartarus are you supposed to be?" she asked as though she were in charge. She probably was. "There's no call for a prop looking like that."

"I am a torture device designed to extract information from the prisoner," Logan said in a rather lazy attempt at a monotone.

Mixolydia blinked for a second as though she had no idea what he was talking about, which Logan realized just then could very well be a possibility. Why would a theatre troupe be holding someone hostage? That's always a good question to seek out the answer to. "Oh. Huh. Are we doing that? Well, if you say so. Lemme show you the way."

From backstage, Mixolydia led Logan down a good many flights of stairs. He was surprised an opera house would have so many subbasements, but there he was. There is oftentimes a certain impetus many people have to think aloud. "This sure is a lot of stairs." Logan remembered to use his robotic voice.

"It sure is." Mixolydia's reply was not very conversational. Logan thought better of probing further, as he felt he was conspicuous enough as it was. The pair descended to the very bottom. Along the way, Logan had a strong urge to just open fire, but he

knew that with Irish trapped somewhere unseen without Scorn & Spite, that would be a very risky move. Just because he was certain he could blow through these ponies without any considerable opposition did not mean he should do so just yet. Still, he did not like how far underground they were going, and he did not like the looks of the heavy metal door standing before them at the end. Mixolydia unlocked it, and beyond was a final short staircase leading into a well-lit room.

This was the room where Irish was being kept in a cage. Within, some ponies were speaking amongst themselves in loud, projected voices. The last thing Logan made out before they were interrupted was Gaseous Anomaly saying, "What do you mean, an African or Asiatic rhinoceros?"

"Will you spinach-chins quit clowning around down here?" Mixolydia said for some reason. "Look sharpish. This ugly device beside me is to be used for interrogating the prisoner somehow. You see to it that it completes its job and doesn't leave this room. Capisce?" She didn't wait for an answer. She just stormed up the stairs and slammed the door behind her with her magic.

"Is she mad at us?" Botfly still had that sleepy smile on her face.

"Nah," said Gaseous Anomaly. "She's usually the sensitive artist type, but this new musical's been like a pet project to her. When she's stressed, she acts more like the snobby prima donna type." The ponies muttered amongst themselves, forgetting about Irish and Fealty for the time being.

Irish by this point was still only staring at Fealty, at the very least smart enough not to reveal his hidden knowledge, mostly because he was curious as to what Logan was up to. He was looking fairly sick as well, like someone whose stomach was severely upset. Through his visor, Logan couldn't quite discern Irish's sweaty, clammy complexion, but he could see his friend was feeling unwell physically. Logan approached the cage, his heavy footsteps getting everypony's notice. "Beep boop," he said in his gruff Australian accent. "Commencing interrogation of prisoner."

"Is that a robot?" Botfly asked. "I thought they said 'zip zop'. And walked on four legs."

"All our best scholars agreed upon that we know little of the automaton," said Zareah.

"How did you get here?" Irish failed to realize the danger of his question. It made him sound familiar with this "interrogation device".

Somehow, Logan's mind managed to roll with the flow. "You shall not determine an escape route, human. It is I who shall ask the questions." He leaned Fealty's visor up against the bars of Irish's cage and reduced the opacity on its tint. He typed furiously, and Irish followed the backwards message appearing on the little window in front of Logan's face: "Irish you dummy stop blowing my cover so we can get out of here."

"Hey!"

"Scanning. Scanning. This human's mind is very weak like a potato. I shall have to extricate him to the out of doors to jog his memory," Logan said.

"What, you mean that's it?" Gaseous floated over to the stairs leading to the only exit. "That's the extent of your farce? You're already trying to leave?"

"Beep boop. Does not compute. Please restate query," Logan tried. He darkened his visor's tint again.

"We brought your human friend down here. Mixolydia was the one who magicked open his metal can thing. She only played along with your poorly contrived and weak narrative plan to get you down here faster."

Logan scoffed. "What is *that* supposed to mean, 'weak narrative'? Is that just a thing you say when you run out of more sensible gibberish?"

"They put all my weapons on that table. All they left me with was my jumpsuit," Irish said.

Logan examined the barred cage. Like virtually all Equestrian construction he'd seen so far, it didn't appear very durable. Obviously Irish couldn't break out, but a Goliath? "What makes you think we aren't going to just walk out of here?" Fealty's manipulator arm grabbed one of the bars and pried it out of place. He fit both arms into this widened gap and pushed them apart, making a wide enough space for Irish to slip through. "Do you seriously expect to stop us?"

"No, *we're* not going to stop you." Gaseous Anomaly moved away from the stairs to join Botfly and Zareah in the opposite corner.

"Well okay then," said Logan. "Come on, Irish." He formed a kind of body shield for Irish to exit the cage. Both men kept wary stares on the three ponies in the room with them. Logan waited while Irish hastily collected his confiscated things like a trick-or-treater at that one house with the "please take only one" bowl on the front stoop. Both men next headed up the staircase with Irish going first and Logan keeping a watch on the Equestrians who still hadn't made a move on them.

"Uh, Logan? We got a little problem with the door," said Irish.

"Is it a push door?" Logan asked.

"No. I opened it, but look."

The two muttered as Logan shuffled to reach around Irish. The door was open, but the way was not clear. A transparent yellow barrier of magical energy filled the doorway. "What sorta koala droppings is this?" Logan asked.

"Phew, what a long wait for a delivery," Gaseous Anomaly said. "I said that *we* weren't going to stop you. We don't need to if executive producer Mixolydia already did."

Logan stomped back down the stairs and gestured up them with Fealty. "Hold on, she was rehearsing singing. You're telling me there's a producer who actually does any work? And besides that, you mean nothing can get up there?"

"That's right," said Gaseous Anomaly.

"So you're just going to suffocate down here?"

"Well, no. I believe nothing solid can get through. Air is fine. Not wind though." The pegasus looked to his two compatriots. "Is that right? I don't get the finer details on how magic works."

"I think there's a vent," said Botfly.

"So let me get this straight," Logan said. "There's nothing stopping me from doing this." He fired a slew from his heavy assault rifle. Blazing holes ripped open in the bodies of the three actor ponies. They barely had time to register the pain before they each died bloody. "And you have no way of running out of here either."

"Now they don't," pointed out Irish.

"Here, move aside. I'm gonna see what Fealty can do about this weird magic bullshit."

"Can't I just shoot it?" Irish whipped out his Ruger Mark II.

"No, don't shoot it, you imbecile!" Logan shouted. "Imbecile" is a word which here means "idiot". "The last time I saw a pony shield get shot, the ricochet wiped out an entire platoon of men!"

"Alright, geez." Irish scoffed and headed back down the stairs.

Logan returned to the top of the stairs and examined the force field for a long moment. He swung Fealty's right arm against it, but the barrier stopped it flat, like a mesh net of some unknown material. There was a loud, low gong sound that reverberated through the Goliath's arm. He called down to Irish. "Oy, start looking for a secret way out of here. Check the walls or floor. Let me know if you see anything remotely suspicious."

"There is a vent in the ceiling, but I don't think even a pony could fit through it," said Irish. He commenced his search, feeling with his hands along the lower portions of the panel wall.

Logan continued to stare hard at that barrier, glossing it over from corner to corner. He raised his minigun arm and fired at the rim of the wall around the doorway. The explosive bullets chewed the wall to pieces until there was nothing supporting the door frame. The force field did not extend past the frame, so when the frame collapsed, the force field collapsed with it.

"Alright! Let's sneak out of here, Irish!" Logan looked back downstairs when Irish didn't respond right away. "Oy, Irish!"

Irish had been engrossed in feeling along the floor. "What?"

"We're leaving!"

The trek back upstairs felt even longer. Logan hadn't memorized how long the journey would take and hadn't known on the way down, but now he kept worrying about stumbling upon Mixolydia and her theatre troupe, thus getting caught and landing Irish in the midst of the crossfire. True, their marine fatigues included bullet-proof armour, and he hadn't exactly seen any pony carrying a gun since they entered Equestria, but after roughly six-odd years give or take some time being dead, Logan knew there was never a reprieve where ponies were concerned.

When they arrived at the floor just below the stage, Logan urged Irish to stop. There was a set of stairs just in front of them, but Fealty could hear Mixolydia singing from upstairs. They snuck around to the far opposite end of the floor, evading a couple of ponies who were sorting through costumes by keeping behind mechanisms and stored props. Here they found another route upwards, and in this way the pair escaped from the opera house without further incident.

Sneaking back to the storehouse was something of a nerve-wracking process. Wracking nerves is a harrowing experience, like when a child stomps over your head at early hours of the morning every morning of his entire walking life, stomping so gratingly that even the floor above him feels like it's shaking to the point of collapse, but still his parents refuse to get up off the couch and stop watching *Boy Meets World* to actually fulfil the mandatory and ethical lifetime responsibility of having had sex. Slightly less irritating was the journey of Logan in his Fealty and Irish. Logan retrieved the box he'd pilfered, but it wouldn't fit both Fealty and Irish, so the latter had to use it as cover. At one point, Logan set the box down to hide as an inanimate box, and a hysterical, sobbing pony ran over and gave it a swift kick.

"Dad didn't like the garter belt I got him for Father's Day! What in the world am I going to do?" The stallion then took off, partially mollified by his outburst.

"Okay, that was weird," Logan said.

"Your head's on backwards. *You're* weird," said Irish. "Can we please hurry along?"

The Baltimare shipping warehouse was still not very well guarded, or else everypony was still away on their two-hour lunch breaks to scoff fondant and margaritas. Logan threw off his box, headed to the corner, and lifted up the box that was there.

Nothing but a few apples rolled out across the floor. "Oh god!" Logan said. "Your Goliath isn't here anymore! It's been stolen!"

Irish felt nauseous. He could feel his head swimming with panic.

"Oh wait, my bad," said Logan. "It was in *this* box." He lifted up the box adjacent to the one he had removed, and there was Scorn & Spite sitting open on its can. Logan tipped it onto its back with Fealty to aid Irish wriggling back inside.

"Aw, damn, I didn't think I'd be glad to be back in this damn oversized tuna can!"

"How long were you gone from it? Just a few hours tops, right?" Logan asked.

"Felt more like decades to me. Hey, what's this thing binkin' on me HUD?" Irish fiddled around blindly with his controls once he was upright again. He'd found Scorn & Spite's alert to the recorded dialogue from earlier and played it for both men to hear. When that happened, they knew their plans had changed. They heard all about the Crystal Heart and Sunburst's plans for the war effort on Equestria's behalf. They'd all too recently dealt with a pony force large enough to successfully lay siege to the entire city of Moscow. They did not fancy this happening again.

"I can't tell what it is they're talking about doing," Irish said. "They wanna make a bunch of soldiers using a crystal? And a bunch of ponies make it work like a J. O. crystal? How does that work?"

Logan clicked his tongue. "It's gotta be more magic, like those barriers I've seen before. There was one in Lenin Base, like I said. A unicorn named Trixie was able to cast magic on Earth, like those stupid Dungeons and Dragons games with the thirty-sided dice."

Irish scoffed. "Using your imagination sounds nerdy."

"You're right, but don't use the n-word. Actually it's not so different from Irish mythology. Think of this 'Crystal Aorta' thing as your Blarney stone. Ponies come from all around to kiss it, and when they do, they can, er, I think they want to summon these soldiers from wherever they come from. I think that's right."

"That's not how soldiers work!" Irish protested. "You have to give birth to them and train them. They don't spontaneously generate out of thin air."

"We appeared out of thin air in this dimension when we came here from Earth," Logan said. "Think of it like time travel. You travel back in time and suddenly appear in the past. According to the timeline, where did you come from? You just spontaneously generated there, effectively."

"This is making my head hurt, which is making my stomach hurt," said Irish.

"We could just skip to the bottom line. We need to destroy the Crystal Heart."

"But that's not how reality works!"

"Didn't you listen to Jenny Everywhere? This dimension doesn't follow the same rules of reality as Earth does. Anyway, it's better to be safe than sorry. We need to infiltrate that musical when Sunburst may have the Crystal Heart, then we blast the thing into bits with our guns. Mischief managed."

"That's brill," said Irish. "But we're just gonna wait around 'til then? What about Daniel and the others?"

"We're just going to have to be late. This could be vital. We don't want to let some magical army marching on Earth while we're busy here. We can't just blow up the opera house and scare Sunburst off. This is our best option."

Irish could see the logic in this.

Waiting for the event was another nerve-wracking scenario, and yet for most of the ordeal, Irish and Logan were standing still, hidden in the darkened eaves of the corners of the theatre, cloaked beneath long, red curtains that hung against the walls. As they listened to the sounds of loud work transpiring across the stage far to the end of the room, they wondered at any moment whether they'd be caught. For the most part, the rehearsals had ended, perhaps so the performers could rest up.

Irish was getting pretty restless, but Logan managed to convince him to fiddle with his HUD applications to pass the time. "Application" is a word which here means "program". They found one that was completely inexplicable. Two vertical lines moved up and down on opposite ends which Irish and Logan could control on one another's screens, and a square bounced back and forth in a zig-zag pattern between them. Neither of them could understand the purpose of this "nonsense", which Logan surmised was some kind of demonstration of the HUD software's graphical capabilities.

When the audience swarmed in, chatter filled the room with invisible noise as posh ponies in fancy dress and bouffant hairdos took to their seats. There was another interminable wait beyond this point, during which Irish and Logan felt as if they'd plunged into the busiest shark tank ever constructed. The only times they'd seen this many or more ponies together was during their most harrowing battles. Any pony that did happen to spot Fealty or Scorn & Spite thought them some kind of decorative statue, but neither Delta Squad member felt particularly relieved.

Sitting nearly above Irish in one of the balconies was an earth pony stallion who'd been introduced by somepony as "Quibble Pants". Irish couldn't see him, but he could hear him muttering to himself by proxy of Scorn & Spite. "Strawman's Blog, Friday the today. I write to you from my seat in the Baltimare opera house where the orchestra is just tuning up. I have received an advanced sample of the script for critical analysis. The narrator is clearly a reflection strawman for the audience as an underhooved desire to invalidate critique over the...crappier segments of the latter narrative. Heh heh, 'crappy'. It's shameless the way contemporary authors still rely on this childish tactic of weeding out audience members that don't happen to benefit them, when they should be thankful of any viewers they get. I currently sit here prepared to see if the performances can hope to do justice to this over-ambitious experiment."

"Ruddy hell," said Irish. "It's only a story about our lives, presumably. You could shut up a bit, mate."

"Remember to keep an ear out as well as an eye," Logan told him. "It might not be so easy to find Sunburst. He might keep to himself on a central balcony somewhere, but he also might take more precautions to safeguard his important relic."

The lights dimmed. A hush fell over the audience. The great curtain parted and lifted. The stage was cast in total darkness. Every breath was still at once.

Lights burst all over the stage along with the crackling of staged gunshots. This went on for a few seconds, briefly illuminating the scenery as if by a strobe light. There was a building somewhere off in the distance, and the stage was rife with what appeared to be foxholes surrounded with barbed wire. A "foxhole" is a word which here means a dug-out trench in a battlefield for soldiers to take cover in. It has very little to do with foxes. After a moment or two further of simulated gunfire, yelling could be heard and figures could be seen running across the stage in the rapid, intermittent light. Ponies and ponies dressed in human military fatigues clashed in a battle of implied violence. Members of both sides fell until there were none left standing. An off-centre white light faded in and held there. From stage left, another human rushed across the scene, bellowing like a barbarian. From stage right walked in a unicorn made up to resemble Twilight Sparkle. She "slew" the other actor with one swift stroke of a bladed weapon clutched between her jaws.

"No!" Another "human" soldier held this syllable as he dashed across the stage at the killer. Raising his weapon aloft, he deflected her first couple of strikes before being disarmed. Pinned to the floor, ominous music crept in and continued after the last soldier was slain. Rising like a ghost from the corpse was Mixolydia, painted in pale, deathly makeup and looking very much like a human for being a quadruped. "This is the greatest story never told," she said. "I was once a leader of men, cut down by the reality of war. This is the truth of your battle against my kind." As the stage was cleared, Mixolydia lapsed into song, once again singing the "Wings of Steel" song Logan had heard earlier, although the lyrics came in a different order.

I was born on a field flame-worn from war
Disinterred from what came before
No one retreats
From destiny
We were drafted into life
On wings of steel
With a heart of flame
This damaged earth
We shall reclaim
We won't be done
Until the day is won
Before the setting sun

Logan wasn't sure how he'd ever explain to Daniel that the ghost of his older brother, James, was narrating an Equestrian musical about the war. He wasn't sure how he'd ever explain to *himself* that the ponies had basically tried to dress themselves up to play the members of Delta Squad. The whole spectacle was the damnedest thing he'd ever seen in his life. Irish on the other hand was just looking terribly confused by it all. If the situation hadn't been so *weird*, they might've felt nostalgic. Perhaps what impeded their nostalgia was their desire to end this war and the idea that they could be so very close to that goal.

Logan reminded Irish of their present mission. They needed to search for Sunburst, wherever he might be, and whatever he might look like. Neither of them had any certain idea what the Crystal Heart looked like either, apart from a faint blue glow, but both of them liked to imagine it resembled a heart made out of crystal. While viewing some of the side balconies was relatively easy, neither dared tread closer to the stage where Mixolydia would be sure to notice the giant armoured figures lurking. Neither Irish nor Logan had any experience with the theatre, and so neither knew if the stage lights would render seeing far into the audience impossible or not. They were both convinced, for now at least, that finding out may not be worth the risk. Logan convinced Irish to check out in the hallway, motivated to do so by Irish's strange enthrallment with the production. Irish's goal would be to head upstairs to the upper seating and try and observe the audience members there.

Some weepy song was playing as "Daniel" and "Tom" sat in "jail" while their "girlfriends" joined them in a quartet. It was the traditional slow song that goes on way too long and sets people—and, evidently from the snoring, ponies—to sleep by grinding the plot down to a halt. Logan tried not to be distracted by the lyrics saying something about the "cost of a life" and the price of freedom these days. Realising that trying to recognize an unfamiliar pony in a vast, darkened crowd was futile, Logan indicated to Irish that he should gain a good vantage point to watch as many ponies at once. Irish set himself up in one corner on the top level, with Logan remaining in a different corner down below. The waiting was insufferable, and the production was distracting. Neither Irish nor Logan wanted to be reminded of how the city of Monsoon had burned to the quick while Delta Squad beat a hasty retreat, and they certainly didn't appreciate how the ponies were depicted as an underwhelming force facing overwhelming odds.

Logan was seriously considering abandoning the plan and just blasting the opera house down to cinders. Sure, there was a vast chance Sunburst could escape, but...well, that kind of was the point, wasn't it? He stowed his impulses for another lengthy song involving the three Williams men. Following that was some expository interval melody between the ponies playing Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash. Both Irish and Logan were tired of searching over the same places again and again without finding anything. The more they moved around in their Goliaths, the more suspicious they felt. A couple of ponies asked Irish if he was selling concessions.

"Maybe he's hiding somewhere near the stage," Irish suggested.

Logan let out a long groan. "Dammit. I didn't want to tip Mixolydia off to our presence, but it looks like you may be right. Let's not just rush the stage, though."

A jarring orchestral chord caught the attention of them both. They could tell from the orchestra itself that a reprise of the "Wings of Steel" song was starting up. The Goliaths picked up several hushed gasps and even a quiet squeal here and there; the ponies sounded titillated by a musical revolving around their sworn enemies. Irish and Logan remembered all too well the attack on Berlin and how back then their mission felt like it was culminating into some long-term climax.

Light swelled within the theatre as the "humans" commenced their march, riding their prop machines across the stage. As the musical continued, the blue illumination grew brighter, like a sunrise emanating from one of the left balconies. Sunburst leaned over the edge of his balcony to levitate the Crystal Heart toward the middle of the ceiling like a person trying to catch rainwater to stave off dehydration on a desert isle.

"Logan, look at that!" Much to Irish's expectations, the Crystal Heart was indeed a heart that looked like it was made out of crystal. He was certain that the glowing object had to be what he and Logan had been warned about. What else could it be?

Logan didn't need to ask where he was supposed to look. He could see that glowing rock hovering in place at the top centre of the room. Questions formed in his mind. How exactly was this object supposed to work? By what principle could a rock herald forth an army? If it was crystal, what type of crystal was it? He probably wasn't going to receive the true answers to these questions. If Sunburst's hypothesis was any indication, then the anticipation of the audience below was bestowing the rock with some kind of emotional energy, but the humans knew this was scientific bunk, a word which here means "lacking a basis in reality". Part of him felt compelled to see this through to satisfy his disbelief like a sneeze that wouldn't come, but the other part of him wanted to take no chances.

"On my mark, Irish, fire!"

This was the moment Logan learned what magic was all about. It wasn’t just bending the laws of reality to overpower one's opponents through unfair means. It was about out-thinking the enemy. The shield around the Crystal Heart which absorbed the momentum of the bullets acted totally in the unicorn's favour. Some of the ponies thought the noise of gunfire was part of the play, though they thought it was too loud to bear and couldn't explain why the earlier gunfire wasn't as frightening.

Irish and Logan now spotted Sunburst. He was a unicorn stallion, orange in hue though the darkness made this hard to detect, with a white stripe running down his nose. He had a small goatee and a red-orange mane and tail. Obscured by the low light was his pair of spectacles and cloak. His horn was glowing, however, revealing him as the one levitating the Crystal Heart. The other issue was that now everypony knew where Irish and Logan were.

The ponies acted as if they were ignoring them, however. Irish could see Mixolydia's cruel smile pointed at him, but still she sang, the opera hall never more reverberating with music. Logan's voice crackled onto his radio. "Irish, you see Sunburst? The unicorn with the glowing horn? I'm gonna fire at him. I want you to fire at the Crystal Heart at the same time! On the count of eight.

"Six. Seven. Eight!" On Logan's signal, Irish blew another payload from Scorn & Spite's minigun. Both guns only struck magical shielding once more. Without missing a beat in her song, Mixolydia was projecting her own sorcerous barrier so that both Sunburst and the Crystal Heart were protected.

Now that mysterious, stony relic was shimmering, spinning around rapidly on its central axis point. Its glow appeared to be tied in with the power of Mixolydia's voice, whose volume was rivalling that of the false gunfire of the ensuing re-enactment behind her. Before their very eyes, the ponies were beginning to change in ways they couldn't quite describe just yet.

Irish turned his gun on Mixolydia. Logan fired at Sunburst. Afraid but observant, Mixolydia threw her shield up around herself which rippled from the impact of the bullets. Sunburst, on the other hand, refused to relinquish protecting the Crystal Heart, and he went down from a few shots in the neck and face. Betrayed by Mixolydia's own self-preservation, his guarding spell vanished from around the Crystal Heart, and both humans fired upon the relic next.

The stone was still durable, but under the pressure of hundreds of high-velocity bullets, it cracked, splintered, then shattered into uncountable pieces. From its core, like a fountain of haemorrhaging blood, spewed a torrent of light-less black cloud that snaked like a hydra this way and that across the ceiling. Although the musical's special effects continued, even the performers were now awed by the alarming occurrence. Something that resembled an eyeless, fanged equine face, but like a mask made from crusty papier-mâché or something similar, loomed into view amidst the shadows roving like creeper vines as though the smoke were a horrific but regal mane. It drifted about in the mass like a bobbing apple as its tendrils slid toward the walls.

"No! No, it can't be! Why is their king here?" Sunburst, coughing up blood, had dragged his body to the edge of the balcony. Pony civilians down below were cowering in awe, some of them already beginning to flee from the place. Irish and Logan could only stand in confusion, faced with an entity the likes of which they'd never seen before. Up until now, their encounters with ponies and even dragons had only been solid, corporeal, fixed in space and made of meat and organs. They'd never thrown in against something beyond the rules of engagement, whose body was a formless shape. That ghastly face was uncanny, and not in the out-of-the-box clever sense. "Uncanny" is a word which here means "horrific" but elsewhere is used to convey other meanings. Their Goliaths could give no certain readings to what they were witnessing other than a catastrophic storm front manifesting inside the building. Irish and Logan wanted to deny this vision, to refute its existence with every ounce of their being, even to the point of lapsing into depression, but they couldn't. That wasn't an option. This was happening, and they felt helpless to stop it, even inside their war machines.

Also helpless was the audience. By now, catastrophe struck like half a dozen bolts of lightning, which the black clouds overhead were presently calling down. The performers had fled save for Mixolydia, but the audience had a much harder time. Ponies tried to clamber over the seats and one another just to stampede out from the opera house. Traffic jammed up at the doors to the exit. Though the Goliaths could have easily pushed them aside, Irish and Logan felt overwhelmed by the rush. Before more than a couple dozen or so ponies had escaped, scattered jolts of electricity struck the doors. From the impact rose great, shiny black crystals that seemed scarred within with purple fulgurites. The ponies who'd come in contact with the crystalline structures wailed in pain as though receiving a severe shock, but getting away was no easy task when they were being pressed in upon by more than fifty other panicking ponies. Pretty soon those at the doors were lifeless corpses, the shine drained from their massive eyes.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" Irish asked. Seeing one such massive crystal, at least the size of Scorn & Spite, blocking his exit, he strode over to it. He whipped his chaingun arm back and gave the thing a heavy punch. This proved to be a mistake. Irish let out a choked yowl and yanked his arm away with a start. Warnings glared up all over his HUD, alerting him to a sudden power drain in his batteries.

"Irish, what's wrong? Report!" Logan commanded.

"I touched a crystal and it sapped the power from my Goliath!" Irish said. "What the hell do we do?"

The entire building shuddered. It heaved sideways like a boat being tossed on the waves. Logan shoved some ponies aside by battering them with Fealty's arms then tested the black crystal in front of the left exit with a short burst from his giant automatic rifle arm. The high-density bullets punctured deep into the structure, shattering it apart from within. He fired a few more times until it was naught but a mess of shattered bits of crystal around the exit. Frenzied ponies fled around Fealty like a river, pouring out into the lobby as fast as they could. The broken shards, meanwhile, grew where they fell into new, sizable chunks of black crystal.

Up on centre stage, Mixolydia was singing. The unicorn mare was holding one long, unfettered note that rose in pitch every few seconds. Her vocal range was incredible. Even as a pony she deserved some recognition for it, except that listening to it was painful. "Agh! Dammit! What's she doing?" Irish complained. "Should we kill her?"

"Not sure!" Logan shouted. "Maybe she's doing something about that shade!"

"Maybe she's commanding it!"

"She's doing more harm to her own kind if she is!" Logan, being a tad more observant than Irish, noticed how the black crystals appeared to be vibrating. They trembled so rapidly their movement could hardly be seen. Some of the smaller specimens were already crackling and shattering under the sonic pressure.

The face in the smoke spoke. "My crystal slaves," was what it said, though it sounded as though it were sucking on its own drool to do so. Its voice sounded like an enormous frog caught in an echo chamber.

Knowing that they had to do something, they had to try to save themselves even if it meant saving some dippy ponies in the process, the members of Delta Squad did what they did best by the end of the day. Apart from drinking. They raised their weapons and fired. Irish fired Scorn & Spite's chaingun. Logan fired Fealty's automatic rifle. Together they aimed for the enlarged, eyeless face that sneered at them with its hungry, vengeful expression.

Lines of orange light split open the face, lighting up two tiny pupils inside its gaping eye sockets. It roared in anger, not pain, and its roar soon manifested into a quake that throttled the entire opera house once more. The bellowing noise was met with the cracking of wood, the rending of earth, and the screams of ponies as they plummeted down the sinkhole that gasped open below them into the inky void of darkness.

"Logan, what's going on down there?" Irish yelled. There was no reply. "Logan? Logan! Logan!"

Irish was about to leap down below and take a look for himself when the balcony collapsed. The support columns holding up the front of it gave away to the opening void, sending the entire platform buckling forward like a slide. Several ponies tumbled and fell over the side into the unlit pit, though many managed to cower between the seats and the remnants of black crystal still covering their escape. The smog above was clearing rapidly, but Irish hardly noticed as he went careening forward. The Goliaths were heavy constructs, but this slope was too much to maintain its equilibrium. Irish couldn't help running toward the edge and flinging himself off like a long-distance runner.

Waiting for him below was open space, and he felt as if he'd left his stomach behind.

18. What Echoes Will Carry 'Til the Sunshine

One of the few remaining parchments on the nature of light posited that instead of something that just sort of happened, it was a principle akin to both a particle and a wave. A particle is of course a very fine, small unit of something, like a single piece of sand on a beach. A wave, of course, is a shape of movement in water. Having learned nothing, let us move right along. Few people ask what darkness is made of, mostly due to the fact that one cannot see anything in the dark, leaving matters rather obscure.

Irish could see nothing beyond the lights of Scorn & Spite's HUD. The symbols didn't illuminate very well, and what lay beyond his visor looked to be nothing more than some grainy, blurry texture of some sort. It took Irish a few seconds to focus and see the dirty stone surface and realize he was horizontal after the shock of his great fall.

It was what he heard that captured his attention: The wails and moans of several dozen voices crying out at once. Pony voices. Even bawling they sounded monstrous and horrifying. They sent shudders down Irish's spine the way human voices never would. Were they in pain from the fall? He had yet to scope out the collateral damage from the disaster, so he decided first he must get Scorn & Spite to its feet.

The intermittent screams grew louder, but it wasn't exactly fear that spurred Irish to faster action. He needed to know what was happening in this inky void surrounding him. He knew not how he got to his feet so fast and saw only his reflection on the visor. The moment he switched on Scorn & Spite's headlights, a resounding thud collided with the headpiece. Plastered to the front of his visor was the front half of a pony, its eyes agog with a stupefied expression, and its entrails drooling ordure down Scorn & Spite's front side.

What Echoes Will Carry 'Til the Sunshine

Irish threw the dead weight off of his visor. He was about to shoot the pony into smithereens when he took a second glance. There was still a glimmer of life in the pony's eyes, but given that its body had been scissored in half, there didn't seem much point in wasting precious ammunition.

Now that his vision was clear and lit up with Scorn & Spite's headlamps, Irish scanned his surroundings. There was such wreckage from the opera house theatre floor collapsing into the sinkhole that he couldn't be certain what he was even looking at straightaway. Scattered fragments of grey-brown and shadow muddled the cavernous landscape, interspersed with a colourful limb here or there jutting partway over or under some unidentifiable scrap like some optical illusion. Wooden fragments of foundation lay strewn about in numerous broken pieces. Separated sections of seating formed a distressed pile of sorts. Bits of busted planks like giant splinters of sawdust trickled down from far above the unseen world way up there. Amongst it all were ponies in various states of injury. Some lay dead, motionless, some barely stirred; all were dressed in tatters of once-formal attire. Some sobbed over the broken bodies of loved ones. Irish focused for a lingering moment on the body of a pony that had been roughly impaled on a long plank of wood. The corpse of another Equestrian was tangled in portions of carpet while its skull had been smashed in on a stalagmite. He wondered to himself what transpired to cause a pony to be split in half like he'd seen; thus far he hadn't found an unclaimed back end. The moaning, groaning and writhing in pain reminded Irish of some tedious film about Hell he'd caught a glimpse of once before leaving the room. He was glad he couldn't smell through Scorn & Spite.

Irish had to collect his thoughts, which was something of a trial for him, but the direct path was usually easiest. He knew he had to get out of this underground, but he didn't even know how far he'd fallen. Was he below the basement dungeon where he'd been kept? First, he'd need to regroup with Logan. Ideas always came easier when one of the other Delta Squad Members was around, and he felt sure Logan knew enough about getting out of scrapes like these. After all, Logan had said he'd hailed from "down under". Irish looked around himself, found no traces of a larger-than-human-sized powered armour suit in his immediate vicinity, and decided to traipse across the mound of debris. Wood scrunched and slid under Scorn & Spite's feet and ponies gasped and cried as they were crushed. Irish was about halfway across before he thought of checking his HUD. He called out to Logan on the radio a few times to no answer, but he could see a dot not far off ahead of him at an angle. He resumed his march in that direction, disregarding the ponies under him although they provided a lumpy terrain. He kept calling Logan's name incessantly, sounding more bored with each iteration,

trying different inflections and ways of referring to his friend. "Logan? Logan. Logan. Logan! Lo-gan. Lo-*gan*. Logan Walker. Walker. Walker. Wal*ker*." He held out the syllable for some time until he finally got a response.

"Cork your gob, you hoon, and shift this lot off me." Logan was pushing a heavy weight of ponies and debris off of himself. Irish looked down and surmised he was standing on top of his friend, so he moved aside and lazily bent down to knock bits and pieces away with Scorn & Spite's arms until Logan could free himself.

"I think we've had a bit of a tumble," Irish said.

"Yeah, that'd be right. Day wouldn't end in Y if something didn't come a gutser." Tilting his head back, Logan gazed at the darkness above. There was no sign of the opera house. "Can't tell if we're within cooee of getting out of here."

"So what took you so long to answer me?" asked Irish.

"I thought I saw my HUD's sound indicator doin' somethin' weird, so I was trying to listen for anything, but I couldn't hear squat." Logan kicked at a pony that had been trying to grab onto Fealty's ankle while begging for help. They searched about with their lights for a while, neither of them quite knowing what it was they ought to look for, when Logan spotted a pony getting to its wobbly legs. He didn't seem particularly injured, at least not as far as either human cared. "Oy, who the bloody hell are you?"

"I think I'm gonna be sick!" said the yellow-green pony with tiny flecks on his pelt. He stumbled sideways and did indeed look about ready to spew a Technicolor yawn, a phrase which here refers to emesis.

"I didn't ask how you were. I asked for your name." Logan raised Fealty's gargantuan automatic rifle.

The sick-looking pony let out a long groan. "My name's Bingey Purgey. I'm a rock farmer from outside Ponyville. I was in Baltimare on business to look into the recent seismic activity."

"Cut to the chase. Why do we 'got' to help you?" Irish asked.

"I can figure out the way out of here," said Bingey Purgey. "I've worked in tunnels most of my life. I need to get to the train station to report this to the central authority in Canterlot."

"Really? And which way is this central authority?" asked Logan.

"It's almost due west of Baltimare, in the mountains of central Equestria, but I'll need your help. There are always monsters lurking in tunnels like these. We need to help as many ponies as we can get out." Bingey Purgey started knocking aside broken bits of refuse to try and uncover some other ponies who had fallen.

"Hey, that's a great idea," said Logan. "Let's get out of here together." He then fired a single bullet into Bingey Purgey's brain, killing him. "I can't believe how dumb these little monsters are. Like we're really going to help our mortal enemies?"

"Oh, you should have kept him along." This grave, levelled voice belonged to Mixolydia. The crisp, even timbre of her lyrical tones were quite recognizable. In the darkness and through their Goliaths, pinpointing her location was difficult. Irish and Logan swept the area around them with their headlights but could not find her. "There are terrible things down here. Things armour can't protect you from forever."

"God, I hate it when they talk!" Irish said.

"It's got to a point for me where they mostly just sound like a series of nonsensical screeching," said Logan. “Like every time their mouths open, I just imagine them going ‘muh-muh muh-muh-muh.’”

Mixolydia ignored his impoliteness. "Sunburst warned me of the invaders crashing into Manehattan yesterday. He wanted the utmost security to enact his little plan. I don't blame him for it going haywire; I entirely blame the pair of you. I blame every single human. This isn't about some war I spent years researching so I could open ponies' eyes to reality. I'm genuinely unconcerned that it was my own production that got caught in the crossfire. This is between you and destroying art."

Logan decided to ask the wrong question. "Why the bloody heck did you write a musical about us anyway?" What he should have instead asked was, "What's that sound you're making with your voice?" Although music is typically centred around beauty or intentional anti-beauty for people playing to their strengths, the noises Mixolydia was making were uglier than throwing inappropriate references in material targeted at children. It was some kind of squelching, screeching noise that sounded like a small child desperately

trying to be obnoxious and unlovable. Not long thereafter came a rumbling which didn't take long to reach devastating levels of volume.

"Oh no! It's back!" a pony screamed. Irish and Logan didn't much care what was back, but if they'd wanted to ask, their question would be answered in fleet speed. Lunging from the darkness was a horrid, alien face of sickly pink with a Y-shaped set of yellow-toothed jaws. They caught enough of a glance of two insidious-looking eye spots to get properly frightened, but it was the size of the thing that drove them to a tactical retreat. In terms of a sense of scale, the creature was large enough that it could swallow Fealty whole, which it promptly did. Its three jaws flapped open wide, baring sharper fangs lining the fleshy mesial portions. Three long, black tongues lashed out like tendrils and grappled Fealty. Dragging the heavy powered armour into its mouth wasn't so much the issue as was crashing its gaping pink maw around Logan's Goliath and barrelling on around him as though he wasn't even an obstacle. Irish tried to run, but the speedy worm-like entity was gone as suddenly as it had appeared.

By the time Irish thought to glance at his radar for Logan's relative position, there was a second left before his blip vanished out of range. Screaming Logan's name out over the radio, he didn't sound so bored this time. The notion that Delta Squad was war-bound family, that they looked out for one another, was so intrinsic to his mentality that Irish considered no other possibility than to pursue the lost rampaging beast. Perhaps that wasn't strictly the condition. You may have noticed that Irish wasn't the chief strategist amongst the marines.

"Oh, you'll never catch up that way." Mixolydia's haunting voice carried after him somehow. "The Tatzlwurm can move fast enough to launch itself into the lower atmosphere to catch pegasi to eat. You'll see your friend soon enough when it comes back 'round to devour you."

"Fuck off!" Irish said in a grating, flustered breath. He thought the unicorn might be speaking from somewhere above him, so he blindly shot up and behind himself. He heard a resulting shriek and allowed himself a smirk.

She'd been right, though. He had no idea how he was meant to catch up with the "Tatzlwurm" as she had called it. *What a stupid-sounding name*, he thought, though he didn't have any better ideas. He caught sight of multiple gaping, round holes through the light of his headlamps. His hasty plan of blowing up the creature before Logan could get digested had hit a wall. Cursing to himself in Gaelic, Irish moseyed as close as he dared to the edge of one hole in the floor. He tilted forward to aim his lights down, but he couldn't see the bottom. "Hello, Logan? You down here, mate?"

The only answer he got was the crackle of crumbling rock beneath Scorn & Spite's heavy feet. The weighty machine toppled forward into open air and was gulped up by the darkness below. Irish's expletives intensified as he plummeted like a sack of bowling balls only not as bright. "Oh, come on!" Crying out in frustration, Irish felt his body tumbling head over heels, over and over in circles. His view was a madcap wash of stony surfaces rushing by the pool of light pointed dead ahead of wherever his visor was pointed. Just when he was about to say aloud, "This is gonna suck," he hit something, but not something hard like rock or a body of water's surface. His stomach did flips as he was caught by something he couldn't see, something that felt like he was lying in an unsteady hammock. Then something green and translucent smothered into view over his visor. It wasn't entirely opaque, but he couldn't make out a thing beyond its surface. "Oh, what the hell is it this time?" he asked himself.

Scorn & Spite picked up faint reverberations beneath the prevalent sounds of sucking. More suction and popping followed, and his head was freed from whatever emerald-hued gelatine he'd landed in. This Equestria was getting stranger and stranger by the hour, as far as he was concerned. "Logan? Logan, answer me!" Irish shouted.

"Logan's not here, man," said a stoned-sounding drawl that made Irish instantly think of the reeking stench of patchouli oil. Irish strained to bend Scorn & Spite's headpiece back and saw an upside-down green mare standing before him. Her dirty reddish-magenta mane was bound in frayed ropes known as dreadlocks which include the word "dread" for a reason. "You're now a prisoner of the Smooze."

"Ew, gross! I don't want anything to do with pony ejaculate!" Irish said.

"I said 'Smooze'. I would know. I'm Tree Hugger, and I know all about magical creatures." Tree Hugger sounded annoyed.

"Yeah, and smooze is a slang term for jizm," said Irish. "Man, and I thought my own bowel movements were getting pretty disgusting. This just hit an all-new low, I think." He wasn't quite right about that, but never mind.

"Seriously, guy, you need to mellow out. Don't you ever wake and bake? Spleef? Doobie? It'll cure your depression."

"Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Irish couldn't even struggle. Whatever had hold of him was exerting incredible pressure from all sides. Weren't the Goliaths supposed to work in any environment? Shouldn't they theoretically function at the bottom of an

ocean? It was probably the smartest notion Irish ever had, and it was the last before the shroud of green covered him back up again. In his mind, his panic made him think that Scorn & Spite was caving in around him. The last thing he wanted was to be crushed like a soda can under a jalopy's wheel and have bits of him go squirting out all over the pavement. Of course, for all the fight they put up, the ponies still hadn't been able to crack the Goliaths. They'd gotten him out once while he'd fainted, but that time was over. They'd regret not putting him out of his omnipresent misery while they had the chance. Irish laughed to himself at the joke he had hidden. Now it was time to test how durable the Goliaths really were.

Not sensing which way his arm was pointing, he pressed the trigger on his cluster bazooka. The first detonation ripped the "smooze" apart, shifting Irish sideways while he heard deafening ripples just beside him. Something stung his leg as it bent wildly inwards from that side. It was followed up by several more abrupt expansions within the smooze that ripped the green jelly away from him. Instinctively, Irish took in a gasp of breath even though he could still breathe. The slime had exploded right off of him in a flurry of potent detonations. He had seen something glowing, but his mind was too frazzled at the moment, a word which here means "disoriented and out of sequence", to identify what it was. Bits of the smooze were splattered all over the cavern walls. The creature was slightly luminescent by itself, but Scorn & Spite's brilliant headlamps scouted the immediate area. Irish directed his Goliath to its feet with great effort, and realized to his dismay that the right leg was not bending. Something felt wrong in the hip and knee, as though portions of the powered armour had been rent out of place. He could also see large bits of rock crumbling. He moved aside away from the walls, but a hefty-sized boulder still collided with his shoulder. He felt a small jolt, but that was about it. He kept standing, barely fazed by the event.

Looking around again, Irish could see no sign of the tedious hippie pony. He could also see no obvious exit, save for climbing his way up, if that was even possible in these machines. Now if only the Goliaths had come equipped with a drill.

Fealty's headlights granted Logan a well-lit tour of the interior of the giant beast that had swallowed him, which would have been fascinating from a naturalist's perspective, but being from the outback, Logan had seen sights much like this all too many times before, which was more than the Discovery Channel could legally or ethically claim.[22] Undulating walls of shiny, slippery flesh heaved around him. The wild, reckless peristalsis and the lack of frictional footing tossed Logan onto his face, and the slimy cavern opened and closed around him on his rushed passage through biology at work. The weight of the muscled flesh pressed in around him, but he couldn't feel it through Fealty—at least not outside of his mind's expectations. The mess that was organic life was apparent in this blister-hued tunnel of sputum and unidentifiable globs of what might have once been food. Further along inside, Logan passed a screaming, flailing pony, and for a moment they were carried along together. The pony glanced at his visor, wearing the most dreadful look of panic on its face Logan had ever seen on an Equestrian. The sight of it nearly startled him.

Logan had a good guess where his next stop was. He was flung hard into the stomach, suddenly realizing how fast he was traveling. He would have rammed hard into the recess of the giant worm's guts if he hadn't instead collided with a bloodied, writhing mass of ponies. Some were torn apart, some half gone and some little more than collections of severed extremities. They filled the gigantic monster's belly like a guessing jar of jellybeans. Logan could see the massive pile he was up against heaving and bustling about. The creature around them was still moving, and the throttling motions kept tossing its contents aside, making standing up difficult for Logan. The task wasn't impossible even if it was still unsteady. He could also see the ponies looking about in alarm in the glare of his headlights, then screaming in panic as they were able to witness just what was happening to them all. At least a couple of ponies were sick upon one another, perhaps from the abysmal stench that graciously didn't permeate Fealty.

To be honest, Logan didn't have a clue what to do. Turning back was no option, considering how forcibly he'd been dropped here. There was no telling how long a creature like this would take to pass its food, but there was another emerging issue regarding that idea. A wave of yellow-green bile splashed over some of the ponies, and the pile jostled and burst as several more ponies screamed in pain. Logan tried to shut off Fealty's external listening so he wouldn't have to hear their bellyaching, but their endless complaining was still loud enough to just be heard. Logan could tell that several ponies were already actively being digested. Several had severe burns that had already eaten away most of their pelts. Even more alarming signs emerged from the corners of the mound as it was disturbed. Logan could see bits of what he thought were loose bones. There was another loud gurgle like thunder, and a wave of stomach acid washed over half of the ponies. More screaming, more flailing.

Logan knew two things. He knew he couldn't stay here, being unwilling to test the Goliath's resilience against acids that, for all he knew given xenomorphic anatomy (xenomorphic is a word which here means "alien form" and therefore is not a specific-enough term for an alien species), could very well be exponentially more powerful than hydrochloric acid. He also knew he came well-armed, and that was worth a damn try in getting himself out of this grisly depiction of Hell. Who cared if Franz Bandelt, the ex-soldier engineer he played gofer to for a year, claimed the Goliaths could survive under "any" environment? Let the scientists test that in the lab. Like paintball, a Skrillex concert, or an American electoral campaign, he saw no need to have to endure it for himself. He decided to employ that very best of all Delta Squad ploys: To shoot at the problem until it went away.

---

[22] This was a television network which promised to feed a human to a wild animal, but failed to deliver. While the end result was basically a good thing, one should not make promises one does not keep, especially if one is a corporate entity. Ideally, both the network and the snake should have kept their big yaps shut.

Using his assault rifle, Logan fired as many high-density rounds as he could in seemingly random directions. Thin streams of blood squirted out from the venous walls of the creature's stomach, and there was definitely flinching occurring. The bubbling fluid that had been seeping ever closer receded now, though pools of it gathered around the newly opened ulcers Logan had delivered. The entire stomach caved in on itself, with the few surviving ponies crying out in confused unison. Even Logan grunted as Fealty was thrust forward again. The entire contents shifted like a boat tipping over at sea. The second time this happened, Fealty's body kissed the oesophageal sphincter. With another mighty push, Logan and a good mass of ponies were thrust up into the oesophagus, a word which here means esophagus, a word which here means throat. Awash in some kind of probably caustic fluid swimming with unidentifiable chunks, Logan returned to being bolus, this time ejected through the throat, into the mouth, and out into a pile of disgusting muck on some cavern floor somewhere.

Screeching in its uncommunicative rage, the worm-beast dove off into the darkness, disappearing down some other hole and out of sight. Logan was glad to be rid of it, but he would have been gladder had he destroyed the thing. It was so huge even from the outside that he wondered if a few hundred holes or so in its stomach lining would really do the trick.

Turning his attention back to himself, he wished he had a mirror to see if there was any damage. As far as he could read from the HUD, Fealty hadn't suffered any deleterious effects, but Logan had absolutely no regrets about getting out of that thing as quick as he had done.

Logan's initial inclination was to ring Irish up on the radio. "Irish, are you there? Can you hear me?"

Irish heard a lot of crackle and static, but what else could be causing it other than Logan? He waited just in case for Logan's words to be more coherent before responding with, "Boo."

Logan stopped in his tracks. "Why are you saying 'boo' at me?"

Irish didn't exactly answer his question. "I'm trapped down a hole, mate. Can you help me?"

Logan resumed his march, not wanting to waste time. "I think technically we're both trapped down a hole. Do you happen to know which way I went, and which way you are?"

"No, that bloody worm took off at such a pace I couldn't follow." Irish slid Scorn & Spite's arms over the convoluted, rocky outcroppings lining the lower walls in his present chamber, but he couldn't find a purchase he felt confident would hold his Goliath.

"There's no point in not trying to get out. Having the others search for us will delay the mission, and if we don't get some sun, the Goliaths will eventually lose power."

Irish found a weakened portion of wall which he was able to scrape away with Scorn & Spite's arms. "Didn't that one pony, Pukey Pie or whatever his name was, say we had to head west?"

"Not to get out. To get from Baltimare to Canterlot. I wish you'd pay attention. Besides, down here, we have no idea which way is west."

"Right, we don't have a compass or a map. Fuck."

"We do have a compass, actually, on our HUD radar, but it's not much use to us."

"Why not?"

"Because even on Earth, magnetic north and geographic north aren't located at the same place, and magnetic north is near geographic south anyway. We have no idea what's the same or different here in Equestria. For all we bloody know, it could be a flat world with no globe or outer space or what have you. It's an entirely different reality."

"Are you *trying* to make my head hurt?" Irish complained. "Let's just head between north and south away from the coastline then! A 'central' authority's likely to be in the centre of whatever landmass we're on, right?"

"Hm. That's a point for you, but I'm still ahead. Now let me concentrate on finding you."

"Right, I'll try and dig my way out if I can."

"Just remember one thing, Irish."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Dig up, stupid."

"Har de har har."

Logan wandered about through the vaguely linear, weirdly-shaped tunnels in the direction opposite to the one he'd been thrown up in. At the edges and above, he could see the stalagmites and stalactites that had naturally formed within the underground's recesses, but he could also tell from the rounded edges of this corridor that it was a common travel path of the Tatzlwurm. Irish had explained to Logan his encounter with Mixolydia, but all Logan's instincts told him they weren't out of danger yet. He wished that turning off his light to be stealthier wouldn't prevent him from being able to see where he was going, but the Goliaths' radar was only based on primitive electronic signatures.

After a moment, Irish spoke up again. "Oy, Logan. Is the compass the thingy that's spinning around?"

"It's the N and S around the radar circle. It shouldn't be spinning unless there's something magnetic around you. Damn, you're probably surrounded by iron ore or something. Wait, that can help me find you, maybe. I just need to figure out how. You making any progress down there?"

"I'm eliminating possibilities on how to get out, if that helps."

"Don't fret too much. I think I've got an idea." As Logan was puzzling things over in his mind, the caverns beneath Baltimare once more shuddered with a deepening intensity. Logan stopped thinking and rolled his body down into the nearest nook within the tunnel floor, some place he knew the Tatzlwurm might pass over. Indeed, the quaking was a result of the colossal monster passing above, and Logan's instincts proved to be spot on. He waited as the endless rampage of the creature washed overhead, sort of diagonally across his path. Clumps of earth and stones of varying sizes crumbled down all around him. Tossing Fealty to the ground had taken some wind out of him, and he strained quite a bit to stand up again, remembering his age. He wondered how much this war had aged him, but he tried to shut out some half-assed, dubious statistics he'd once heard of the multiplicative effects war had on the aging process.

"Damn. I thought for sure a monster that dangerous would prove too much even for your metal armour." Mixolydia was standing on an inaccessible ledge higher than Logan. Logan's first instinct was to fire his minigun at her, and her first instinct was to defend herself. Emitting a low thrum from her voice, a circular distortion wave met the bullets about two feet in front of her, stopping the projectiles dead. When this occurred, her horn lit up, but by this time, Logan was catching on to the way things worked in Equestria. Her magic and her voice, he reasoned, must have worked in tandem to create a sonic wave dense enough to stop bullets. The science didn't sound feasible to him, and he hated falling back on that same excuse of being in an alternate dimension. "Seriously," Mixolydia said, "Why are you not dead?"

"Seriously, it's because I'm an Australian from the outback. Every commute to work or school, every barbie in the backyard pits us against all manner of deadly creature trying to eat or torture us for fun. I'm the most dangerous creature around here. Australians have no word for 'fuzzy', and our children's puppet shows are the most violent on all the Earth. I thought my associate said he killed you."

Mixolydia responded with a mock shriek. "Hearing isn't seeing. Unless of course you're me. I'll track you two down no matter how lost you get in these catacombs." She made a forceful motion with her mouth, but no sound came out.

"What was that supposed to do?" asked Logan. "Why not just open up my armour with your magic like you did Irish?"

"I'm afraid that wasn't me. We just found him like that, all wet. Perhaps he panicked and let himself out after crawling out the ocean?"

After a moment of Logan and Mixolydia staring at one another, the former wracking his mind for his next move, three holes burst open like haemorrhaging wounds in the wall. Out popped three bipedal creatures covered in fur, with ugly, misshapen faces and club-like tails. They looked bestial in nature, but certainly not equine.

"What are these, more cohorts? Why not fight me yourself?" Logan asked.

"I *am* fighting you, you philistine. This is what I do. I have absolute control over all forms of sound; not just singing a pretty tune or two. I'm going to use any and all tactics made available to me. There's no room for honour in matters of life and death, and the Diamond Dogs hold the concept of honour in even lesser regard."

"How the hell are these things supposed to stop me? No way can they even get through my armour. Shooting them would be a waste of ammo." Logan was surrounded by these supposedly canine creatures. The one behind him chucked a boulder at the back of his head, and it rolled down the front of his chest. Though the Fealty was heavy enough to keep upright, it still heaved backwards as its centre of gravity was somewhat out of place given the entire internal itinerary it had to carry. "Alright, that's it, you stupid bitch. Now you're gonna get it." He whirled about, brandishing his guns, but all three Diamond Dogs were already burrowing away and out of sight into the ground which looked to be hard stone. Skilled diggers they must have been, with both speed and strength to hurry away in this geology. "Some plan! Looks like your hounds all ran away." When Logan turned toward Mixolydia's position, she was already gone. He swivelled around, casting his light around the cavern, but there was no sign of her. "Irish, heads up. That unicorn may be heading your way."

"There must be some way out of here," said Irish. "There was a pony down here when I first landed, but she's gone. Where, I don't know, though I think I probably obliterated her."

"Yeah, well, just be careful of cave-ins. I'm pretty sure the Goliaths can tough it out, but there's still the matter of getting trapped." Logan was striding along in the direction he'd been going when another heavy collision struck his back. With a grunt, he turned back around to see two of the Diamond Dogs leering at him with their maddening, unreadable faces. "I've got these bloody mole things pissing me off! Listen, why don't your three badgers or whatever leave me alone?"

"We don't need to talk to you," the medium-ugly one said to him. Its voice was wretched, squeaky and scratchy. It ducked underground yet again before Logan could even aim his weapon. He looked around himself and saw loads of holes now littering the floor all around him, each roughly the size around as one of the digging creatures. They could evidently squeeze through gaps narrower than their proportionally broad shoulders. Fealty's large, metallic feet would make walking around a challenge. Everything about this mission was starting to infuriate Logan, who thought he'd always been rather a stoic person. These pony gambits were piling up one on top of the next, making him feel woefully underprepared. He wish he'd thought of all these shortcomings beforehand while Franz Bandelt was still designing the damn Goliaths, but Logan never thought he'd get to wear one himself. He didn't imagine anything could stop a suit of armour with a huge gun. He thought, and he was certain the rest of Delta Squad thought so too, that bigger guns and thicker armour would render them invincible.

Logan wanted to lay down another bolas snare across a majority of the holes so the diggers would have a harder time coming up from the ground, but he didn't want to waste it. He needed to construct a ladder or a rope made from the durable cables to help Irish if the need arose. He started to hurry, not out of concern for Irish, but because of how many damn holes had already cropped up around him. These Diamond Dogs could dig at a frightening speed, and it wasn't the holes straight down that worried him. He needed to get ahead of the mutts at any cost. The Goliaths weren't what one could consider speedy, but they were capable of keeping up a steady pace of running on their hydraulic legs for longer than the pilot could have run by their own two legs. The mechanical motion was stiff and awkward, but it carried Logan at a dangerous clip through the caverns lit only by his headlamps. Turning wasn't easy by any means, so working his way around the bends was a matter of strict timing if he didn't want to risk decelerating.

There was one gracious point in his favour: Irish's blip now appeared on Fealty's radar display. Logan alerted Irish to this immediately. Once Irish confirmed seeing Logan as well, Logan told him something else. "Do you think you could knock down any loose rocks or hard soil? They shouldn't damage you if they don't fall from too high up, but if you can fill up the pit you're in, it may be quicker for you to reach the top by staying on top of whatever falls down." He knew Irish would have trouble comprehending his plan right away, but Logan didn't have the concentration to explain it in more detail right now.

The Diamond Dogs had caught on that Logan was aware of their own dogged ploy. He could see them burrowing along the inside track a little like a cartoon leveret in one of the only surviving pieces of animated footage from before the pony holocaust. They were digging through dirt and stone like Olympic swimmers, criss-crossing in front of him, but so far Logan was managing to leap over the troughs they made. He knew what they wanted to do. They wanted to make a wider gap, a deeper trough, a trench almost that the Goliath would be too heavy to leap across, thereby cutting him off from where he wanted to go. If he kept them on the chase, however, that would be enough. The next pass they took, Logan hung back and fired ahead of their trails. There was a high-pitched yelping as he struck down all three of the Diamond Dogs in turn, putting an end to their interloping.

Again Logan wanted to shut off his headlamps and guess his way forward based on his last glimpse of the tunnel ahead. If Mixolydia truly possessed some kind of echolocation as she was implying, however, she would have no need to create a light source he could follow, and she'd be able to tell precisely where he was anyway. He shut off his headlamps anyway and slumped against a wall to think. Irish was so close now. His pit couldn't have been more than a few meters away, but Mixolydia must have been ahead of him. That was her shape he could see, briefly outlined in a dim spectacle of light from what must have been her horn. She must have needed to confirm something by sight. Her silhouette shifted, and Logan backed away against the wall when he knew her head must be turning in his direction. There could be no sneaking up on her. If he fired from his position, she'd thrown up that accursed sonic shield again.

Irish felt bored shooting down rocks and soil then trying to get out of its way as the debris fell. He wasn't doing a very good job of dodging. It seemed no matter which way he sidestepped, the plummeting objects would gravitate towards him and collide with Scorn & Spite out of spite. He should have been out of time when Mixolydia called down to him from on high. He told himself he should have given up, that he was done then and there, but Irish, being Irish, saw no reason to take her petulant threats seriously. She called his name a few times while he scrambled to knock more rocks free. In a cagey fashion he started pulling down lower rocks within arms' reach of Scorn & Spite and tried tessellating them together under his feet, though there wasn't much hope of keeping them too steady. He also shut off his headlights, knowing the layout of the pit well enough that it wasn't too difficult to knock a good-sized boulder down by attacking the walls.

After a moment, Mixolydia sighed. "I know you can hear me, Irish. I've studied your profile over the course of the war when I researched my musical."

Irish wanted to keep quiet, but he had to quip back. "You could've left out the part about me crapping myself. Haven't you ever heard of artistic liberty?" "Artistic liberty" is a phrase which means the alteration of a story to make things more palatable to an audience, which is typically used for works of historical fiction and is inappropriate in works of historical fact such as these, although some events may be reordered for the sake of easing confusion or where careful interpretation must supplement a lack of crucial detail.

"Oh please, you defecated yourself a whole lot more than we let on," the unicorn said. "Discord distributed the war records to both sides after copying them. I suppose it means with him gone, the story has to come to an end, doesn't it?" She couldn't quite see to the bottom because of the way the pit curved.

Irish didn't respond because he couldn't think up something to say, though he told himself it was because there was no need to dignify her dialogue with a response. It occurred to him that she must have been projecting her voice with her crazy magic somehow that was beyond his comprehension.

Predictably, she spoke again. "Irish?" She waited a moment while he said nothing. "What's it like facing your own extinction? I'm not saying that as a taunt or anything. I'm truly curious what's going through your mind. When this war is finally over, I'll make sure you tell stories of who our enemies were, so long as you're honest with me. As an artist, whether it's musical, visual or literary, it's my job to tell people's honest stories."

"What makes you so sure you're going to win this war, goat hips?" Irish asked.

Mixolydia projected a loud sigh. "You know nothing of our world, and you're on our home turf. Even on Earth we were winning, because our leader took the time to study human culture. All you knew was what we allowed you to know. Conflicts aren't won with your guns or your bombs. They're won with what's in your head: The mind."

"Spoken like a true pussy." Anyone else might've chosen more politically correct words. The phrase "politically correct" means "not being a bigoted douchebag with generalizations" although its term doesn't make the best sense because politicians are rarely if ever correct.

"Your crude expletives are as infantile as they are confounding."

"Do your big words make you think you're smart?" Irish asked, a typical bastion for the intimidated paranoid.

"No. Let me know if that answer was too fast for you."

"You know what's really fast?" asked Irish

"Yes, what?"

"A matzah worm!"

Logan's voice crackled over the internal radio. "That's Tatzlwurm, you dingo."

Before Mixolydia could interpret what Irish had meant, the wall burst apart like a Mack truck had just careened through it. Stones and dirt clouded the arena, much of it ricocheting off of her sonic shield. There was something her shield couldn't defend against, however, and that was a gigantic Tatzlwurm monster whose mouth alone was larger than her entire body twice over. She let out a scream as the beast paused to hiss, spewing froth from its three-jawed mouth.

Wanting to get her goat one last time before she was devoured, Irish laughed. "Joke's on you, fatty-fatty-fat-fat! While you were yabbering away at me, my friend here played the recording of you calling the tassel-thingy. Our Goliaths can detect a wider range of sounds than can be heard, so stick that in its mouth and chew it." The last bit there didn't make too much sense, but it didn't matter. Mixolydia was no longer around to question it, because those multiple black tongues had grasped around her like tendrils and yanked her into the slobbering pink mouth of the creature. She was engulfed by muscular flesh and disappeared head first, her legs kicking hopelessly before she was swallowed up a second later. Then the creature rumbled off through the underground and back out of sight, though the reverberations of its movement could be heard for quite some time.

Working together as fast as they could, eventually Logan helped Irish back onto the same elevation. "That felt like a long way to go just to off one pony," Irish said.

"We do what we gotta do," said Logan. "Now let's get out of here. We keep walking west, we're bound to hit the surface at some point. We don't have much time to lose, and we can bring the ceiling down on our heads if we need to."

"Won't that just get us trapped like you said earlier?"

"I feel like right now, nothing can stop us."

The two men kept walking, but Irish's mind stewed with thoughts. "Not even death stopped us. Logan, I know we've mentioned it a little bit before, but I gotta ask again. Do you remember what it was like being dead?"

Logan slowed his pace, wanting to give the thought some reflection, but not wishing to waste his time. "Not really, no. What about you?"

Irish shook his head. "It was just a blank. I remember being in terrible pain one moment, and then it was like waking up from a nightmare. I almost forgot how I died. I had to rip the nails out of my body to get down off that cross, and I could still feel the burns all over, but my mind was groggy for a day afterward. I kept confusing myself remembering what Daniel had told us about his death. He said he'd had dreams, but that was just his coma, right?"

Logan shrugged, except Fealty couldn't really replicate this motion. "I don't remember it either. The way I was told I died, I think I didn't even realize what had happened at the time. I'm not convinced of that rumor about remaining alive after being beheaded. Must be muscle spasms or something, when they say you blink and all. When I awoke wasn't much better, being enthralled to that blasted vampire pony. I didn't really feel alive again until Ivan and Tyrone slew Nightmare Moon. Actually, I never really felt alive until I met up with Delta Squad again."

"So what the hell does that mean? There's no life after death? That's just it for us?"

"All we need's Hell to keep us going," said Logan. "Sending the enemy there. Not wanting to go there ourselves. 'Course, I think Hell's too good for these pony bastards, but maybe nothing's not enough. Just not remembering the afterlife doesn't give us much to go on, does it? Our hippocampi were shut down, y'know."

Irish gave a shrug and thought for a minute. "Maybe, but then what in the hell are we fightin' for, knowing we could die?"

19. The Gryphons are Coming, the Gryphons are Coming

"Tell me again. You're certain you saw him head this way?" Daniel had been following after Tom all the way from Manehattan, and it wasn't until they were long out of relative danger that the distance they'd travelled was getting to him.

Deliverance's communications radio was working once again. Neither Tom nor Daniel was certain how this was, though Daniel remembered Franz Bandelt spewing something along the lines of the Goliaths being able to "repair" their software given time. He wasn't a computer scientist. Either that or the debris and dust in the air in the wake of Manehattan's demolition interfered with their peer-to-peer wireless. "Yeah, mate. I told you three times now. While I was up in that building, I saw him pull his parachute. Then he drifted in this direction. South, according to the radar. Southwest-ish." The suffix "ish" derives from the terms such as the language name "English" which is said to be a smattering of so many other languages that it's something of a hodgepodge, nearly its own thing but not quite. Hence, adding the suffix "-ish" to a word denotes it with a modifier similar to "nearly", "inexact" or "just about".

Daniel had to take Tom's word for it, and why shouldn't he? Trey Bunker wasn't a member of Delta Squad, but as the only known human that'd ever seen the world of Equestria, and through a pony's eyes, no less, he was an extremely valuable resource to the Human Resistance's vital intelligence. He couldn't say he cared for the man, and he wasn't certain anyone did. Who would trust a pony, let alone a traitor to the human race? Yet somehow there was a twinge of pity for the man who had come to see via the difficult road the evils the ponies had wrought. He kept telling himself that, and like learning any new idea, repetition was ingraining it into his

mind. If he'd been thinking about it anymore at the time, he'd have suspected this was a bad thing, but it isn't, really. Adaptation is animal nature, and one can't subsist solely on one point of view forever, or Daniel would never have come to think of himself as a viable leader for the human race.

Speaking of repetition, plodding along the topography in the Goliaths was an arduous process, temporally speaking. Pavement gave way to grass, which soon thinned out to a balding wasteland of grit and gravel. A sandy desert now stretched before him, not as scalding and unforgiving as more severe deserts known on Earth, but unmistakably a wasteland that reached out for miles. Both Daniel and Tom were getting tired of mushing their powered armour suits along. Tom was more motivated to carry out Daniel's bidding and succeed this mission, but Daniel had no intention of being dissuaded despite his grim deficiency in morale.

Neither of them was quite sure why they couldn't see it a moment ago—something about the terrain of tall, stubby plateaus that surrounded them, no doubt—but there it was, lying across the ground, ruffling in the light wind in a lengthy, disgruntled heap. "Tom, what colour was Trey's parachute again?"

They were staring at a red parachute, lying across the ground, wanting to drift away but caught on some sort of weight. They could hear its motion like someone trying to fit sheets on a bed. The wind picked up harder, kicking sand and grit across their visors, and Daniel blinked twice as the vision of a feather momentarily grasping to his. Tom marched up and yanked at the voluminous fallen duffel. A storm of feathers careened across their path, swirling around them both. Then came the torrent of a dozen or more shrill cries. By the time they recognized the ambush, heavy bodies were already colliding against their armour in an all-out, berserk attack.

The Gryphons are Coming, the Gryphons are Coming

Daniel and Tom had to shout to one another to be heard over the ear-piercing squawks and cries of the creatures now attacking them. Neither of them failed to recognize their attackers, even though neither of them had ever seen a real one before. A half-mammal, half-bird creature made up of eagle and lion parts had to be a gryphon. They'd seen them on ancient coats of arms amongst the wreckage of Great Britain. There was no time to deny or debate their existence. They were here, and they were every bit as violent as they were capable of being.

Too bad for them then that Daniel and Tom were fully-trained marines since their teen years, and dressed in thick, heavy power armour with weapons larger than humans could conceivably carry without considerable aid. "Sweep them!" Daniel commanded. "Guard the canvas!" Tom swept his rapid-fire standard minigun over the area while Daniel's slow-firing massive shotgun committed heavy damage. In the end, the clear victors were obvious, and those gryphons that did not lie dead as particularly un-living door nails were busily flying away at top speed, proving to be every bit as infuriating in their evasiveness as the average pegasus.

"Dude, they scratched up the paint job!" Tom pointed at Daniel who naturally couldn't see the outside of his Nirvana very well. He could see the scraping claw marks along Tom's Deliverance as well, but neither one was being reported structural damages by their HUDs, so any injury must have been solely cosmetic. Neither of them could find a broken gryphon talon on the ground, however.

Tom resumed grabbing away folds of parachute to reveal a dead and broken body underneath. One of the gryphons had gotten tangled in it during the fracas. The only traces they found of Trey Bunker were scuffled markings in the sand and a trail of the weapons he'd been given to defend himself leading off in the direction of a far-off settlement. So they followed that trail of ammo clips, a gun and a machete. They sought out that town barely visible in the haze of the horizon.

A big archway bore a sign reading "Appleoosa". Without bothering with the futile question of why it was written in a language they were able to read, they strode on through under the arch. It wasn't as if there was some great big fence surrounding the town, but the moment they passed through onto its turf, they felt as if they'd returned to civilization from being lost at days. They couldn't say they felt at home by any stretch of the imagination, but they could say what they found was weird.

Appleoosa was built like any city in the western United States of America. Tumbleweeds darted between wooden storefronts. Piles of horseshit were messily strewn across where streets should have been paved. Barrels, outhouses and troughs decorated the exteriors of buildings in a random but neat assemblage. The odd thing was the utter lack of life. They had to look hard to see signs of activity, and these were in the faces of ponies peering through windows which were hastily shuttered, or over doors whose spaces were swiftly vacated. What was a ghost town on the outside was clearly inhabited. Daniel and Tom took their time in passing not because they felt any sense of vulnerability, but because they were curious to soak in every detail and figure out why this place felt so wrong to them beyond the fact it was a pony city in Equestria where everything looked so downright cartoonish to begin with.

"Alright, so where do we search first? This place looks like a western film." Daniel asked Tom.

"Not sure, mate. I never liked American stuff."

"Yeah, me neither. Think we should start at separate ends of town and just check inside every single building? I'd smash my way through, but we have no idea where he's being held."

"Don't need to tell me twice, but nah. That place over there looks like a pub. I wouldn't drink any swill the ponies gave me, but it's gotta be where they all congregate."

"I've never known you to refuse a drink," Daniel joked. "I'm surprised you're not already asking me to cover your bar tab."

Tom laughed. "Shut up, Danny boy. Let's head inside."

Not quite knowing what to expect is like walking through molasses. Your feet drag, and you can't see what's under them. Tom insisted on entering first to no surprise of Daniel's, but nothing happened as both of them stepped inside. The floorboards creaked under the immense weight of their Goliaths, but did not give. There were quite a few ponies waiting inside the tavern, at least a dozen by Daniel's count. Salt licks graced every round, dusty table top. Most of the Equestrians in here were earth ponies. The stallions generally wore ten-gallon hats, while the mares wore inconvenient-looking frilly dresses. Behind a counter was a snappy-dressed bartender pony. At one table, three ponies were playing miserably at some card game like poker, waiting the ages it routinely takes to get a hand (or in their case hoof) that could actually be played for something. Leaning over a second landing balustrade were two mares gazing down upon them. In fact, all eyes were on the Goliaths with fearful expressions, and yet nopony stopped what they were doing.

The bartender must have been the bravest of the bunch, because he regarded the two Goliaths as welcome customers. "What'll you two be havin'? We got sarsaparilla, apple juice, and apple cider. If you like salt, we got salt licks: Medium, large, or a bag of smaller chunks to go."

"No," said Daniel.

"No?" The bartender wasn't sure he'd asked a yes or no question. "Y'all won't be havin' nothin'? Well, I guess that's on yer."

"No," Daniel repeated. It felt nice to tell a pony that.

True to small town stereotypes, the ponies here were a nosy sort, partly because it was easy for them to keep track of a stranger's business. They must have known any strangers had a reason to be out here. A yellow stallion wearing a vest spoke up next. His mane and tail were blonde, and his cutie mark was a rather unremarkable red apple. "You fellers musta come into town at a dreadful time like this for a reason." He didn't look up from his drink. Didn't touch its glass, either, as if his hoof couldn't pick it up somehow. He just left it where it was, standing next to his cowboy hat. "T'ain't fair. T'ain't fair."

"Could you stop talking about your taint? What's not fair?" Tom asked, giving his enemy the momentary benefit of the doubt. Daniel let out a sigh that only Tom could hear. His guess as to why the pony then so eagerly shared the woeful tale of his sorry state was because he and Tom obviously outclassed any combative ability any pony or gryphon could muster up.

"The gryphons are in charge around here now. They were supposed to join the ponies in their defence of Equestria against the aliens, but all they've done since they've arrived is wreak havoc and order us around without doin' a lick of anythin' in return! T'ain't fair."

"That is great; listen," Daniel said as if it was all in one sentence. "We happen to be looking for a human. He has very important information, so he had better be alive. Do you know where he is?"

The stallion frowned at them. "He's in the jail house. In a jail cell."

"You have crime in this candy-coated munchkin-Ville of yours?" asked Daniel. "Just let him out already. We need him."

Tom whispered to him on their internal channel. "Oy, Dan."

The stallion picked up his hat and stuck it on his head. "I may be acting deputy Braeburn now, but I ain't got the authority to do that."

"You do not have the authority," Daniel corrected him. "Why the hell not?"

Braeburn continued what he'd been saying while Daniel was talking right over him again. "Becau'n the gryphons, o' course! They barged right in and told us they'd take over everythin'. That was a no-can-do, so Sheriff Silverstar had to put his hoof down. Put

his hoof down right in it, fer gosh sakes, and his deputy, Trouble Shoes, accidentally kilt himself in a gun-cleanin' accident. Bein' the prominent figure in town I am, what with the apple orchard an' all, I was chosen to step in and beg for a truce." He drooped the forward brim of his hat over his eyes.

"What do we do now?" Daniel asked. "Just barge in there and get him out?"

"Could be dangerous," Tom answered. "Maybe there's some way to get a better idea of what we're walking into."

Since Daniel had forgotten to switch back over to the internal radio, or more likely just didn't care, Braeburn answered him. "I don't reckon that'd be such a good idea, pardner. Here, take a lookee at this." He produced a small, radiant yellow crystal from his vest pocket. It had broad, jagged protrusions rising from a flat base, but a well-cut sphere situated from its upper majority. "I call it the prisoner's beacon. The old sheriff used to use it to keep an eye on prisoners when he stepped outta the office."

Daniel and Tom couldn't tell how the magical artefact worked, but when Braeburn touched it with his hoof in some specific way, they could see a two-dimensional image projected within the spherical portion that beheld the same angle no matter what vantage point they observed it from. There was Trey Bunker, sitting inside of a tiny little prison cell behind vertical metal bars. His fatigues were only slightly tattered and torn, but he was sitting on the floor, hugging his knees to his chest. Shortly after this image appeared, he turned to face the viewer. His eyes shifted in that shifty way he had of being which irritated Daniel so.

"Can he hear us?" Daniel asked.

"I can hear you," Trey replied.

"Good. Sit tight. We are coming to get you out."

"Are you with the ponies right now?" Trey was squinting to see harder.

"Yes, but it is not like they can touch us. Guess with these gryphons in town, now they know what it is like to be invaded with the sins of capitalist colonialism."

"They would, because originally this land belonged to the buffalo," Trey said.

"Buffalo?" Tom asked. "You're telling me there're talking buffalo, too?"

"And cows. And donkeys and mules. Pretty much most ungulates, actually. Not pigs, for some reason. I think they eat them."

"What in the fuck is an ungulate? That's not even a word," said Tom. Nobody corrected him because there were far more important issues on the table than his illiteracy.

"Listen, uh, be careful," Trey said.

"As if we need to be," said Daniel.

"Just be careful, please? I don't have one of your suit thingies, and I've got something crucial to tell you."

"Just tell us now. Can't you?"

"No. No I can't. Please get me out of here as soon as possible so we can get underway to Canterlot. I'll tell you on the way."

"Right. Canterlot. Whatever. We will be right over," Daniel said. "Over and out." He shot Braeburn a look, because the pony was giving him an unamused look. "What? You want to help liberate your prison from the gryphons or whatever? Then we want the human in exchange. Simple as that."

"It would truly be a feat if you could possibly manage that." Braeburn finally took a sip as though he were toasting them. "I may be gettin' ahead of myself here, but I can't wait to see what happens after you manage all that, seein' as our species are at war an' everythin'."

Daniel turned away on the spot then halted. A twinge of fury raced through him. "By that point, if I were you, I'd run far, far away. Heat stroke in the desert will be preferable to what your kind deserves."

When they headed back outside from the tavern, Tom said to Daniel, "Not sayin' you were wrong, mate, but even I got chills from that one, and the temperature gauge says it's headin' upwards past thirty Celsius."

"You're saying I was wrong to say what I said to them in there?" Daniel asked.

Tom sighed. "No, the very first thing I said just then was that you weren't wrong. Daniel, listen. Maybe storming the jailhouse gung-ho isn't the only option we have to take. If even the ponies were willing to have a spot of chat with us, maybe we can force the gryphons to hear us out too, huh? The enemies of our enemies are, well, not our friends by any means, but they could be a means to an end."

Daniel thought back to the way the gryphons fearlessly assaulted them out in the hinterlands, clawing and swarming against overwhelming odds. It sure would be nice to see their claws cutting into pony flesh instead of scratching up their paint jobs. "Yeah, I suppose that's worth a try. I'm kind of curious what the hell their deal is, too. Still, they're Equestrians, and once this is over, they have to die as well."

"Well, natch, mate." Tom followed Daniel's lead through the town, remarking at one point how incredible it was that such an antiquated society could have ever been as successful as it was in conquering the Earth. They sought out some place like a town hall which wasn't too difficult to find in such a small town. What was more indicative that this was the building they sought was the presence of gryphons lazing about on the upper outdoor balcony like guardian sentinels or gargoyles. They gazed with lazy disdain toward the two Goliaths below and made no move to bar either of them entry into the mayoral edifice.

Walking through the crowd of gryphons lined up like judgmental statues inside filled Daniel with unease. Even though he was protected by a durable armoured shell inside Nirvana, it wasn't as though he was born made of metal. He was just a flesh and blood human inside, and being in a room filled with half-lion creatures with sharp, deadly beaks and talons was every bit as unsettling just from the provocation alone that they could be lethal in a heartbeat without his protection. Although there had been no official invitation, and they hadn't exactly brought an RSVP (an acronym standing for a French phrase meaning "please reply"), the posture of the observant gryphons said they'd been expected.

The chief gryphon said the same thing. "You've been expected, dweebs!" She was a tawny bronze-hued monster with yellow talons and a white-feathered neck and head. Her voice sounded like a midget trucker with a chewing tobacco fixation of Freudian proportions. "Congrats on fuckin' killin' so many fuckin' gryphons, you lame-o twats. Kaplop! Name's Gilda, grand poohbah of the gryphon group here in Appleoosa. 'Course, you goddamn bein' here and all, I'm sure you got some important shit to fuckin' get my goat with, right? 'Cause I motherfuckin' love getting to hear dorks whining about their pissant little problems."

This manner of speech was a little difficult for Daniel to listen through, so he hesitated a moment and stammered. This made the gryphons angrier, as evidenced by their general glares and Gilda's garrulous gloating. "Well? Stop daddling about and speak up, you stupid Mollies!"

Daniel whispered to Tom on the internal radio, not that the gryphons could hear. "I am beginning to have second thoughts here."

"C'mon, mate. We gotta lend 'em an ear if we expect 'em to help us out. We can't blow all our ammo before we get to Canterlot."

"What? What in the hell is Canterlot?"

Tom paused for a minute, but Daniel could feel his blank stare on him. "It's where Trey suggested we go. Didn't he mention it in the briefing?"

"I think we fell asleep for that one."

"Did they go to sleep or somethin'?" Gilda asked the gryphon nearest her. "Hey, dorkapotamuses! Wake the fuck up!" She reached forward and banged on Nirvana’s headpiece a couple times. Daniel was tempted to deck her one with one of Nirvana's arms. "You came here to gab with us, but you don't know the first thing about how great gryphons are, do ya?"

"No, as a matter of fact, we—"

Daniel was cut off by an elderly gryphon who looked more part vulture than eagle. He had one glass eye and was wearing a fez to keep cool in Appleoosa's harsh environment. He coughed and wheezed vociferously like a train pulling into the station. "I'll tells ya! I'll tells ya all about gryphons, ya—" He lapsed into another lengthy bout of hacking up a lung. His coughing was so intense he fell

backwards right off his perch and landed on his back on the meeting hall floor. His tail curled up and his hind legs stuck up in the air. There was a long pause as he just lay there, then one of the other gryphons reached over to take his pulse. "He's dead!"

Gilda groaned and rolled her eyes. "Get on with it! I've got a funch to get to after this."

Daniel almost shouted. "Right! We understand things are tense between you and the ponies."

"No duh. Those namby-pamby cunt-rags don't take kindly to authority."

"Uh-huh. And what authority it is. You were pretty strong out there. Way stronger than some dumb pony."

"Can your gormless glozing and get to the point, geeks! What're you tryin' to say?"

Daniel wasn't sure he was rushing the point home or not, but every moment not spent directly fixating on his goal felt like a waste of time. "It seems to me as if the ponies are not doing very much around here. You were the ones guarding the town after all. Why not just do away with them?"

Gilda let out one short, loud laugh that pained Daniel's and Tom's ears. "What do you think we are, your desperation number? We don't need your help keeping the ponies in their place. We garrotted their sheriff and they fell into line almost immediately. If you want the ponies dead so badly, go do it yourself. We certainly won't stop you. Given your power, why don't you just do it now? Or was there something you wanted out of it, hm?" She turned her head to point one accusing eye at Daniel.

Daniel gritted his teeth. "We seek the release of your prisoner, the human."

"Ugh. Why? And no. We plan to feed him to the gryphon chieftain when he arrives. We respect the strength of those deceptions you wear, but take them off and we will not hesitate to slaughter you like so much food. It's difficult to find meat in Equestria." With that, Gilda and her gryphon groupies broke into guffaws of laughter. Daniel wanted so badly to blast them all away, but he stayed his temper. He tried to shut his eyes and meditate like the Kyrati monks had taught him. He had to find out what Trey was too scared to tell him within pony earshot. Once again he had to bid Tom follow him as they exited another building.

"Now where are we gonna go?" Tom asked.

"We are busting Trey out ourselves."

The plan was this: Daniel and Tom would walk into the jail house, check each cell for Trey then rip the bars out of the walls to free him. There was jack all the gryphons could do to stop them while they wore their Goliaths, and any who dared insult them with any attempts at resistance would be met with a hail of hot Chinese lead. It was a good feeling, finally being able to turn the tables on the Equestrians that had plagued them for six long years, killing, pillaging and raping humankind, that now the enemy could not fight back. Tom tried to voice a couple reservations, but he was ultimately on board with whatever Daniel wanted to do. For whatever reason, they both remembered Berlin. This situation wasn't as dangerous, wasn't as momentous, wasn't as grand, but it was the two of them together again at last, without being brainwashed or on opposite sides. It'd been a long time since between Twilight Sparkle had been killed and Rainbow Dash had escaped custody that Daniel felt like he was finally getting what he'd signed on for.

Daniel didn't even push open the door to the sheriff's office. He forced it open by trudging his Nirvana through the swinging partition. A gryphon guard standing beside a desk let out a chiding exclamation then rushed Nirvana with his spear. The weapon snapped in twain against Nirvana's alloy exterior. Though there was no need to, Daniel blasted him to smithereens against the wall using his minigun. The other two gryphons were playing cards and could only watch in terror as their superior's gaping bullet wounds exploded into even larger pits of chunky, dark red. Naturally this angered them and they rose to the challenge even without having a ready plan to take on this threat. Tom shot them both up as well.

Halfway down the corridor of jail cells, Tom heard a loud clang and felt a jolt shudder through Deliverance's right shoulder. His HUD reported structural damage. "Uh oh. That's not good. Daniel, they're comin' up behind us! Go on ahead!" Tom stomped Deliverance around on the spot and took another puncture to Deliverance's upper arm. This time he could see the weapon was a pickaxe, but it must've been made of steel or something to do this kind of damage. Luckily for him the Goliaths were made of thicker stuff. The movement of Deliverance's right arm was feeling a little sluggish now, however. Tom battered the hostile gryphon away, flinging the beast against the bars of an empty cell.

Daniel came upon the cell on the left down the far end of the corridor where Trey was, but Trey was not alone. A gryphon standing on his hind legs had seized Trey by the throat with enough strength to pick him off the ground. Trey was still able to choke out words. "What're you doing, Daniel? Just go, just leave me!"

"Do it, or he dies here and now, metal monster!" The gryphon smiled as though this was exactly what he wanted to have happen. It was a little odd to see a beak bend as though it was slightly malleable, and also to see a beak with teeth inside as if the gryphons didn't just swallow everything whole like lizards. That wasn't nearly as important as the razor-sharp talons already pricking Trey's skin.

"Daniel, this is important! Princess Celestia's power—" They were the last words Trey ever got out. The gryphon pulled in two directions, slashing its talons deep through his throat. Deep red blood gushed out as though squeezed from an overripe piece of fruit. Daniel and Tom had witnessed a lot of violence in their days, but they hadn't quite seen a jugular squirt like an SUV rolling over a bottle of ketcup before. Trey gurgled as he was dropped to the ground where he teetered on his knees before falling backward. His eyes were wide and bright, his pupils dilated. He weakly tried to grasp at his throat while he fell, but he was dead by the time his head hit the floor. Blood continued to puddle out from his neck which had been sliced up with horrifying brutality.

"Kaplop!" was the last word the gryphon got out before Daniel flew into a rage and emptied a few more seconds' worth of ammunition from his minigun's explosive rounds than was strictly required. Still not enough to quell his rage, he let out a rising bellow until Tom yelled at him several times to stop.

"What the hell is the matter, Daniel?"

Daniel remembered where he was. He stomped after Tom and toward the exit. "This was a total fuck up, as usual! Let us just get the hell outside!"

"What happened?" Tom asked.

"He is dead, what did you think? Trey is dead! The Equestrians were one step ahead like they *always are*, and Trey is dead!"

Back outside, Daniel smashed apart a trough with Nirvana's foot, sending water splashing everywhere. Tom yelled at him again. "Dammit, Daniel, stop this! Stop it! This isn't you! I don't believe this is who you are, agonizing over each and every life!"

Daniel felt like his heart had just smacked against a brick wall. He turned around to face Deliverance. "That is just it, Tom. I did not really care about Trey. He was a traitor, even if he helped us in the end, and there was not one thing about him I liked. It is these damn Equestrians, these ponies and gryphons and whatever. I thought becoming a monk would save me, but here my blood is boiling."

Tom's voice was gentle again, now that Daniel was calming down somewhat. "It's a hard habit to break, losing control. Believe me, I know. You know what I was like growing up, and you still stuck by me. You spent one year in a Buddhist monastery, while you endured five to four years of trauma. Bad emotions, carried with you for so long, start to become you, but let me tell you the secret. Having a friend who'll care about you no matter what through it all is the cure. We don't have those monks with us, but you have me."

Daniel wished he could see Tom's face better. "Thank you, Tom." After a sigh, he soured again. "Damn it all! Trey was saying something about Kaiser Celestia."

"I think he briefed us on enough. We can handle anything Equestria throws at us," Tom said. "We need to be thinking about our next course of action to meet up with the others."

"If Canterlot is really as important as we have been told, the others should end up heading there, too. I do not like this idea of gryphons joining the Equestrian ranks against us, though."

"Maybe we can rectify that," Tom said.

"How so?"

"Hear me out. I know it's weird, but those ponies in the saloon were actually willing to chat with us. I think a lot of the ponies here are civilians just living their lives, not believing the war would ever come to them. We've got civilians on Earth doing pretty much the same. I'm not trying to compare the two. Similarities aren't equalities, and a point of view can be situated behind a blind spot. The ponies are monsters of pure evil, but maybe we can ally with them against the gryphons here."

Daniel was struggling to maintain his cool. He really was. This suggestion was a bitter pill to swallow, a phrase which means that the truth may not be as palatable as it is important to hear, using something called a "metaphor" which is a word for oversimplifying a situation. Having Tom with him here as his support made all the difference in the world. "We'll have to act fast," Daniel said. He told himself this plan was a necessary evil or a tactical convenience at best. He tried to think of this as just an

unfortunate fact, like how one has to play poorly at the violin before getting good, so that while one practices one unfortunately subjects all within earshot to bad playing for years. "One day smarter men than us will have solutions for this type of situation. Until then, we have to make it clear there can be no accord between the pony and gryphon races against us. Wiping the whole town out won't get that point across."

Acting sheriff Braeburn was still in the saloon with much of the other residents of Appleoosa. "I didn't think it'd take y'all this long to see those gryphons aren't anythin' to reckon with," he called out.

Daniel tromped up to his table. He tried to think up an intimidating pose to strike, but such things weren't the easiest to accomplish with the Goliaths. "How soon can your ponies be ready to take back your town?"

"I ain't sure we got the fight left in us."

"Find it. Grab your guns and anything else you have. We are kicking those gryphons out this minute. They have no right annexing your towns like this." Daniel found it easy to spout words he didn't mean to the ponies.

"What's a gun?" Braeburn asked. "We got plenty of apple pies."

"Guns! Weapons! You use them all the time on Earth."

Braeburn paused for a second. "We really have no need for those kinds of things here."

"You have seen the claws on those things, have you not? They can swoop down and rip you apart in an unarmed fight."

"Boy, you're sure makin' a fine point with yer argument, ain'tcha?"

"My comrade and I will cover you. If you help us, we will leave your little town in peace."

Braeburn was silent for a longer moment this time, so it was hard to tell if he was ignoring Daniel or considering his proposal. "That'd be mighty helpful. We got help on the way, actually, but it's just one pony. Said to be the strongest earth pony alive today. Trained in the highest peaks of Yakyakistan."

"I guarantee you will not be needing him. Tell any pony capable of raising whatever weapons you have to find a place of cover. My comrade and I will go out in the open where it will be easier to pick the gryphons off in larger numbers."

Though the ponies had earlier made known their disapproval of the gryphons overtaking their town, Daniel still half expected them to be too cowardly to show up to the fight. When he and Tom stood outside in the middle of the main street, they could see ponies in cowboy hats peeking over the parapet walls or out from behind makeshift barricades of barrels and boxes.

"They don't seem very thankful," Tom said.

"Huh? About what?" asked Daniel.

"They were waiting on one pony to show up, they said, but you and I are worth countless ponies in these machines. All we have to do is wait for the gryphons to show up, then blast 'em."

"I just hope leaving one little town of ponies alone is worth an entire war," Daniel said. "When Discord took over, the ponies were receiving no reinforcements from Equestria. Dividing them up has been a good strategy."

Tom made an attempt to joshing-ly elbow Nirvana. "Eh, you worry too much, mate."

Maybe Daniel should have been worried more. Worry is simply the mind trying to plan for the worst. Daniel's confidence in Nirvana was such that he had no notion how the gryphons could possibly combat them. Perhaps that Braeburn character hadn't known what he was talking about when he said Equestria had no guns. If he was lying about all the guns being on Earth, and this was a trap, then this could become a good opportunity to show the ponies how futile their traps were. No matter all their odds, human beings had managed to scrape together every last thing they had in order to survive.

Gryphons marched out in rows of three from behind a pair of buildings on the opposite side of the street. Many were armed with spears, pickaxes, sledgehammers and the like, although some were bare-clawed. Daniel waited for them to line up before him and Tom before asking on the radio, "You want we should shoot them now? I will let you have the first go."

"Nah, let's let 'em get a bit closer. Let 'em strike first so they have time to see the futility in attacking us." Tom grinned.

"I love the way you think." Daniel grinned too.

A tawny male gryphon with an almost owl-like face and banded red and brown plumage around the neck was the first to speak. Like the elderly gryphon inside the town hall, he too was wearing a red fez with gold stripes. "You may have guessed our truce granted you a green light to go gallivanting around town, gunning down gryphons, but guess again. We are a proud race!"

"We are proud of our accomplishments, not some bogus cultural heritage," Daniel said so that all could hear.

"You have goaded our anger for the last time, deceptions! Gryphons, to war!"

As the gryphons ran forward, Tom shot first. "Changed my mind, Daniel. Those spears may be shite, but those pickaxes and sledges might be trouble after all!"

"Fine thing telling me now." Daniel kept most of his cool intact, waited for a swarm of gryphons to gather in front of him, then let loose with a spreading burst from his heavy-duty flak shotgun. The sensation was refreshing, the ability to pulverize multiple enemy targets at once, sweeping a wide group at close range. He wanted to taste more of the adrenaline. Wanted them to get closer and die harder, if such a thing was possible.

Tom on the other hand was making use of short, controlled bursts from his minigun, though he was scrambling a little. He kept Deliverance's back to Nirvana's because it wasn't easy for either of them to move as quickly as they were used to before they trained with the Goliaths. The gryphons came at them high and low and from every side. They had learned quickly to spread themselves thin away from Daniel's shotgun. Both Delta Squad members had to admit their weapons weren't suited the best at taking care of large groups, but against a force like this, that wasn't much of an issue.

Then Daniel felt a clang on his left shoulder. Tom felt a thud shake his whole right side. Like Tom had tried to warn him, the pickaxes and sledgehammers were made of sterner stuff. Daniel's immediate thought was that they had been too confident, and he channelled his Buddhist teachings once more to calm himself. He swept his minigun back and forth as he tried to right his breathing, and though it wasn't very tactical, it was effective at mustering his vital self-control. Tom punched out at a gryphon wielding a pickaxe, and though the beast toppled backward, it remained upright and did not lose its grip.

"Where the ruddy hell are those ponies?" Tom tried battering another gryphon away, but this one jammed its spear into a joint located in Deliverance's right elbow. It was a lucky shot, but the Goliaths were well-protected for such an obvious vulnerability. The spear's blade wedged inside of the small crevice while the rest of the weapon snapped like a matchstick.

The next thing Daniel saw was to his right: A gryphon skidded across the dirt on its back a good eight feet or so. "Nice one, Tom!"

"That wasn't me!" Tom now noticed a figure moving amidst the rain of feathers and the crowd of fluctuating bodies. At first glance, he thought it was one of the chargers that hadn't been sighted since Pinkie Pie's death; big, bulky, bipedal ponies that were bullet-resistant yet not puncture-proof. It was definitely a pony at least, and once it cracked two gryphon skulls together with its front hooves, emitting a resounding hollow coconut sound, Tom got a second glance.

The earth stallion had a coat of Tuscan red that faded into shaggy wine-coloured legs. His mane and tail were both a kind of military green or similar. His mane was kept in a low, even Mohawk, and his tail was braided into a queue. Tom thought his cutie mark looked like a bullet with an odd ripple effect trailing behind it, but the most striking feature was the triangular sunshades adorning his muzzle.

The muscular pony flung himself about as though he was falling, but his flailing roll, like a cartwheel gone wrong, deflected the nearby gryphons while evading a couple of spears that thudded into the dirt where he'd just been. Tom was tempted to keep watching this pony fight, almost neglecting his own contributions to the close-quarters battle. The stallion whipped his queue tail sharply around a gryphon's throat to keep the latter in place, then kicked furiously with his hind legs over and over again until his tail loosened and let go. The gryphon went stumbling backwards right into Daniel's next line of fire.

"Mind telling us whose side you're on?" Tom shouted.

The stallion caught a spear in mid-strike that had been meant to clobber him with its shaft held in a horizontal fashion. He twirled the spear about in rapid circles so that it struck the offending gryphon multiple times in the beak. For this, it took him a

moment to respond. "Although it is proper etiquette to give your own name first when asking, my name is Matrix Dodge. I was called here to liberate Appleoosa from the gryphons."

Daniel chided Tom over the internal. "Don't talk to it; just let it fight the gryphons."

"Yeah, but I never seen a pony do jujitsu Kwan do before. It's fuckin' crazy."

"The ponies always have been and always will be our enemy."

Tom knew better than to prolong the argument. He knew the ponies were their enemies as much as anyone else. "Awestruck" is not a word that means "admiration". The next time he heard Daniel's voice crackle onto the radio, he was worried his closest friend would lose his cool again, but instead he had ill tidings to report.

"Cannons!" So the Equestrians did have munitions of a sort. Daniel recalled the cannon technology Pinkie Pie had imbued into her weird hazmat party supply suit during that horrendous journey through New York's sewer system. *Yeah, sure, bring that up again, brain,* he thought to himself. The gryphons were lining up down either end of the main street with at least eight cannons total aimed right at the Goliaths and Matrix Dodge. Daniel realized right then that the frontal assault was a distraction to allow them time enough to set up their weapons. He felt now was the time to reassess the feeling of invincibility he'd been relying on.

The gryphons had the projectile advantage. The miniguns and flak shotgun weren't effective at range, and if the gryphons were trained well enough, they could potentially match Deliverance's sniper rifle in speed, though only when he was being swarmed enough. The harpoon would of course just tether him and waste a decent tool. Nirvana's laser might have been their best bet, but lethal damage, especially at this range, required a continuous blast. Oh well. It was worth a try. He fired Nirvana's heat laser at the gryphon on the far right. He could hear its pained squawk even at this distance, but he didn't stop until he could see the flames light up around its plumage.

Tom saw a gryphon go hurtling through the air past him, its wings struggling against the momentum to regain its own flight control. It did so short of scraping the ground, but it had halted in the path of an oncoming cannonball. Its body was shocked like a massive splash of pool water; its limbs flung outwards, and in an instant its fur was stained with ounces of blood. Tom thought he'd blinked and missed something, but the injurious effects were so instantaneous. The broken gryphon was flung to the ground at his feet. The next things Tom saw were about three cannons aimed straight for him. His legs shook. He wasn't sure what happened first: Him seeing the plume of smoke from the first cannon to fire, or him leaping sideways out of the way with Deliverance's jump boosters.

A gryphon swooped down out of nowhere, carrying a satchel strapped over its shoulder. She zoomed for the town hall, away from the fight, but Daniel caught her with his minigun. She slammed down onto her beak on the ground and didn't move again. *Courier,* he thought. *Wonder what the message was.*

Daniel moved on to the second cannoneer by now. He wasn't fast enough. That is to say, a cannon struck Nirvana straight in the gut. The force was such that Nirvana was actually lifted off its feet and thrown back a meter or so. The Goliath landed on its feet again, being so heavy, but inside was chaos. Daniel could immediately taste blood from the shock. Was he injured? Was his sense of pain merely his own shock? Either way, he decided then and there to drop the act. The Goliaths were not impervious. Sure, he would be dead right now had he been wearing naught but his ACUs, but his HUD was screaming at him about structural damage warnings here and there, spreading to places besides Nirvana's abdomen. His food tube had squirted lukewarm, sticky gruel down his chin. He barely heard the second cannonball with his name on it.

Matrix Dodge performed an incredible feat. He leapt up and seized the cannonball in mid-air. He spun around upon doing so and hurled the projectile right back from whence it came where it exploded in a cloud of dirt on top of the offending gryphon. Daniel could vaguely remember asking himself, *Why? Why is it so hard to fight in these things? We practiced for weeks. We are better armed and more protected than we have ever been.* If there was one thing that was true across the universes, it was probably the pithy adage that nothing in life is easy.

Tom meanwhile was screaming for Daniel to respond. He took aim at the cannons aiming for him, but was much relieved to notice that the ponies of Appleoosa had finally pulled through and were throwing javelins and spears at the cannoneers. One got struck in the throat, he was sure.

Matrix Dodge had been seized by a gryphon that was carrying him upwards. Another gryphon tackled him square in the stomach, and his whole form jerked as if he'd been wounded. It seemed even the fight of one lone pony in the fray had been spent.

Daniel managed to respond. "I'm fine. I'm fine, and we're ending this charade right now." He aimed his laser not at the gryphons, not at their hidden stockpiles of gunpowder he couldn't see, but at the timber framing of the buildings along the sides of the

street. They burst into flames under the hot desert heat, and the dryness of it all ensured the blaze would spread quickly. Appleoosa was burning.

"Tom, new orders! Move your butt!" Daniel didn't need to tell him twice. Both Goliaths started tromping off in the same direction, the direction of the railroad tracks that ran perpendicular to the edge of town. Either marine could see the other's Goliath was not in optimal shape, with visible damages to their paint, and jerky motions from their limbs.

"Which way do we go, mate?" Tom asked. Daniel paused to look at a map of the train stations. Tom glanced behind himself and saw that although the Appleoosans were panicking trying to douse the flames but in the midst of a serious drought, they were also being pursued. "Pick one, hurry!" He fired at the couple of gryphons chasing after them, but didn't want to assume those were the last of them.

"This way!" Daniel led Tom over the tracks and into a rather large shed that a separate section of track ran into.

"Oh, you've gotta be kidding me." Tom had noticed what they were going to ride: An old-fashioned handcart from ancient cartoons was stowed inside. He clambered onto the side opposite Daniel.

"This'll be a piece of cake," Daniel said. "The Goliaths are strong enough for this." He pushed down on his side of the handle. Tom then pushed down on his. The handcart squeaked and groaned, but it did budge. It rolled out from the shed at a leisurely pace. They were reminded of a see-saw, each side taking turns to push down or rise up.

"Oh, shit! Shit shit, fuck fuck shit!" Tom had noticed three ponies galloping towards them, one of which was Matrix Dodge. The handcart was still moving along at a snail's pace, accelerating with agonizing delay. When Tom swore, though, there was a slight kick. Both marines were beginning to take off, but the ponies were drawing ever closer.

Tom raised his minigun arm and fired, his spread quickly killing one mare and disabling the other. Matrix Dodge, however, rolled over a full turn. Tom chased him with the bullets, but the stallion sprang to his feet and strode just out of range like he was dancing. No matter how he tried to shoot ahead of him, Matrix Dodge evaded every single one of Tom's bullets.

"Tom, the cart! The cart! Do not let go! Must go faster!" Daniel snapped Tom back into reality, and the pair chugged away at the handcart. Pretty soon they were making good time, finally clipping along at a pace which the ponies could not outrun. As they headed northwest, putting Appleoosa far behind them until it was almost out of sight beneath a ghastly cloud of black smoke, they refused to let up on their escape. "Make it go faster!" Daniel kept saying.

"Where are we headed, anyway?" Tom asked. "And what do we do if a train comes this way?"

"We ditch the handcart at the next station. And, uh, if a train comes by, we get off," said Daniel. "Though we may have to contend with that." He was looking at a cloud of dust that stuck out like a sore thumb in the hinterlands. The cloud of dust that was following them around every long bend. The cloud of dust that was faster than anything they'd seen on foot. The pursuit by their enemies would not let up.

20. School's Out Forever

Despite the recent chaos that had sowed its woeful seeds across eastern Equestria, life went onwards, even for the young foals attending Ponyville's elementary school. The students were chattering as hyperactive children tend to, little aware that they had to talk over one another to be heard, creating a cascade effect of high-pitched volume that could make a blackboard toss its chalk into the rubbish bin. The majority of Ponyville's residents, like in Appleoosa, were earth ponies. Four students in particular had shoved their ways into the position of alphas of the class. A fat colt name Snips was arguing with a dopey-looking scrawny colt named Snails over the benefit of learning karate to beat ponies up. Diamond Tiara, a pink filly who actually wore a tiara wherever she went, was telling her subordinate gal pal, a grey filly named Silver Spoon who wore glasses, a pearl necklace and a braid, that she sure missed mocking "those cootie-marred crustaceans."

Silver Spoon responded with her hypothesis. "They should never have left for that growth hormone program of Pinkie Pie's just to force their cutie marks. It's not like they have any right not to be offended. Rather, as a society of free speech, we have every right to offend them."

Their teacher was named Ms. Cheerilee, a rose-coloured earth mare with a purple and lilac mane and a cutie mark of three smiling faces, something not usually associated with one in her profession. Today was an auspicious occasion because she only had to rap her hoof against her desk three times to get her students to be quiet. "Settle down, class. It's that time of year again for your pageantry! Ponyville may be overrun with strange, thorny vines, but that's no reason we can't parade you younglings around on stage for the amusement of all Ponyville!"

Silver Spoon stared bored-ly through her spectacles. "Oh goody, boss ma'am. Shall we don our straw hats and suspenders and croon zip-a-dee-doo-dah?"

Cheerilee didn't miss a beat, and neither did her smile. "Can the back sass or I'll forget you have rich parents."

Diamond Tiara whispered to Silver Spoon as Cheerilee continued speaking. "What does that matter here? This school is *free."*

Cheerilee scanned the entire student body, pausing only to sip something from a flask hidden in the locked drawer of her desk. "You're here to entertain me, but I'll let you decide." Her words slurred a bit. "This year, shall we do a talent contest, a glee club musical, or put on a fashion show?"

The ponies grumbled over their options indecisively. Cheerilee hiccoughed dreamily. "That's okay, class, we have plenty of time to decide. No matter the case, you should all practice your choral exercises, so let us sing the warm-up song. From the top!" She tapped her hoof again, and the foals she held in her custody for a significant portion of the waking day began to sing.

Missus Wineskin does strange things
When she bakes or when she sings.
Breaks her stick when she is mad
That's why we are sad

The classroom doors burst open with a tremendous bang. In rushed two colossal metal figures that slammed the doors shut behind them and barricaded it with the heaviest furniture in the room. A couple of foals screamed and the others screamed after. Cheerilee, shocked and not knowing what these intruders even were, shouted desperately to try and calm her panicking children down to little avail. Meanwhile, Daniel and Tom started blocking up the windows, drawing the curtains, and securing the perimeter.

"Nobody move! Shut up! Shut up!" Daniel yelled at them. "Nobody move, or everybody dies!"

School's Out Forever

The foals had quieted down on command, but they still trembled and wept, every so often emitting sharp little agitated cries which Daniel couldn't figure out the trigger for. He spoke to Tom on their internal radios. "That side is secure?" he asked.

"Oh yeah. Just moved the desk in front of the door. I'm fairly certain nopony followed us. Wouldn't mind getting some shut-eye after riding that handcart all night. Or a drink."

"I have a bad feeling neither of us will be enjoying the high life anytime soon." Daniel peered out the window, but didn't see any ponies on their trail. Had they really managed to evade notice by abandoning the handcart outside of town and heading through that decrepit apple orchard? "How are your joints?"

"They're starting to move better. That Franz Bandelt may leave much to be desired, but in other respects, he's kind of a genius, you know?"

"Alright, here is the problem. I do not think we are cutting through town unhindered. You noticed when we left Appleoosa?"

"That crazy bushiban aikido freak was following us. What was his name? Matrix Dodge? I'm almost sure we lost him, right?"

Daniel shook his head, even though talking on the wireless they'd gotten accustomed to not looking one another in the face. "A pony with that kind of strength? I doubt he gives up easy. We also know nothing of where Twilight Sparkle and her generals might be throughout Equestria. They are trouble. We do not want to face them straightaway if we can help it. That magic bullshit is potent stuff. We take these little shits hostage and demand a boat out of town. While they set up an ambush there, we will make our way to the train station and take the first express to Canterlot. Strike straight for their leader."

"I really hope we meet up with the others there," Tom said.

"I do too. I do too. Until then, we need to prepare for any sort of ambush. Can you turn up your listening device high enough to hear outside?"

Daniel was interrupted by Snails' oafish voice asking, "'Scuse me, can I have a glass of water?"

Daniel screamed at him, "Go drink your own piss!"

"Oh."

Tom waited a second before replying. "These tiny ponies have really grating voices. I'm not certain I could manage it if they deafen me."

"Hm. Dammit. And telling a bunch of children to shut up for more than a second is futile."

"Wait, I think I've got it. I'm tapping away at the OS here, right? It looks like I can set the receiver to transmit voice into text on my chat screen. Then I can just mute noise from any outside source."

"Right. That sounds handy. Would you be able to listen to me, though?"

"Yeah, I can set it to only play audio on the internal radio. I'll get a feed from all around. I won't be able to hear anything outside my Goliath, but I'll be able to read any words spoken, and I can hear what you say to me over comm."

Ponyville's mayor was named Mayor Mare, which brings up certain questions if she failed to get elected. Her secretary was adept at taking down shorthand, making the minutes of their planning meetings very detailed. Almost needlessly so. "Make Ponyville flame-retardant. We're halfway there, anyway. Pruning these vines that've grown everywhere for the past few years would be easier with fire, but thatched-roof straw cottages are very flammable," the mayor said, using a word which here means "inflammable". "We may not be in budget after the repairs from that bugbear attack, but it's time for Ponyville to make some sacrifices of its own accord."

The door flung open. Apparently Ponyville had an issue with doors sticking. In galloped Matrix Dodge at full tilt. "Madam Mayor, I've tracked a crisis right to your schoolhouse's very doorstep."

"Those foals again, huh? I knew we should've fireproofed the buildings."

"No, ma'am. I just came from Appleoosa. The name's Matrix Dodge. Two Earthlings, humans, have arrived into our world wearing dangerous metal suits. The gryphons called them 'Deceptions'. We need to alert the Royal Guard as soon as equinically possible."

The foals didn't take to not being rambunctious, and with Daniel and Tom silent to them while conversing internally, their hold of fear on the little little ponies was diminishing. Cheerilee was at least smart enough to try to get them to quiet down, but her charisma had taken second chair to unbridled terror. Daniel and Tom played a waiting game, wrestling with their own thoughts of whether they needed to change tack and rush their goal, or to stick by this plan and endure the foals' unsolicited attention. They were told what the foals did in school today thus far, and who was ugly or fat or a snob, which frankly could bore Daniel to tears. He wasn't under twenty-one anymore. He didn't give a crap about any of that stuff. They mentioned their homework, too, but they didn't ask for help with it.

"Dammit, I hate this," Daniel said. "I do not like playing against stalling for time."

"You said it yourself, Danny. There're bound to be unicorns, or maybe even more cannons. We can't take our defences for granted."

"I should have realized that when we crashed down on Manehatten. Fuck it all. Just the six of us is no good. In the past, we have had the whole of the Human Resistance to rely upon."

"What're you talking about, mate? We've always done well with just the six of us. Even apart, our struggles brought us closer together. Right now, it's us the Human Resistance is relying upon."

Daniel took a deep breath before smiling at Tom. "Thanks. Guess now we should figure out which one of these suckers should die first. Man, I would kill just to be able to sit down."

"Yeah, there's a limit to the ergonomics in these things. So, how we gonna do this? One very hour, or?"

"First, we make our demands. Then we kill one to demonstrate our resolve."

Tom was quiet a moment. "That reminds me of that book, *After the First Death.* A general sends his son to negotiate with terrorists who captured a bus then the leader anally fingers him to death."

Daniel frowned. "I do not see what in the hell that has to do with this situation." Annoyed to bits by the foals who were now arguing over something or other, possibly what sort of creatures the metal contraptions were supposed to be, he snapped out loud at them. "Listen up! If your government plays by our rules, then only some of you will die, not all."

"Aren't we all going to die eventually anyway?" Silver Spoon asked.

"What? Be quiet! Can't you see we're trying to have a conversation here?"

"Not really, because conversations are something you hear, and we can't hear you two speaking to one another," said Silver Spoon dryly.

"Hey, I know! There's a song about dying we could all sing!" Snips said. Before either Daniel or Tom could stop them, the deed had begun. The tune was remarkably upbeat and bouncy for such a grim subject matter.

You will die, yes you will die!
Everybody dies, every day!
Under a bus, contract a flu!
A needle full of air punctures you!
You could get shot by a fired employee!
Or maybe during a bank robbery!
The guy who pours your cappuccino
has Super AIDS! Whoops! You're dead!
What's the funniest terminal disease?
Eaten by beavers or stung by bees!
Euthanized or sent off to war!
Screaming, terrified, achy and sore!
You'll never know if you wake up dead!
Uh oh! Watch that last step!

The ponies bounced and frolicked as they sang, but Daniel was working to quell his infuriation at these constant annoyances. He couldn't let pony children rile him. It was just in their nature to act like venomous little piranhas, and anyway, their insipid noises weren't that big of a deal. It wasn't like an attack except on his sanity. Tom on the other hand was purely dumbstruck by the spectacle and didn't know what to make of things one way or another. Daniel told himself he ought to learn by his best friend's example.

"Oy, mate, you've gone quiet again. What're you thinking?" Tom asked him. "You've gotten way too introspective since you went all zen Buddhist on me."

"What? Oh." Daniel sighed. "Just wondering if this waiting game is worth it. Wondering if we can bum rush our way to the station and be done with it. Wondering if since we got here maybe we should have been gunning down absolutely every pony we saw on sight then bludgeoning them to death when we ran out of ammunition."

"I think that'd slow us down."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Is this it, though? I've learned to lead over the past half a decade, but is this tactics? Holding conversations about gambling with lives? It's not easy coming up with plans. I'm not sure I could keep it up forever."

"That's why usually you have multiple tacticians working together, but then I think we've all been in his game longer than we ought to have gotten away with."

"To be honest, so far demolishing town after town has been going well for us. I admit that's based on a very small scale, but these ponies who've died by the sword seem to live by the dollar. In our new world, rebuilding after their holocaust, I want a world that's about the people going places, and not the places people visit."

Just when Daniel thought it might be time to fire off a few rounds into the outside to get some attention, the unmistakable click and whine of a loudspeaker addressed them. "This is the mayor of Ponyville speaking to the Deceptions that have taken our city's foals hostage. We have come to talk!"

Daniel scoffed. "Their children are in danger, and they want to talk about it."

Tom was puzzled over something. "Why do they call us 'deceptions'? The gryphons called us that, too. Is it because they can't see our faces so well in here?" Neither he nor Daniel knew the answer.

Daniel broadcast his voice on high volume so that it could be heard through the schoolhouse walls. "We hear you and are willing to negotiate with you! Do you receive us?"

"Yes, we receive you!" came the mayor's reply. There was a slight pause. "Did you get that last bit saying we received you?"

Again the foals were becoming rambunctious, goaded on by Diamond Tiara's alpha bitch posturing. "Hey, tin heads! I have a *much* better song than that last one about silly old death."

"We really don't want to hear it," said Tom, but she talked right over him without hearing him at all.

"Hit it, everypony!" Along with her entourage of makeshift backup dancers, she twirled about and sang, jerking her head around in a sassy, snotty fashion.

Ooh, I don't want no scrub.
A scrub is a guy that can't get no love from me.
Hanging out the passenger side
Of his best friend's ride
Trying to holler at me.

Telling them to shut the f up was ineffective, so Daniel had to yell as loud as he could to communicate with the unseen Mayor Mare outside. "Our demands are! Will you shut *up?* Our demands are free passage out of Ponyville by boat without being followed. If you do not acquiesce to our request, we will execute one of your children every half an hour." He then spoke to Tom directly. "Let's see if they've ever had to deal with *that* situation before."

Outside, Mayor Mare was speaking to somepony. "Oh sweet Celestia, what do we do, what do we do? This is worse than my worst nightmare!" She spoke through her megaphone again. "We regret to inform you that Ponyville does not have a harbour. We will absolutely grant you free passage out of Ponyville any way you wish. Just please do not harm our children!"

"Damn." Daniel once again broadcast outward. "That is a shame. We still wish to gain secret passage out of this town unhalted and unfollowed. We will now demonstrate to you the severity of our cause." He spoke only to Tom next. "Alright. Grab the fat one. It's time to pay justice for everything these unhinged monsters have done to us."

Tom tromped over and seized Snips in his manipulator hand. The foals started screaming. Cheerilee started screaming, begging him to put the tubby colt down. She panicked, saying over and over that this couldn't be happening, it couldn't be happening, but it was.

"You will be the first," Tom told Snips.

"The first to what?" He cringed.

"Excuse me, I'm the richest pony in this entire village let alone the school. In fact, my family moved to Ponyville to get away from poor ponies, not that that did much good. If anypony should be first to anything, it should be *me* so hm!"

Tom was tempted, but he really didn't want to change what he was doing to suit one pony's astounding ignorance. He shot Snips dead with three bullets, one through the side of his temple and the other two in his fat rolls of American belly.

Everypony's breath caught in their throats as they witnessed this act of brave justice on the Human Resistance's part. They may have been a cruel and unusual race, but they'd never seen the likes of an episode of *Rick and Morty* or *Game of Thrones* or *Family Guy* before. "Oh dear Celestia, they killed Snips! Those bastards!" said Snails.

Tom carried Snips' eye-bugging, jaw-gaping corpse toward the back of the room, the foal's departing face looking as if he'd heard some truly shocking news. Tom began to clamber up the narrow ladder with extreme difficult to reach the bell tower. When he was high enough, he threw Snips' corpse out onto the roof. As he climbed back down, he could hear the protests, shrieks and screams of the ponies outside. Now they knew the humans' resolve. Daniel smiled. The past six years could finally be avenged.

Mayor Mare could not bear to look at the horrific corpse of the colt stuck on the schoolhouse roof. She departed toward town hall with Matrix Dodge and her secretary, unwittingly stepping out of Deliverance's listening range. "These are the wickedest monsters ever to mar Ponyville's history. Kaiser Celestia was right to call Equestria to war against their deranged and evil world." On the way back, they were met by a small dispatch of the Canterlot Royal Guard which had been summoned earlier.

The platoon captain, Sloppy Gelder, saluted and introduced himself, but the distraught mayor was unimpressed. "We waited all this time for you and this is all you bring us? They've already killed one!"

The soldiers looked uneasily at one another. "We didn't come here unprepared, ma'am," said Sloppy Gelder. "We've already been apprised of the situation and are presently setting up positions around the schoolhouse. We're prepared to dispatch the hostages and release the hostiles." One of his subordinates whispered into his ear. "What? Oh. I meant to say we're ready to dispatch the *hostiles* and release the *hostages."*

"I would advise against that," Matrix Dodge said. "You don't understand the sheer firepower these Deceptions are capable of, let alone the magnificent defensive shielding available to them."

"We carry the finest spears and are trained in the most effective combat magics known to ponykind. We shall prevail this day," said Sloppy Gelder.

"What they possess is something beyond magic!"

"Step aside." Sloppy Gelder pushed Matrix Dodge away and marched with the remainder of his platoon on the schoolhouse.

Inside that tiny red building, tensions were mounting. A new force had come to reckon with the terrified foals, and it buzzed incessantly around their heads. Snails opted to take charge of the situation in spite of his emotional distress over losing his best friend and his incredible lack of serviceable intelligence. "It's a fly, come to attack us as well! Just stay calm, everypony. All it wants from us is our faeces, and I think it's for the best we should all hand it over to them."

Not all his peers were paying attention to him, though they were driven away by a severely trembling Cheerilee who was quaking worse than a shaky metaphor about those highway robbery massage chairs you see at fairs. Small ponies kept grabbing for her, begging her by name for her help to somehow save them from this life-shattering ordeal. What in Tartarus could she possibly do for them? She was a teacher; it wasn't her job to be foal sitting fillies and colts kept in her custody for a significant portion of the waking day. They backed away from her unsettling sense of panic, and she backed away from them. If only she could get to her precious item in the desk. That would calm her down and make everything alright. She dragged herself behind her desk and fiddled around with the locked drawer she kept her flask in. Just a sip of the good stuff would make all her troubles go away, so it would.

"Gerrafuckawayfromthat!" Tom pounded on her desk, causing it to break, but not outright shatter and collapse. Cheerilee shrieked in horror, tears streaming down her face. She babbled incoherently and fled on her side, dragging herself as quick as she could to the far side of the interior.

She tugged at her hair and rambled wordless mutterings to herself, watching until Daniel and Tom had what appeared to be their backs to her. She swallowed her next sob and looked from the window to the foals. Dragging herself as quietly as she could across the hard, wooden floor, she stooped up. She began the arduous process of attempting to slide open the window as quietly as she possibly could then whispered to the foals. "Come on. Get out! Fire drill!"

This made the foals even more scared, but they did their best to comply, driven by fear to actually be quieter than they ever had in their godforsaken lives. Daniel had no idea how many if any had slipped out before he noticed the escape. "Hey!" At this range, his laser seared off all the flesh from Cheerilee's face, burning everything underneath away, allowing her students a horrifying and brightly-lit glance at her steaming skull. She was dead before she hit the floor like so many before her.

At the same exact moment, the shrill screams that erupted in terror could be heard outside. A Royal Guard unicorn had found herself a position from which she could just barely see in through the curtained windows and charged up a potent projectile spell into her horn. Those cries startled her, and her spell fired off, blasting open a hole in the glass and missing Deliverance by only a few inches. Tom almost didn't see this, but with his expert knowledge of his sniping craft, he determined the point of entry. He hurried to the window, aimed Deliverance's sniper rifle at the pony outside there, and fired. Within the chamber of his gun, the phrase "Pony Sniper" was engraved onto the bullet. This bullet whirled through the air on a direct course into the pony's bottom jaw, plunging itself through her neck and burying its way into her chest. She choked on blood, her body jolting as she fell first into the bushes, then down the sharp, short incline of woodchip-laden ground beneath her hooves.

"As this is a schoolhouse, we ought to let you know what you did was wrong and take steps to correct this action," Daniel told the ponies outside. He ordered Tom to execute "the one that looks like a giraffe". Tom grabbed Snails whose scrawny body was difficult to get a hold of, so he shot at him several times in the back of the head. The force of the bullets tore open the front of Snails' face, rendering it a pulpy mess of unidentifiable blood. Well, the ponies would know who he was from the class roster at any rate. Tom once more climbed up the narrow ladder and hurled Snails' corpse through the bell tower and onto the roof.

Some mare outside screamed, "No, no, no!" More noisy sobbing ensued.

Daniel grimaced in wonderment. "Where do they get off crying? Do they know how many human children died at their hooves? And it's not like we're nailing them to a cross and lighting them on fire. This is a mercy."

"It's because they will never understand that we go to these lengths," Tom reminded him.

The next voice on the megaphone was unfamiliar to them. The stallion speaking introduced himself as "Filthy Rich". "I am here to negotiate terms with you. Can you hear me? Is this thing on?"

Daniel sighed. "Yes, we can bloody well hear you. Do not start that again."

"Dear Celestia, they've got a well of blood in there! That's disgusting!" Filthy Rich then coughed and spoke directly into the megaphone again. "Now you listen, I say listen here. I can make you wealthy. Very wealthy, indeed. Just name any price in bits, and I'll pay you for the grey one and the pink one. I want to speak to my daughter, Diamond Tiara, first!"

"I do not want to deal with this right now," Daniel told Tom. "I am too tired to explain to these idiots about how communism has no use for such base things as money."

"They're bound to be wearing down soon," Tom said. "We just have to make a gesture of good faith in the interim to show it's not too late for them to cave in."

"Pah!" Both Daniel and Tom knew who Diamond Tiara was, because she was the one who wouldn't shut up. "Speak, bitch."

"Deddy? Deddy, can you hear me? The robot people are being very boorish!" said the tiny pink pony.

Reading Filthy Rich's emotion was a little hard through the megaphone. "Honey! Oh, honey, I'm glad you're safe. Listen, Daddy's going to buy you the most important birthday present he ever got you in your life, sweetie."

"I'm not Sweetie, I'm Diamond. What could be more important than my vadelect-flagellating decalvant?"

"I'm gonna buy the freedom of you and your little friend, Salty Spork."

"What?" said Silver Spoon.

"Shut up!" Daniel said.

"Deddy," Diamond said. "Deddy, there's one other thing I want."

"Uh, honey, now's not a very good—"

"Deddy!" she said even louder. "I want a robit, too! I want a robit right now!"

"Okay, honey, whatever you want. Daddy will buy you a robot. And a bean feast, too."

"I love you, Deddy."

"Shut up already!" Daniel shoved Diamond Tiara in the face. "None of you little monsters know what love is. Mother Russia, I cannot wait until this is over. Alright, you hear me out there, you sons of fucking bitches?" Several of the foals gasped. Daniel continued to address Filthy Rich. "We want a train ride out of this crap heap. Since you frog turds are too stupid to figure this out, we are going to march out double-file with your foals on either side of us. Give us what we want and we will go away. Do not, and we will kill *all* of your children." He wished he had a phone to slam down.

Tom relayed what he read the ponies were discussing outside. He couldn't quite be sure who was saying what, but there were subtle context clues he could discern. "Mayor Mare," Filthy Rich said, "I demand you give these terrorists what they ask for. If they harm one hair on my daughter's head, I'll see to it you won't even get elected for ice cream butt sculptor at the leper hospital!"

There was a slight pause. "Filthy Rich, these royal guards are the most qualified in all of Equestria to ensure those foals are released safely. You're not thinking rationally. Believe me, I understand. In all my years as mayor, nothing this shocking has ever happened in Ponyville's history. I still know that if we keep calm and carry on, we will persevere over any crisis."

Daniel could just barely hear the muffled voice of Filthy Rich yelling outside. "You don't understand a single thing you're talking about! Why, I'll pay these royal guards more than their months' salary—no, their *year's* salary to turn the other way and let these foul bastards walk free so long as they don't hurt my daughter's friend and my daughter!"

"I will not have you besmirch the honour of my soldiers," Sloppy Gelder said. The secretary's minutes reported several shifty gazes shared between the royal guards.

It was an unidentified royal guard who was recorded saying, "Hey, where'd that Matrix Dodge pony go?"

An ear-splitting crack filled the schoolhouse with so much noise that its source could not be found until the wall opposite the entrance caved in. It broke apart as it fell inwards, snapping several clusters of planks to form gaping holes near the base, and the majority of its solid weight collapsed its tinder in on Daniel and Tom. The loud banging continued as the wall broke into fragments and splinters, bouncing off the Goliaths and covering them in dense boards of wood. They tried to shove them off, flailing their arms from side to side to knock away each heavy piece of timber that weighed upon them. Tom shouted about the roof, but it remained sagging atop the other three walls.

To add further to the confusion, both Daniel and Tom noticed their equilibrium tipping until they collapsed onto their sides. More wood slid down to fall upon them, and though they were protected inside their powered metal suits, the weight of the debris was still a struggle to remove. "What in the hell's going on?" Daniel screamed.

Tom took the time to reset Deliverance's listening settings. "The schoolhouse has collapsed! It fell over onto its side!"

"Where are the hostages? Where are they?"

"I don't know!" Tom got to his feet before Daniel did and watched as the remaining walls and floor of the building also collapse from the stress. It took him a moment to make sense of what he was seeing, but he picked out Matrix Dodge standing on the side where the wall had collapsed and the schoolhouse had rolled away from. How had he done it? Did he just grab an entire schoolhouse and throw it over on its side even with all the considerable weight it contained? He noticed Tom looking at him and dashed off after the student body which had made their escape during the confusion. Somehow, Matrix Dodge had done something to cave in the wall without harming the foals.

Back to back, Daniel and Tom stood, with Daniel shooting at the fleeing foals and Tom attacking the royal guards that moved in on them. Everypony not suited for combat turned tail and fled, some even risking themselves as meat shields for the benefit of the children, though to little success. Filthy Rich swooped in with his forelimbs outstretched to receive Diamond Tiara's scampering body, unable to hear even her ear-grating, sycophantic voice under the deafening hail of gunfire. In all the pandemonium, he failed to notice straightaway that her head had been blown down to a bloody stump that fountained around her cervical vertebrae like a crimson fondue. As Matrix Dodge lured the tide of battle away from the maddening crowd surrounding the demolished schoolhouse and toward the comparatively unoccupied centre of Ponyville, Silver Spoon was heard to remark in a dull drone, "Worst day of school, ever."

Town Hall was a tall, circular building in the middle of a wide-open concentric plaza that was most certainly a hub of Ponyville's infrastructure by design. A few main streets bent off at near-even angles, with many narrower pathways leading beyond. The rivers of Ponyville were diverted here as well, crossed by ample bridges, but there was little paving beyond some red cobblestone hoof paths. There were very few signs of outdoor activity here such as mobile vendors and outdoor furniture and the like, perhaps because the town appeared to suffer some grim spectre hanging over its mood. The sky was hazy rather than bright, and a plethora of black, thorny vines crept like figments of lightning across the ground, up and down buildings and over any structure they could find, almost as if they'd been searching. Daniel and Tom had no care for what plight the malodorous denizens of Equestria suffered under, because none of it would measure up to the equitable vengeance they aimed to exact over these murderous, instinctive cutthroats.

Most of the Ponyvillians had been drawn out to the traumatic spectacle of the hostage situation which was now effectively ended. Daniel and Tom found their only worthy immediate adversary in Matrix Dodge who was still every bit as evasive of their bullets as before. To see him in action was mind-boggling to say the least, that one unarmed creature, pony or not, earthbound as he

was, was able to elude their countless blindingly fast projectiles with such ease. They managed to stymie him by pincering him between where their snaking streams of collective gunfire mowed along the dirt ground, but to their horror, he proved even more durable than the old Chargers. His fur tore and his skin bruised, but even when struck full-on with a bullet he only barely managed to alter the impact zone of, he shook it off with a kind of demonic determination.

"What the hell is your deal, you freak?" Tom asked. "Are you just cheating?" Worried about wasting their bullets, both he and Daniel stayed their weapons to shorter, alternating bursts.

Just like them, Matrix Dodge also could concentrate on combat while chattering away. "I've heard tell even on your Earth there are those who practice rare control over their own bodies, but the majority of you have forsaken it for your technology. It was a mistake for Equestrians to adopt the tools of your own mass destruction when we invaded to retaliate against you. This is why you will find Equestria a far more dangerous place than any other!"

Daniel was aiming to position Matrix Dodge between himself and Tom. "Yeah, well, endure this." Tom launched one of his harpoons at the earth stallion, but only struck the ground with a ripping impact. Matrix Dodge leapt onto the harpoon and yanked on the cable connecting it to Deliverance's arm. Too many frustrated feelings spun through Tom as he was plucked off the ground, swung through the air in a wide arc, and came crashing down right on top of Nirvana. The two men, trapped in their Goliaths, could feel the crushing blow of their collision rend its way right through their guts, and Deliverance bounded right off of Nirvana in a heap.

"Maybe we should ignore this pony. It is a waste of time to fight him," said Daniel. "We have bigger horses to fry."

"No," said Tom. "I think that blow knocked something around in my head. Matrix Dodge isn't invulnerable. Back in Appleoosa, the gryphons had him in the air. I swear they wounded him—I swear I saw him spit up some blood!"

"Are you sure about this? How are we going to get him up off the ground?"

"Let's just lie here until he comes over. If we're prone, his ideal angle of attack will be on top of us, since he can't attack from a distance unless he throws something." Tom raised his head to peer through Deliverance's visor. He could spot Matrix Dodge standing some meters away, pacing and scratching at the ground. "Dammit, come over here. Stop glaring at me and come this way."

Matrix Dodge started to walk closer. Tom held his breath, knowing they wouldn't get another shot at this. He whispered to Daniel what was happening, as Nirvana had fallen in the opposite position. Deliverance, however, was on its front side with its head in Matrix Dodge's direction. If Logan were in his position, Fealty would be able to fire with ease, or maybe see what was going on as Matrix Dodge got closer. Unfortunately, both of Deliverance's arms were at its sides, and rotating them would require enough movement to most definitely startle Matrix Dodge away as he read the oncoming attack. Now he was so close that his next move was to step onto the back of Deliverance's head. Tom could hear the clank of hoofbeats on metal.

Daniel let out a wordless yell as he seized Matrix Dodge around the middle with his manipulator arm. "Die, you son of a cunt!" He reached over his other arm and blasted Matrix Dodge's underside with bullets almost point-blank. Tom flipped himself over as quickly as he could and took up juggling the enemy by shooting at his underside as well. Matrix Dodge's body spun in the air, his limbs flailing like a ragdoll's. He went careening out of Daniel and Tom's visual range. When the both of them stood up, they followed the trail of blood to find Matrix Dodge standing on all four hooves, looking ostensibly fine save for a rather miffed expression on his bestial face.

Giving himself a shake, plumes of dust swept off of his pelt. "I see you let everything go to waste on Earth, but I have tempered my mind as well as my body. Battles are not about brute strength; they're about mental acuity! Covering myself in dirt, I have not lost my link with the ground! I am still invincible, and I have yet again outsmarted you!" He leapt towards Daniel, but Tom interposed himself in the way. Collapsing himself to the side, he struck out at Deliverance's shin with a blow from his front hoof. Tom heard an upsetting smash as his HUD blared out one severe structural integrity warning. All this from an earth stallion's unarmed kick? Moving past him with fluent rhythm, Matrix Dodge next seized Nirvana in both front hooves, hefted him over his own head, and dropped him down on his topside into the dirt.

Daniel groaned. As he lay there, he thought about what Matrix Dodge had said, accusing him of not tempering his mind. That was exactly what he'd spent a year in a Buddhist monastery doing. He had spent all that time meditating so he wouldn't let his anger at the ponies prevent him from rationalizing and thinking things through. He picked himself up again.

Facing Matrix Dodge, Daniel chased at him with his laser, the heat of which was so intense that it could spring up small fires all around the earth stallion, surrounding him with flame. "You metal monsters do not listen," Matrix Dodge said. "My body can withstand physical pain." He held a front hoof over the burning fire for a few seconds, then stepped backward right through them to put even more distance between himself and Daniel.

That was when Daniel sprang forth with Nirvana's jump boosters, tackling Matrix Dodge. He sent the pony sliding through the dirt and toppling into the river behind him. He splashed about in the water in surprise and scrambled against the slippery tile wall of the trough. "Now you have had a bath, and you are not touching the land anymore. Maybe there will be enough of a corpse left to bury you in it." Daniel let loose with his minigun until Matrix Dodge's face-down body was totally obscured by the blood mixing in with the water. That was the end of Matrix Dodge.

Daniel stared down at the scarlet water a moment longer, fired another quick burst off then headed back over to Tom. Using their manipulator arms, Nirvana helped Deliverance back to its feet. "How are you doing, mate?" Daniel asked him.

"Could be better. Deliverance is in worse shape than I am, but I'm starting to wonder how long that can last."

"I know. We've spent a lot of ammunition, taken a lot of damage, and those lasers soak up a lot of battery life."

The train whistle told them both there was no time now for an equipment review. They could hear, off in the distance, the train conductor calling out: "Last train to Canterlot! Last train to Canterlot!" They knew they had to take off running.

21. The Canterlot Crossing

Running in the Goliaths was a chore after having taken so much damage. The functionality of the hydraulics used to steady their running and allow them to exert less effort over time was fluctuating from all the physical stress and beat downs Deliverance and Nirvana had endured. Deliverance in particular was suffering from the multiple attacks striking its legs, and its left booster was stronger than its right one. Although Tom could use it to better effect than flat-out running for the time being, it only operated in short bursts. He didn't fear falling behind because he knew he could count on Daniel to reach Canterlot and end this bloodbath of a war once and for all, but he didn't savour the prospect of being left behind on the most decisive battle their defence of the Earth would ever see.

Daniel didn't want to leave him behind. They'd been in the thick of this from the start, and felt determined they would see it through to its final moments. Still, he knew he couldn't let up for even a second. He had to catch that train. He couldn't let this opportunity slip through his fingers like so many others. This would be their final test, and he had a sense there would be no more do-overs. He told himself that if the Human Resistance did not prevail here, then Equestria would win.

"Last call for the Shaner Express!" The railway pony had a decent shouting voice that carried well beyond the train station. He had to be louder than a train after all, didn't he? The last pony had disembarked or boarded a while ago, however, and there was no need for him to call out anymore. The doors were shutting, and the train was leaving. Steam poured from its frontward smokestack as it chuffed out of the Ponyville station.

Daniel and Tom only then reached the station, and were running along the tracks at top speed to catch up. Deliverance's HUD was alerting Tom to the constant stress he was putting on the legs of his Goliath, but Daniel was telling him, "Don't give up until the train's out of sight! You hear me?" He had to give it his all for Daniel.

The Canterlot Crossing

The instant the train's rear railing was in arm's reach, Daniel seized it with Nirvana's manipulator arm and reached back with his other arm to give Tom something to grab onto. Deliverance's own manipulator arm clutched fast to Nirvana, and Daniel thrust himself in his power armour forward to land on the back balcony. He had to break Nirvana's manipulator arm to do it. He could feel his Goliath's whole right arm shake and thought he almost sprained his actual wrist in the process. He made it on, but Nirvana took up almost the entire balcony. He turned back and found Deliverance still jogging after him. Seeing the back railing had bent and broken from Nirvana's weight, he snapped it off the rest of the way, bending the bars outwards so Deliverance could reach them. Tom grabbed on, and Daniel wasted no time bending them back before Deliverance's weight could snap them right off. Somehow, by sheer luck it seemed, they had both boarded the train.

Tom apologized, Daniel told him to not, and they both entered into the rear cabin of the train which wasn't even locked. They found themselves in what was ostensibly a luggage compartment. Curtains framed the walls where up above suitcases and parcels sat cluttering the upper shelves as well as a nook towards the front end of the room. The actual walking space was barely wide enough to allow the broad-shouldered Goliaths through. "Want me to go on ahead?" Tom asked.

"We can adjourn to the next cabin and discuss that as a team." Daniel pointed to the floor. Beneath the bottom of the curtain, large metal feet could be seen standing on the floor. Pulling back these curtains revealed the rest of Delta Squad, two on either side.

"Holy crap!" Tom said. "I didn't even notice you on my radar."

Daniel laughed. "Neither did I."

Irish, Logan, Nick and Tyrone emerged, grinning, from their hiding places. They almost wanted to hug as their individual ordeals made them feel as though it'd been weeks since they'd last seen one another, but of course they couldn't. "Where the hell have you two been?" Nick asked, his words tuned by his excitement to see them once again. "Sorry, where the hell have you two been, sir?"

Daniel led Delta Squad into the next cabin over which was empty save for a lower quantity of luggage. They could actually see out the windows and had enough space to walk about. "Tom and I were following Trey out of Manehatten, the city we made landfall in, and followed the tracks into Ponyville as far as we could. That's the station we just left. Trey didn't make it. What about you guys?"

Logan and Tyrone looked at one another to see who would speak first. Tyrone went ahead. "I dragged Nick outta there as fast as I could, and saw some woods on the city border. Thought that was a good place to hide, got him patched up, then we hopped the train from the first town we found. That's where we ran into Irish and Logan."

"Yeah, we followed the coastline," Logan said.

"So to speak," added Irish.

"Long story short," Logan began, "we ended up underground and half-dug, half-marched our way out of there 'til we came out in the middle of nowhere near some tracks. Looked like an old mine, actually. Train was coming by; we figured, why the hell not grab a lift, eh? So we covered the tracks with debris and snuck aboard. Turns out we had some help from Nick and Tyrone spottin' us.

"Now naturally we could've just hijacked the thing, but we knew better than to just blast in guns a-blazing at this point. If we let one pony escape, we might never find it until it alerted those pony generals, Twinkle Sprinkle and what's-her-face. We don't know how these old stream trains work except in surviving pre-event cartoons, so a coerced conductor could sabotage it and we wouldn't know where we were headed. Long story short, we can blast as many ponies away as we like any old time, but we can only stealth once."

"It seems we're headed to a place called Canterlot in central Equestria," Daniel said. "Trey mentioned as much in his briefing, remember."

The other members of Delta Squad nodded, even Tom. "Yeah, we remember hearing as such," Tyrone said. "Sounds like that's where their leader, Kaiser Celestia, is."

Irish tried to spit at the mention of her name, but ended up gobbing on the inside of his visor. "Ah, fuck. That wench-y skank killed me. I aim to return the favour."

Daniel smiled. "I look forward to leaving her just on the brink of death. Then we each get to take a stab at her."

Logan jolted inside Fealty then pointed toward the window. "Fuck me dead!"

Irish grimaced at this phrase. "That's gotta be one of the sicker things I've heard come out of Oz."

Logan grimaced at Irish in disgust. "Only Californians call it 'Oz'. I've got an accent, not a drunken slur." He gestured to the window again. "Anyhow that's not important. I just saw that blue bitch go by the window just now. Rainbow Dash or summat or nothin'."

Even though Delta Squad was all too familiar with the pegasus's speed, they tried to crowd around the windows to try and get a look at her. The train wouldn't even need to stop in order for her to board.

Nick turned Mercy Kill's listener up high, what with his damaged hearing enhancing his tolerance for the higher volume. He relayed what he could hear Rainbow Dash saying a few compartments up, confirming that she had indeed boarded the train. "The secretary of Ponyville handed over to me these minutes as evidence the humans have been through Ponyville. They're on board this train right now! We have to search every compartment. Humans. They stand on two legs, look like hairless apes, kinda smell like 'em, too, eh. Geez, let me do it! I could have the whole train searched by now in like seven seconds flat!"

Rainbow Dash had already blown the door to the next compartment open when Nick warned them, "She's heading this way!"

"Boy are you murderers in for a world of hurt," Rainbow Dash said.

"Take us to your leader!" Daniel said.

"Why, so you can die even faster? Good luck!" Rainbow Dash noticed that both Nirvana and Deliverance had raised their guns on her in the middle of her retort, and she flung herself away into the next compartment over. Delta Squad sort of expected this behaviour and hadn't even bothered to shoot.

"Guys, how much ammunition do you have?" Daniel asked.

"Not much," Tyrone admitted, and the rest concurred.

"I've only got two harpoons left, and it looks as though we've all taken quite a beating," Tom said. "I could probably stab her with the end of one without firing it, though."

"I've got my chainsaw," Nick suggested. "Even without revving up the flames, it's a big, strong weapon."

Neither Nick nor Tom awaited a confirmation and barrelled first into the next cabin. This one, too, was fairly open and relatively uncluttered of too many obstacles, as though the recent trouble in Equestria had had a negative impact on the public travel industry. Thus it was that Rainbow Dash had just enough room to spin around in circles, creating a vortex that lifted even the heavy boxes and objects around with her. She zipped about like a hummingbird fed on a steady diet of liquid eyeball crack, and her trajectory avoided itself at all costs, spinning up and down like a wobbling orbit of a planet ready to encase its sun. There was no getting through to her with large parcels and numerous valises sputtering around through the open air of the rickety train car. Although colliding with these projectiles wasn't particularly damaging, they still obscured Nick's and Tom's accuracy and interfered with their movements, banging into their arms, torsos and heads. Nick stepped up, battering away at them like an infuriated golfer in a slightly more dignified outfit, swinging his giant chainsaw blade left and right to shatter clattering objects into debris that was far less intrusive against their metal exteriors.

Before Nick realized it, Rainbow Dash had zipped by him and landed all of her centrifugal force onto Tom's left leg, kicking hard with both hind legs. She didn't stop there. As Tom screamed out in rage and agony, she tore away at him with rapid flying punches from her forelimbs. "Useless, idiot armour! Speed is force! Twilight Sparkle told me it's power. With enough speed, even I can crack these stupid shells of yours apart!"

Nick shot at her, but she rebounded off of Tom's shin at the last second, evading all damage. Tyrone, however, had shoved his way through and fired one of his heat-seeking missiles. The missile followed Rainbow Dash, but to his dismay, her velocity was still much higher. She smashed through one of the train windows, and the missile departed after her.

"Tyrone, no! If that missile hits the train, we could get derailed! Who knows what'll happen then?" Tom said.

A loud explosion rocked the cabin from its side. Delta Squad felt their collective hearts leap in their chests, but were relieved the train didn't jump the tracks. Rainbow Dash smashed in through another window and screeched to a halt inside the cabin again, flapping her wings where she hovered in place. "Your petty tricks are too slow to catch me! There is only one ultimate power in this world, and that's speed! I only wish you could live long enough to see the day I'll have trained up so much speed from my cutie mark that I could rip holes through you all in the blink of an eye!"

"That day hasn't come yet!" Logan had pushed his way through as Tom managed to drag himself over to a wall. "You know your own powers pretty well, monster, but it's not enough unless you understand your own limitations. These cramped quarters inhibit your speed, don't they? And crashing through the windows like that restricts you to a very narrow angle of attack! Now, do you know what our powers are?"

Rainbow Dash let out a growl. "I don't care! Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh I *do* not care!" As she rushed in to tackle Logan in the face, he fired his bolas snare which spread out to feel the entire span of the room in height and width. There was no escape for Rainbow Dash. The netting tangled up around her body and weighted her to the floor. She struggled angrily under the net as tear gas seeped from the canisters that doubled as the anchors. Rainbow Dash coughed and struggled to buck the heavy cables off of her, but she could scarcely lift her legs under the weight. Her eyes bulged out of her head all bloodshot as she gagged and choked profusely on the noxious fumes. Just when she thought she would pass out and find sweet release in unconsciousness, Logan finished her off with a single shot to the forehead.

"That takes care of that. Guess they come back, but they still fall down again."

"Tom, status report!" Daniel shouted, which was his little way of asking Tom how badly he was hurt.

"My left leg's broken and won't move!" said Tom.

"What do you mean, the Goliath's or your leg?" Nick asked.

"The Goliath. Deliverance. The left leg's lit up red. My leg is killing me, though!"

"Are you able to move your leg at all? Can you wiggle your toes?" asked Logan.

Tom grunted. "I can't really see, but I think so. Yeah. I just can't budge Deliverance an inch. I'll have to drag it."

"Whatever you do, do not worry about it. I once saw a man snipe about a dozen ponies or so and he was missing a leg," said Daniel.

Tom furrowed his brow. "Yeah, I'll—I'll try to do that. Both things, actually. Thanks." He found he was still able to swivel his left hip, and since Deliverance's right leg still worked, he could drag his left leg along with him, though his motility was severely limited in this fashion. There was very little either of them could do to check up on Tom's leg itself beyond wasting time opening up Deliverance and dragging him out of there for inspection. Instead, he followed in back of the five still relatively able-bodied men into the next compartment, which they had to do single-file.

The next car after that one, Logan was attacked as soon as he opened the door. A flurry of something hard was shattering against his visor, blinding him from whatever the assault was. He couldn't quite reach Fealty's arm in front of his face, so he ducked his head and charged forward. He banged into something rough he didn't see and went toppling back into Inescapable Truth. In order to not fall over as well, Tyrone shoved Fealty to the side as he stepped the other way. Now the first three into this car, which included Daniel, were pinned in place or against the wall by a rough, steady stream of what felt like the largest hailstorm any of them had ever experienced. Through the onslaught of blurry projectiles hitting them in the face, Delta Squad could just make out the colour blue gleaming at them like a wall.

Behind the first three, Nick could see what was going on. "It's Rarity! Shoot to kill!"

"No, I wanna shoot to disenfranchise her!" Logan said.

Daniel, Logan and Tyrone fired off their miniguns, but soon realized their bullets were being deflected by the unicorn's shield. The sky-blue light rippled like gossamer fabric hung on a clothesline in the breeze. Most of the shots rebounded wildly, but some burst against the Goliaths' armour. If they didn't have that, then several members of Delta Squad would surely be dead—in some cases, again. The impervious barrage ceased for the moment so their attacker could bore them to death with idle speech.

Rarity twirled her front legs in the air as she cackled. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Go ahead and take your best shot, you ruffians! The jewels I've collected over the years are numerous as they are wondrous, and they'll spell your doom."

"A bit melodramatic, isn't she?" Logan asked.

"She's got a point. My screen's fuckin' up!" Tyrone said. Logan saw what he meant soon enough, and was reminded of the energy-draining crystals summoned by that shadowy monster in the opera house in Baltimare. The display of his visor was flickering, and the images and words were breaking up into a mess of disjointed pixels. It was interfering with his vision through the headpiece. Daniel too was suffering the same fate at a lesser extent and could see gemstones sticking like barnacles where their Goliaths had been struck. They must have been responsible for the interference on their HUD, but how did they work? How could pretty rocks have any sort of effect on them?

Another onslaught was headed their way. Gemstones issued forth from the shield like water droplets falling sideways. They blasted outward at violent velocity and with random trajectory. Maybe it was all the beatings they took on this journey, but the gems felt like heavy bullets pounding their Goliaths. "They're impervious to this sort of impact, remember," Logan tried to remind them.

The other members of Delta Squad weren't so convinced. "That barrier blew you right off!" Irish said. "What the hell do we do about that?"

Though Tom was kept to the back of the cabin, his trained eyes could still make out the mechanics of Rarity's attack. Every time a gem manifested itself from her magical wall, it would leave a momentary hole that would quickly get sealed back up. Delta

Squad would have to ignore the spazzing out of their HUDs, disregard the unwavering jolts of Rarity's squadron's worth of attacks, and fire non-stop to slip through the gaps in her defences.

It couldn't work, though, not the least reason of which was the angle. Rarity's gems were shooting out from the top, bottom and sides of her sinewy wall while she stood far in the centre of the back end of the car. They were already dipping toward the low end of their ammunition, and if he told them his plan, there was a chance Rarity might catch on. He could speak on internal radio, but what were those gems doing to the Goliaths' software? The only chance to take would have to be his own.

Rarity's next cascade of volatile gemstones flurried out at the already-encrusted members of Delta Squad whose joints were starting to act up in the presence of her draining projectiles. Tom had raised his sniper rifle and fired. Engraved into the bullet at top-speed but with all the care of a diligent craftsman was the name "Rarity". It shot forth and ricocheted off of a particularly large lump of emerald.

Rarity laughed. "Hah! What was that? You know you can't get past my magic with your simple technology."

"Oh, but we already did," Tom said.

The firing gemstones had abated, but the barrier remained in place. "Whatever do you mean, you cur?" Rarity asked.

"That's not just blood dripping down your forehead," said Tom. "That's bits of brain bubbling forth, too. You're having a cerebral haemorrhage, or whatever it's called. Sucks to be you."

"Wh-what? How?" Rarity crossed her eyes in horror at this disgusting and very real image.

Tom was quick to explain, because he wanted her to know how she was beaten before she died. "My bullet hit exactly what I wanted it to hit. It ricocheted off your attack, from gem to gem, at high velocity, until it bounced with the perfect angle to pass through a hole in your barrier and straight into your skull."

Rarity's face turned down. She tried to babble something, but her brains were frothing pink from the gaping hole in her forehead. Just as she collapsed, the barrier faded away into ethereal shreds of nothing, and the interfering crystallization encroaching upon the Goliaths crackled away like dissolving hard candy. For all her magic, in the end, the only trace that remained of Rarity was her corpse. Her eyes rolled back in her head and one front hoof looked as though it was reaching out for something, but whatever her last passing thoughts were, no one could ever know. Pushing themselves to their feet, Delta Squad pressed on without further hesitation.

The next car was filled with frightened ponies whose alarm was triggered by the sight of half a dozen huge, robotic-looking bipeds stamping into their space. These ponies were evidently civilians given their lack of inclination to attack. A fat stallion tried to watch them from behind his newspaper. A lone mare clutched her three offspring to her sides, even as they struggled to fumble around. A younger mare with a jagged Mohawk of a mane popped the bubble-gum she'd been blowing, drew it all into her mouth, and stopped chewing altogether. Others sheepishly tried to make themselves smaller by slouching, hiding behind unfeasible objects like narrow poles, and still others sat bolt upright in their seats, trying not even to let their breathing move them too much, as if feigning death would spare them such a fate.

"I can't go on," Tom said. The other members of Delta Squad stopped and looked back at him. "I can't do this!" His voice was cracking.

"Tom? What is the matter?" Daniel said the words before he took a second thought. The answer was all around him. He knew full well what the matter was, and to a lesser extent, so did the rest of Delta Squad. They all had the horrors of war haunting them. Their past memories flashed like clip shows in their minds every so often, whether or not what they were doing at any given time was similar to some prior trauma. This was one of those times for Tom, and in a big way.

Daniel was still only dimly reminiscent of the troubles he'd caused while under the influence of the Pony Obedience Toxin before his own year-long coma and temporary death, but he recollected the arduous battle Tom had faced trying to track him down, needing to stop him at any cost, yet struggling with this fate by killing another man who'd been intent on hunting Daniel down. Tom still remembered washes of faces of the humans on that subway like brush strokes over his eyes, and he still reviled the horrific end the helpless hobos of New York City had faced in that catastrophic wreck. Even then, that incident was only the penultimate precursor to the destruction that would ravage that urban gauntlet and separate him and Daniel for what he thought would have been forever. For some further reason, any time Tom's sanity threatened to wane, he was also reminded of that monumentally terrible siege that felled Moscow, where he thought a woman and child he'd been falsely obligated to had died at the hooves of the Equestrian menace, and Daniel had to shoot him in a Chinese restaurant just to stop him plunging out of reach beyond an untold edge.

Tom did not want to return to those days. Now was not the time for revisiting the past. Now was the time to prepare for the end, to cut through the swathe of tragedy and hurt and bring an end to the chaos that berated them at every turn. Daniel knew it was futile, but he raised Nirvana's arms anyway to clutch Deliverance. Deliverance slumped in his limbs to a sitting position on the floor. The watching ponies had no clue what to make of this, but they kept their gormless gawking to a minimum. "Tom, you can do this. We are too close now to our goal to give up. You must remember things are different this time. You and I are on the same side, and the enemy in the engineering compartment is bound to be a pony enemy."

Tom's breathing was getting shakier and heavier inside his Deliverance. "I know. I know that. I can't help the way it's affecting me, though."

"Yes, you can. You can try. You must suppress these thoughts for better ones. You must decide to feel better," Daniel said. Delta Squad was quiet for a moment, their indecision soon turning awkward. Then Daniel spoke up. "I am staying behind." This declaration was met with several confused questions and protests, to which Daniel responded, "I am staying behind with Tom. You four are capable of fulfilling this mission and seeing this train to Canterlot. However, do not hesitate to do whatever you must to ensure we reach our destination. Our Goliaths will see us through to the finish, and I for one trust in the engineering of the Human Resistance."

The other four members of Delta Squad nodded, turned, and resumed their solemn but swift march further up the train. After they'd gone, Tom spoke. His voice was still ragged with breath. "I can't believe you just decided to stay. Killing ponies has always been your dream."

"Yes, well, it is time I started to trust in the abilities of my fellow comrades," said Daniel, "And stopped acting as though everyone has to rely on me just because I am the leader. Everyone’s dreams must come true for the common good."

Tom managed a nervous chuckle. "Bit late in the game to be startin' new habits now, love."

Logan reached to open the next cabin door with Fealty's manipulator arm. "Achoo!" Irish sneezed loudly over everyone's radio. He sniffed loudly, didn't ask to be excused, and instead said, "Ugh, I got snot all over my visor! God dammit!"

Tyrone grimaced. "It's just one bodily ejection after another with you, isn't it?"

"Hey, maybe I can take my headpiece and give all the ponies a cold that'll kill 'em off!" Irish grinned.

"That never happened when they invaded Earth," Nick said. "I don't think it'll work here, either. It must be non-communicable."

"Yeah, but they invented AIDS, so they must've been able to transmit that," said Tyrone.

"Maybe not from themselves?" suggested Nick.

"Man, I am not gonna give no pony AIDS," Irish said.

The other three turned and looked at him. "Why, do you *have* it?" Tyrone asked him. Then the three of them let loose laughing at Irish’s expense like good old times. It was a momentary reprieve as they all suspected there were still more ponies to fight before they even reached Canterlot.

"Fuck you; I don't have AIDS!" Irish protested. Instead of listening to him, they advanced on the front of the train.

Logan sincerely hoped this was the last door he had to open on this train. Like the other doors, it was made of polished wood and had a small, green window that served no purpose because it was greened out for some reason. He grasped the handle and slid the door aside. The very next thing he saw was the colour red. Everything had gone so red he couldn't pick apart what he was seeing from the shapes before his eyes. He all of a sudden felt very, very weightless, as if even the several-hundred-pound Fealty was dancing on air. In the meantime, his allies were shouting to him over the radio, and it would've been nice if they were yelling one at a time so he could better understand them. He had a pretty good idea though that they were frantically curious as to his status just by this change in situation alone.

"Shut up, you guys! Logan, respond! You're trapped in some kind of red field!" Tyrone said.

"It looks like a balloon," said Irish.

"We have to get in there. Some pony's in there and did this to him!" Nick slipped around Tyrone and pushed hard on Logan's balloon. There was a loud, rubbery squeaking as he strained to enter the next room. The balloon finally fit through and bobbed sideways along the floor. Nick only caught a fleeting glimpse of Pinkie Pie before everything in his vision turned a murky red as well. His vision was tilting sideways until he was upside-down.

"Dammit, they got me," Tyrone said. He, too, had been trapped inside of a large, red balloon, so that the next compartment was rather crowded.

"What the hell, guys?" Irish barged into the next room, minigun drawn, and fired. Pinkie Pie was nowhere to be seen. He looked at the balloon Logan was in and tried to grab a portion of it with Scorn & Spite's manipulator arm, but could find no purchase. He tried punching at it with both of Scorn & Spite's arms, but it just rebounded around the compact room like a billiards ball. He tried firing at them, much to their complaint, but the bullets just rebounded off of whatever material the balloons were made of.

"Dammit, just get after her! We'll figure something out," Logan yelled.

"Can't wait to get that bitch," Irish said. He barged into the final room of the train, the engineer's compartment, and fired off his gun before the rest of him was even inside.

Pinkie Pie trapped each one of his bullets into various balloons. "Aw, come on, what in the fuck?" Irish asked. He stood there feeling defeated, but not so defeated he didn't keep his gun trained on Pinkie Pie. The aptly-named pony had some kind of festive-looking cannon device strapped to her shoulder that even Irish could surmise was the source of her terrible trickery. For some reason, she didn't trap him in a balloon straightaway like she did the others, but that was probably because she wanted to lecture him first like the rest of her buddies.

"You're the goofy one, right?" she began. "I've got a few words for you. Well, a few hundred or so. Two-hundred and forty-eight. When Princess Celestia resurrected us, she brought us back as we were before this entire war started. She did that for a reason, because that's when we were at our strongest. The war changed who we are down to our very core, because in order to visit Earth, a brand new dimension, we had to revise our behaviour to match that of your standards and mores. It was a real paradigm shift, let me tell you!"

"No, you've always been that way, down to your very core," Irish said.

"Then, why do you humans write such things about us? We tried to communicate with you by contacting your mass media. Then you wrote that propaganda about us, that we bake our children into cupcakes, or that we're getting raped by caribou all the time. What kind of broken, demented minds would come up with that stuff? We were a family show! You think we appreciate it when our work, our lives, our imagination is stolen away from us and perverted?"

"I don't know what in the hell you're talking about!" Irish said, cocking Scorn & Spite's minigun. "I should just kill you now, I think."

"The fan fiction needs to stop. It needs to die down. Creativity is making up your own ideas. Sure, there's room for parody, but satire is only satire when it has a poignant statement to make!"

"You infiltrated our world with merchandise and crass capitalism. Gosh, I sound like Daniel a wee bit."

"Corporations are a figment. They're comprised of people, too, no less guilty than you all are." Pinkie gave a soft shrug. "That's all I wanted to say before the end."

"The joke's on you, cunt. I'm gonna end you either way, so why not release my friends?"

"I don't need to. It's not magic, so killing me won't free them. Those balloons are puncture-proof. They're trapped inside pure helium environments, so at least they'll suffocate peacefully." Pulling a trigger connected to her cannon, she fired at breakneck speed a red object of some sort that socked Scorn & Spite in the abdominal region. Keeping up that speed, the red substance spread over him, covering his entire Goliath to the point where it even squeezed underneath those cumbrous boots. Somehow this elastic substance sealed itself up into a perfect sphere, hoisting the hefty powered armour up off its feet.

Pinkie Pie shouted at him through the balloon wall. "I just waited until I said my piece because it's a little harder to hear me through there!"

"Before I gun you down, maybe we can talk this over!" Irish shouted back. "If you're really such a goody-two-shoes family endeavour, surely we can cry about our problems and solve our differences that way!"

"The only person who'd really believe that ideal can apply to every situation is someone who'd want to lure children into a trap," Pinkie Pie said.

"And the only pony who'd really believe a yoke could trap me is a gobshite." Irish smirked the smuggest smirk he'd smirked all day. Drifting about in the unrealistic internal environment of Pinkie Pie's weird Equestrian balloon, Scorn & Spite's left arm managed to reach the bottom below him. Cocky grin set in place, he fired with his chaingun. The rotating chambers spun against the smooth interior wall, pinching it with enough friction to tear the material apart. The bullets up until that point, even when fired at point-blank range, spun wildly along the sphere's inside surface. The balloon popped in an instant, flinging portions of itself around the room.

"Your bullets still won't be able to reach me," Pinkie Pie warned him.

"How about at point-blank range, you dry shite?" Irish stomped toward her. She reacted by inflating another crimson balloon with such speed that it flung Scorn & Spite against the back wall with its girth. Pinkie Pie popped this balloon by some means. Picking himself up, he aimed with Scorn & Spite's other weapon: The cluster bomb bazooka. Hoping to fake her out, he detonating the missile early, launching it into several other smaller missiles that exploded furiously. Each of these explosions, against his every expectation, became trapped in more of Pinkie Pie's impossible balloons. Irish watched, dumbfounded, as he saw each explosion rage like a teeny, hot sun inside its balloon, burning away at the helium without breaking their containment.

Pinkie Pie snorted loudly and burst into sickening giggles. "Can't you see there's nothing you can do to stop me?" she asked. "Or even if you do, Princess—I mean—Kaiser Celestia will always prevail. You can't ever, ever, ever-ever beat her! Before we finish this up, though, I just gotta ask Mr Jones if he'd like to get into an epic rap battle with me!"

"No, I fuckin' do not!" Tyrone shouted.

Irish looked from the fires raging inside Pinkie Pie's balloons to the fire roaring inside the coal engine of the steam train. As the train coasted through another long tunnel leading up the mountainside, they were the only source of light provided in the engineering compartment. He swung Scorn & Spite's right arm mightily, scattering the balloons he didn't hit and knocking at least three of them toward the furnace. His next bazooka shot was not aimed at Pinkie Pie, but this. Anticipating his target to be herself, Pinkie Pie surrounded herself with more balloons, but none of them hit what they should have. She had underestimated Irish's resolve, or his tenacity, or whatever it was going through his mind in that moment that led to such a rueful decision. Equestria had forced his hand, steering him against his own limitations to this one decisive action. The engine ruptured in a fantastic volley of a chain of explosions, rocketing right up through its chimney stack and shattering apart every component immediately linked to it. Pinkie Pie was flayed alive by the shrapnel and seared near beyond recognition from the concurrent blast. The entire engineer's compartment, the epicentre of this exponential explosion, leapt clear off the tracks. The entire train lurched, derailed, and collided in a zig-zag fashion against the tunnel walls. As the explosion punched through the stone above, the tunnel cracked then collapsed as boulder after boulder pummelled the train and everything within. Portions of train folded in on itself from the percussive damage with the walls alone, and flames from the blast flew down several cars at once, blowing away doors as they came. No one and nothing aboard would survive undamaged.

22. Rocks Fall

Daniel's vision was swimming with strange visages of ghastly faces he couldn't recognize; not at first, anyway. As the drumming subsided in his brain, he could see his own face repeated maybe a dozen times, swirling before him. His eyes uncrossed, and they stopped moving. He gazed dumbly at these numerous faces and pondered what they could signify. It took him a moment longer in his dazed condition to recognize them as reflections in very shiny surfaces, but he couldn't tell whether or not they were shards of glass from the train windows or something else entirely. They appeared to be very glossy stones lying about the cavern. As he stared a bit longer, trying to remind his mind what it was like to stand up, he saw writing appearing on his visor. "Daniel, wake up," it said. "Wake up. You have to wake up. Something's gone horribly wrong. Can't you hear us? We're right nearby."

The message was strange to him, and he wondered who on Earth could be calling for him when he remembered he wasn't on Earth. It all came crashing back, like a fast-forward replay of the wreck that had disembowelled the train they were riding to Canterlot. The war with the ponies was still on so long as he could wake and think. "Guys? What is our situation? Report!" His own voice sounded far away and quiet to him. As if his speaking had kicked his hearing back into function, a dull ringing grew louder and louder. He tried to move his right arm and let out a hoarse yell. A series of painful sensations sizzled across his skin, and he couldn't tell what was wrong. The singing feeling kept going for a few seconds longer before petering out. He hadn't a clue whether he'd somehow ripped out some arm hair from his unusually hairier right arm, or if something inside Nirvana had drizzled sparks on that region.

Static. Something was interfering with the Goliath communication systems again. He could only guess at one of a dozen things or more that could be the cause, but at any rate he could still make out a voice. Nick's voice. "Daniel, can you hear us? Come on, get up! The rocks of the cavern above are shattering. I think they're made of some kind of quartz or something. Dammit, geology wasn't my strong suit."

Not yet able to comprehend the implications, Daniel pushed his way to his feet, banging Nirvana's headpiece on a caved-in bit of train wall. *Well*, he thought. *That's at least two plane and two train disasters Delta Squad's survive to date, unless I've miscounted.* Considering his persisting wooziness, he couldn't rule it out. He tried to remember better to test his memory, but Nick snapped him out of it. "I see him, Tyrone. Daniel, come this way. Behind you. *Slowly."* Nick put extra emphasis on this last word.

Daniel whirled around and tromped over the broken seats until he clambered out the broken back wall of the train car. "What, why?" he asked along the way. Once he was out, the train slid away from him, plummeting into what looked like a gully in the catacomb system, smashing further into pieces. He took one look back, then forward again. "Oh."

"Are you feeling alright?" Nick asked. "I seem to have been lucky, but Tyrone's stomach is hurt. He's thrown up, I think, but other than that, he claims to be fine."

"Is his comm not working? Where is he?" asked Daniel.

"Right this way. Come on. He's trying to listen for the others right now. We keep picking up this static that could be from the others."

The entire cavern shook violently, and Daniel thought *he* might throw up next. Even the Goliaths were being shifted off balance. Daniel was surprised to see sunlight rip open the wall a few meters to the right of him and Nick. A slew of rocks barraged them both from above, and then both ceiling and floor gave way to a pants-wetting freefall.

Rocks Fall

When the ground hit a jarring stop, both Nirvana and Mercy Kill were flung upwards maybe a foot. They landed on their stomachs, and both machines scrambled in earnest for the top of the slope up ahead. Crumbling rocks surrounded them all, with many rolling down the incline and colliding with their shoulders or helmets. Daniel in particular found his right arm was stiff all over, but with effort he could move his shoulder enough to still use his arm as leverage. When Daniel and Nick reached relatively solid ground again, they peered behind themselves in shock at the void they had supposedly just clambered up. Far, far, far below them was the terrain of Equestria. A gaping wound had opened up in the side of the mountain leading up to Canterlot, and a couple of train cars were still falling away. They could just barely make out a few ponies tumbling away through the air.

Nick hurried Daniel along to where Tyrone had been stationed. They found Inescapable Truth sitting up against a rock wall, and when they did, they could hear static on their own comm systems coming through with more clarity. Tyrone raised Inescapable Truth's arm in a shushing gesture, then the word "listening" appeared on the text chat display on their inner visors. After a tense moment of waiting to hear what was going on, Tyrone let them in on what he'd heard. "Logan and Tom say they're alright, but they can't find Irish. They think he might've gotten trapped."

"There cannot possibly be that much space between the two of us," Daniel said. "There were only a few cars between us, right?"

"We got thrown around pretty good, sir," Nick said.

"Alright, let me think," said Daniel. "Tell Tom and Logan to do what they can to recover Irish, though knowing him, he might have wandered off down a tunnel. My gut instinct is telling me that we need to get to Canterlot as soon as possible. The ponies are bound to know we are coming to get them, and I wish to cut off as much time they can use to plan as possible, if at all possible."

"Problem is, which side of the tunnel are we on?" asked Nick. "Though I did notice signage I think is a walking route up the mountain. It'll be a long hike, but since they use so much pictography in their signage, it should lead us to Canterlot."

Daniel nodded. "That's a good head on your shoulders, Nick. Tyrone, apprise Tom and Logan of the plan. If worse comes to worse, have them meet up with us in Canterlot." Tyrone responded with an affirmative and carried out this task. Though none of them felt very good about leaving the other three behind, the members of Delta Squad were well aware that each of them was a competent, fully-trained marine with years of experience under his belt and each one had grown in such a short time to understand the limitations and capabilities of his Goliath.

The journey was long, but once they'd cleared the last few cars of only a few ponies, even less of which survived and were in no condition to act, and a smattering of destroyed luggage they'd already seen earlier, they just had a long walk along the railroad tracks to the end of the tunnel and to the sign Nick had spotted. Indeed his assessment appeared reasonable. A sturdy wooden sign was stuck into the grass beside a winding dirt path leading upward, and on the sign were pictures of a galloping earth pony, an upwards-pointing arrow, and a castle. From their position below, it was difficult to make out much of the city. There were some pine forests ahead of them, but signs of buildings with tall steeples beyond. There was a reason there was a train leading to or from this place, but there was no getting around the hours of walking ahead of them.

"At least our Goliaths should be fully charged by the time we get up there," Nick said.

His optimism rubbed off on Tyrone. "We only have half of the old pony generals to re-kill. Then after that, Kaiser Celestia."

"How do you figure that?" asked Nick.

"No chance they're gonna let us just take a shortcut through them," Tyrone said. "If what she told Daniel was true, I doubt their leader would bring them alone back from the dead just to bench them."

"Almost feels like we'll be done in time for supper." Nick grinned.

"Man, what you wanna do when we get back home to Earth?" Tyrone asked.

"Stack of pancakes, my friend," Nick said. "Stack of pancakes. I need serious downtime after this half-a-decade-plus nightmare. The wilderness of Canada as a lot of growing back to do, but I bet it's still as serene and majestic as it ever was. What about you?"

"Shit, I can't stand forests. I guess I'm gonna go back to the states, but then? Haven't a damn clue, to be honest, but maybe first I'll just stick around and help Daniel out runnin' things." Tyrone chuckled.

"Actually, I am going to stop you there," Daniel said, literally stopping the walk. The word "literally" here means that he actually stopped walking for the time being. "I know it sounds dour, but we should not even think of celebrating until we have beaten the ponies once and for all." A lump in his throat formed along with a knot in his stomach. They still didn't even have the means to get back home unless they found another black box among Kaiser Celestia's possessions. Maybe six years ago Nick and Tyrone would have protested his reaction and demanded he lighten up and motivate them, but not now. Their experiences had taught them to trust in one another and value each other's ideals and mannerisms. By now, they had grown to completely understand Daniel's feelings on the matter. In turn, Daniel could sense how they felt about his statement, and he forced a weak smile. "And anyway, I do not want to rule when I get back home. I have had enough of the task of leadership. All humans can finally be equal now, and while someone else will be qualified for the task of inspiring others and the big decisions for them, it is a burden I grow weary of."

"Hey, man, for what it's worth, if you change your mind, I'm all for that," said Tyrone. They stood there a moment as if needing to say something else, but they realized they shouldn't delay a moment longer. They had to get a move on.

After over an hour of walking, one more hill crest remained before the three Delta Squad members really got their first good look at the city of Canterlot up close. They had to squint and try to shield their eyes against the glare of the sunlight reflecting off the archaic-looking buildings. Everything looked relatively clean for a bustling metropolis, but the style of construction put them in mind of old castles and the like, but much rounder, with many dish-like balconies and platforms with swirling staircases leading up to such. Roving, amorphous streets wound around buildings of unremarkable residences and various shops, most of which catered to sweets and snooty dining. Houses were generally some near-white colour with gold trims and long, pointed roofs of blue, purple, or sometimes green. Disgust welled up in the three of them at the blatant conspicuous consumption running rampant throughout the Equestrian settlement, as no expense had been spared to make everything look fun and fancy like some sort of highly marketable tourist trap.

Several unicorns pranced around, usually in small gaggles, with their noses held high in the air like caricatures of pompousness. A few of them noticed the strange sight of the metallic, textured, and sorely scuffed up, dinged and otherwise damaged Goliaths in their presence. The unicorns kept to themselves however, and as Delta Squad passed through the streets and observed these civilians, they came to suspect that even high up here in these mountains, there was an undercurrent of persistent tension. The unicorns would hurry along, barely stopping, picking up their pace once they caught a glimpse of the Goliaths. Frequently Delta Squad would spy on some pithy, shallow conversation about fashion of clothing, dining, hobbies and friends, or personal delusions about politesse stemming from underlying insecurities. Daniel likened it to a capitalist zoo, but having seen so many ponies, he could tell when they were feeling tense and unassured. He felt fairly certain this notion wasn't just the feeling of power he got from wearing Nirvana.

They passed by a slow-talking earth mare telling some unicorn stallion with a blue mane about the geological instability of Canterlot at the present, and he responded by stating he distinctly remembered the rock-obsessed mare having bat wings. This wasn't even the most nonsensical conversation they overheard. A pair of foals were trying to toss donuts onto each other's horns. Two mares were loudly screaming that the other one was a "nag" while their presumed boyfriends stood by in possibly amused silence. A fat stallion had been carrying two ice cream cones and one had dropped on the ground, so he was hoarsely demanding his mother replace it for him by buying another. The rest of the interactions between ponies were all just as incorrigible and cut off in the middle so their full stories could never be told the whole way through, not that you'd want to hear them. If you've ever heard one conversation about what might be the "in" thing ("in" being a word which here does not mean "out"), whether that thing be the Chicken Dance, aqueous martinis or television series that show off boobies to distract crass, uneducated inebriates from shit-tier writing, then you've most certainly heard too many.

An ensemble of unicorn royal guards raced up to them and came to a screeching halt, complete with sound effect. Daniel recognized their attire from back in Ponyville: Gold from their peytrals to their tail-guards, with a blue Mohawk sticking from each chanfron and crinet. "Halt, criminal scum! You are under arrest for crimes against fashion! You are to be escorted to the palace for inspection." the lead guard said.

Every unicorn Delta Squad had encountered since entering Equestria had been trouble enough not to resist, but the thing was, Daniel suspected the royal dungeon might be in some sort of royal palace, and blowing up some royal ponies was precisely what he royally longed to do. "Well do not just stand there, come along then!" Daniel shook Nirvana's arms emphatically and with an air of impatience hurried a few steps past the royal guards. "Show us the way!"

The guards angrily trotted after Daniel, who was followed by Nick and Tyrone. One guard tried to poke at Mercy Kill with a spear which Nick barely even noticed, and when he did he could only frown at the pony with a pitying look. One of the law-enforcing ponies shouted at them, "Hey! Hey hey, you're supposed to follow us! We give the orders around here! We're authority figures!"

"You know, four legs aren't very speedy if they're so short," Tyrone said. He and his two comrades snickered, a word which has less to do with commercialized candy bars and more to do with chuckling.

Castle Canterlot was rather a prominent figure in the city's design. The guards ushered the three Goliaths into the castle's exterior courtyard, a spacious knoll of grass with a path paved in pastel bricks of multiple colours. There were many hedges with tops that sloped up and down, some gnarled-looking trees that didn't appear to be kept particularly well here and there, and plenty of stone statues of various ponies, gryphons and other creatures rendered in very candid, unartistic poses. Obligatory topiaries were strewn about as well, and off to the distant side a portion of a hedge maze appeared to continue around the side of the castle. Daniel was greatly saddened by all this crass opulence.

Ahead of the pack, a white picket fence opened up, and out from it trotted two all-too-familiar ponies. "Hi, I'm Applejack! Now you're gonna die!" said the orange one in a drawl similar to the dregs of the southern United States.

The pegasus behind her was expectantly Fluttershy. "Oh, I think I'm going to urinate myself submissively again," she said as two tweeting canaries lifted up strands of her pink mane and unrealistically-long tail.

"Hey, look at this," Daniel said. He roasted the three royal guards with one quick swipe from his minigun. Their armour didn't prove very resilient against over half a dozen ballistic slugs of hot, piercing metal each.

"Check that shit out," Tyrone said. "Maybe you better just move aside. Back in the day, you were trouble, but now, you're not even small fry."

"Oh yeah? Just you try it!" Fluttershy glowered at him, or tried to, anyway. There was a heavy bonk followed by a deep, metallic clatter as Mercy Kill went crashing to the ground. When Daniel and Tyrone turned to look, they saw this and what looked like an exploded turtle strewn around. Figuring it must have dropped out of the sky, and from a great height to boot, they looked up and saw some kind of bird that greatly resembled an owl. It looked like an owl and sounded like an owl. "Don't worry, Tank," said Fluttershy to the deceased terrapin. "Your sacrifice will not be in vain. Owloysius, alert the others now!"

"Hey, Nick, you okay?" Tyrone asked.

"I'm fine. Just a bit dizzy is all." Nick sure sounded a bit worse than "dizzy". "Anyone get the license plate number of whatever hit me?"

Nick lost interest in the answer to that question. All three present Delta Squad members had become transfixed with the spectacle that filled the skies with flickering shadows. Fanning out from the trees were uncountable dozens—if not hundreds—of dark, moving shapes, each one roughly the size of a leaf. Because of this, they initially thought autumn had come early, especially Tyrone, who felt he had something to say. "This place is whack! First it was winter and Christmas, now it looks like fall."

Daniel was perplexed for a moment. "It's been nothing but summer our whole time."

"Uh, guys?" Nick pointed. The shapes, as it turned out, were birds. Birds of many small to not quite so small flying varieties. They had taken the skies by storm, and the rustling din resolved itself into a brazen chorus of caws, cheeps, tweets, and many more avian vocalizations that could not be discerned from one another, both sweet and melodious as well as throaty and coarse. The end result was shrill and downright deafening, a word that ordinarily means "rendering deaf" but not here because it's being used as a descriptive exaggeration and not meant literally. The birds swooped down, and all three men raised their miniguns, but the animals headed instead for Fluttershy, swooping around her in such a tight mass that they formed a many-hued dome around her body. Evidently, through means none of the men understood, she had brought the birds here.

"Don't think we won't shoot those birds to get through to you," Daniel shouted. "In fact, I'm not so sure they aren't monsters like the whole lot of your Equestrians."

Fluttershy may have been renowned for her timid and retiring demeanour, a surreptitious tactic of disarming cloying, but the glare she wore now was perhaps the most brutal they'd seen coming off of any pony to date. "The only monsters here are you who'd hurt innocent critters! I'm known to be kind to everypony, but if you're unkind to my friends, then kindness is *not* what you will remember me for."

"Then don't put them in harm's way!" Tyrone sounded peeved. Although he was American, the country which has pets, he wasn't so much concerned with the animals' well-being as he was with this whole argument.

"They're not in harm's way if you concede not to harm them!" Fluttershy screamed, which from her sounded like hard work. She stamped her hoof, probably because it was the only way to punctuate her loud point.

"Never you mind, Fluttershy. You just do your thing and I'll have these dag-blasted spittoon-drinkers litterin' the henhouse to feed the chickens in no time. Oh, wait, I suppose chickens don't eat meat, just like us," Applejack said.

"Actually, chickens evolved from tyrannosaurus rexes," Fluttershy said.

Applejack lowered her voice. "Flutters, I done told you not to use the E word."

"You eat people all the time!" Tyrone shouted. He almost sounded like he was screaming himself. "People are meat, you dumb ho!"

Applejack stomped a hoof. "Ah can't account fer wut we done did in your world, Earth, but them's're different rules. I'm told before we died Twilight said the best way of existing in an alternate reality is to abide by its rules. When in Faroem, do as the Faroemans do."

"Perhaps not," said Daniel, also getting into the heated debate. "Here you devour humanity's minds instead." Wanting to end this discussion ever since before it'd even started, he let loose with his minigun. He stopped firing at Applejack when he saw what that a torrent of birds had ripped through the air from Fluttershy's feathered barrier. With astounding accuracy and frightening self-sacrifice, not a single bullet had reached Applejack. In fact, from behind the flurry of birds, she had leapt out of sight.

Tyrone spotted her first, having launched herself high above their heads. He shouted for his comrades to look out even though he couldn't think of how a single common pony could even threaten them in their Goliaths, but his instincts knew better than him: Applejack was no common pony. There was a reason she had been appointed a general for the Equestrian army. She twisted her quadruped body in mid-air, whipping out a long lasso with her mouth that she looped around Mercy Kill. She slung it around his middle, trapping his arms against his sides, before tightening it.

"Ridiculous. I'll just tear this rope to shreds." Nick was dumbfounded to discover he couldn't abide by this promise. The rope wouldn't budge.

"That's cable, stupid. You dumb or unedumacated or somethin'? Yeehaw!" Applejack tugged hard enough to send her own body spinning and lifted Mercy Kill clear off the ground. Nick felt his contents shift as he was whirled through the air, then collided hard against another Goliath so fast he couldn't tell it was Nirvana at first. Daniel grunted as his Goliath crumbled to the ground along with Nick's, and he had a horrible flashback to his fight with Matrix Dodge back in Ponyville.

"Daniel, hurry up to the castle!" said Tyrone. "Nick and I can handle these two!"

"Are you sure?" Daniel was dumbstruck.

"Positive! We need to end this as soon as possible, don't we?"

Daniel hesitated for a second as he had to weigh this decision, but he complied in a matter of seconds. "Got it! Catch up with me sooner rather than later!"

"Not a doubt." Tyrone wanted to give him a thumbs-up, but now was not the time for gestures the Goliaths couldn't translate. Daniel gave the two mares a wide berth, feeling tempted to shoot at them, but he opted to rush for the castle steps in the end.

"You've just sent him to his death, you realize," Applejack said. "How far you suppose he's gonna get? Princess Twilight and Prin—Kaiser Celestia are more than a match for one armoured ape."

Tyrone had no more words for her. He did have a mighty bellow, however, and a few thousand more bullets to unleash as he marched steadily towards her. He was certain there weren't enough birds in Equestria to block every single one. Like most certainty, he was wrong about it. Even with Nick's support, the birds covered both essential angles, and by the time Tyrone's minigun spent the very last of its ammunition, there were still many more entire flocks of birds swirling around the two ponies in dedicated formation. Without warning, without detecting any trace of the attack, both Mercy Kill's and Inescapable Truth's visors were blinded by dozens of butterflies flattening themselves up against the glass. Nick emitted an exclamation. "What do we do?"

"I don't need to see to kill me some ponies." Tyrone fired off one of his heat-seeking missiles in the general vicinity of where he last remembered Applejack to be. The tiny gaps between the multi-coloured butterfly wings were insufficient for Tyrone to see what was going on, but he heard grunting and knew motion was taking place. A dread feeling took up root in his chest, and he just knew something awful was about to happen, because he knew it filled him with hate. "Gangway!" he shouted, trying to turn and leap with Inescapable Truth's heel boosters, but he didn't quite make the nick of time. Both he and Nick were blown clear, and the shock absorption of their Goliaths had weakened from all the damage they'd accumulated. Tyrone theorized she must have utilized her improbable lasso skills to rope the missile in mid-flight and hurl it back at them. With enough speed, it would be unable to correct its course.

"I just realized something," Nick wheezed from on the ground. "Heat-seeking missiles can't be very useful when you're piloting a machine that puts off an incredible amount of heat."

"The missiles read a signal from the Goliaths to evade them at all costs," Tyrone explained. "We need to get these damn moths off!" Butterflies, moths, they were all the same to him in a crisis. What mattered to him far more than entomology was Applejack's weight pressing down on his Goliath and stomping all over him, swinging her forelegs like fists, or perhaps she was square-dancing atop him. He could hear a terrible rattling with every blow she rained down on him. Tyrone swung one of his weapon arms and knocked her away, but he was unwilling to assume she hadn't braced herself for a tough blow and landed on all four hooves.

He felt another presence hovering over him, but heard Nick shout at him, "Don't!" Through the slightly transparent butterfly wings, Tyrone could see the flames of Mercy Kill's chainsaw arm. A few of the butterflies scattered when the flames spread across Inescapable Truth's face, singeing and burning the insects. He thought he could imagine the feel of the chainsaw's whirring blades less than an inch away from his visor and worried whether or not it could cut through a Goliath exoskeleton.

Tyrone began to question how in the heck Nick could do this if he had butterflies all over *his* visor and the arms weren't able to reach their own faces. "That's close enough, Nick! I can see now!"

When Nick yanked his weapon away, Tyrone could see the butterflies had vacated his own visor. He could also see tiny little flames licking up from the crater his missile had left, as if some mostly-invisible cats were drinking from a bowl of water. The next thing Nick did was to swipe his chainsaw arm low across some flower bushes, cutting the plants and scattering them to the winds. "Now all these pheromones will confuse the butterflies so they can't find us," Nick said. "What's your next trick, whores?"

Tyrone was quick to his feet, just in time for Fluttershy to summon forth a stampede of wild creatures, animals that resembled those from the four corners of the Earth but painted in Equestria's nauseating flat lighting and blatant colours. Kangaroos, gazelles, bullfrogs, capybaras and various other sorts rushed at Nick and Tyrone in an overwhelming fury. Tyrone wondered why the gazelle weren't sapient like the ponies were if they were both ungulates. "Sapient" is a word which in a dictionary means the same as "wise", but in vernacular is sometimes used as a handy word to mean something with cultural, typically communicative intellect on the same level as human beings, as opposed to when something is merely sentient, a word which usually means "possessing consciousness". Someone like Seth MacFarlane would probably get away with saying this is the difference between men and women, but he's a douche bag, a phrase referring to a hygienic implement which when used to refer to people is meant to be unflattering.

The herd of mismatched animals proved to be a distraction. Even though the creatures were clearly Equestrian in origin, Nick had a hard time bringing himself to harm them, and he wished the other members of Delta Squad could be present, as their European and Australian descent would make the job easier for them. Tyrone hesitated only for a short while, but it didn't matter because he was getting low on precious ammo. His minigun was depleted, and Inescapable Truth wasn't exactly manufacturing its own heat-guided missiles. That was why it was up to Nick to tear his chainsaw through the lot of them, eliciting a clamour of chilling screams. Blood and bodies flew apart as their screams rose above the whirr of the chainsaw, and solace could be found in the taking of ghastly Equestrian lives.

"Looks like your followers have their limits, don't they?" Nick asked Fluttershy. "They'll fly into bullets on command for you, but when they see the fire coming, they just run away." Revving his chainsaw up some more, Nick went to town on the royal gardens, evading the ponies entirely as he lit aflame the hedges, a topiary, a tree. The tree's branches he slashed, allowing them to fall helter-skelter upon the ground where their sparks and fire could spread along the dry ground.

From amidst the tornado of rooks and robins, Fluttershy could be heard shouting. "You think it'll be that simple? I command the flight of the mightiest hawks and the marching of fishes!" From a nearby pond emerged many fishes, most of them small, but a few large catfish pulled their heads from the water as well and spat streams of water at the base of the flames. Nick fired at them with his minigun, and the lot of them leapt clear from the water with stunning agility, a feat way beyond anything he'd seen salmon doing in the bear-littered wilds of Canada. Several fish battered themselves against his visor in wet splats, and even one large catfish, which should never have been able to lift itself out of the water by his account, managed to lodge its fat maw around Mercy Kill's headpiece.

Applejack and Tyrone were hardly standing idly by as this transpired, as they resumed their dance—an admittedly clumsy dance given his heavy machinery and her two left feet. Tyrone just had to confirm her ability with that cable lasso by firing off another heat-seeking missile at it. She did indeed catch it before his very eyes, but she hardly needed to divert it as it was drawn to the flames instead. She let it fly errantly toward Nick, but with her attention focused on Tyrone, Nick was able to evade the concussive blast, even with the fish around his head. Tyrone knew he was down to his last weapon short of running up and battering her, and he wasn't sure he had the speed to match her unholy strength. He flung Inescapable Truth's massive claw hand out at her several times where it crashed against the ground when she jumped, leapt, or skirted out of the way. It was almost as hard as trying to win one of those rigged claw machine games where you end up paying roughly $7.50 in quarters for a $1.00 plush knock-off of Marge Simpson at fifty cents a go. The next time you meet somebody stocking those machines, give them a hit across the jaw.

Tyrone knew it was a matter of time before Applejack's luck ran out. He could keep reeling that claw in at top speed and launch it all over again, with each attempt bringing him closer to being able to predict her movements. "You wouldn't be able to fight us at all without your friend over there!" he told her. Of course there's no way to truly predict the future at any scope, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise, but he could tell where she was going to lunge next due to her limited thought patterns. He caught her on the next shot, pinching her body between the prongs—or so he expected.

She stretched her body out, catching each finger of the claw with a hoof, and used her earth pony strength to hold them at bay. There was a slight strain to her voice, but a smug smirk on her face. "Ah guess some ponies are just more equal than others. An earth pony may not be able to fly or cast spells, but our strength and endurance are unmatched!"

"Oh, you'll fly alright, when I decide to fling you off this mountain!" Tyrone looked forward to this idea, though because the edge of the mountain was on the opposite side of the royal palace, he knew the trek would be impractical. A pity, really. He tautened the claw's cable and knew he had to defeat her here or else risk having to chase her around with the claw again. "Thing is, is one of you earth ponies stronger than a few tons of pressure per square inch?" Inside of Inescapable Truth's right arm was a grip for Tyrone's fist to squeeze. As he squeezed this repeatedly, more pressure would be injected into the claw. All he had to do with to keep squeezing over and over, and if he wanted to release the pressure, he would have to let it relax gradually over time. Pumping it up this far hurt his hand, however, and he felt like every pore was erupting in magma, like every fingernail was burrowing its way back into his own skin and up his digits. His mind envisioned fractures rupturing along his bones like lightning, and every muscle splitting open like a slashed water bottle. He couldn't back down now, however. He'd promised himself he would end this wretched villain who had enslaved so many humans in her plantations over the years and whipped them to death if they weren't worked that route otherwise. He would make this dream come true, or he would wager his arm.

He wouldn't need to. The confidence was vacating Applejack's face. Her limbs shook as she tilted her head forward and let the brim of her hat hide her eyes. She forced a toothy grin on her vile face. "Ah, horse apples," she said, using a word which here means "shit". The prongs of Inescapable Truth's claw snapped all four of her legs back at the same time, tearing every ligament in her shoulders and hips. The inner claw which had been snapping desperately at her could now reach her, and it tore into her belly like a lion cub at its first feeding. Her eyes rolled back in her head as her entrails spilled from her freshly gaping wound. Then Tyrone clumsily flung her broken body away.

"Man, she was almost as big a cracker as John Cena," he quipped.

Fluttershy once more screamed in her breathy voice, this time yelling her cohort's name. Her eyes welled up with cowardly tears, but she blinked them back and turned her fear into rage. Nick had managed to slide the giant catfish off of Mercy Kill's headpiece and give it a swift kick toward the water before slashing at the air defensively and reassessing the pegasus's position. Tyrone reeled in Inescapable Truth's claw hand and launched it toward Fluttershy, punching through her wall of birds. The bloodied prongs grasped at nothing, however. The villain had been swooped up by a small team of gyrfalcons, the statistics of which she began shouting down at them in spite of their lack of interest. "The gyrfalcon has a minimum average velocity of eighty kilometres per hour and can sometimes lift three times its own body weight! I don't remember where I was going with this, but you'll never catch me!"

"Really? You look a lot fatter than that!" Tyrone shouted up at her.

"Eat a turd, fuck-face!" she shouted back.

"Aw, this ain't good, Nick! We gotta kill her before she gets up there and fucks with the weather like those other pegasi did back in Fillydelphia, and she's out of range of my claw!" Tyrone said.

"No, it's too late for her," Nick said, lowering his weapons. "Look at the smoke."

Fluttershy had indeed just flown into a massive plume of foul black smoke that drifted up from the growing blaze Mercy Kill's flaming chainsaw had wrought. The two men couldn't see what transpired in that murky haze, but after a few moments of watching they did see Fluttershy plummet head-first toward the garden below. Her lungs must have been filled with smog from her foolhardy attempt at escape. She plunged into the chilly water with a splash, and the next thing Nick and Tyrone saw was that fat catfish's back rise up over the water's surface then disappear again. Compelled to watch a moment longer, they never saw Fluttershy resurface.

While all this went on, Daniel had reached the gates of the royal palace in Canterlot and barged through the tall front doors into a grandiose foyer. A chequered white and black marble floor was covered with a regal purple carpet trailing up a steep staircase to a second-landing balcony that led off in two directions. High above was a glittering golden chandelier like a three-layer cake. On the ground floor were several doors and archways leading off to either side, and the place was decorated with a few statues of artistically-rendered equines, many green plants in pricey-looking vases, and several tapestries which hung in symmetrical fashion from the ceiling. Of the four widest, one depicted a sun, another a moon, still another a heart, and the last one several pointed stars which Daniel recognized straightaway as Twilight Sparkle's cutie mark. It was from behind this one that his nemesis emerged. In all the nightmares he'd had of her in the long years of the war, Berlin had never felt far behind. This time, it did. This time, the end was nearer.

Twilight Sparkle flapped her wings. "Now—"

Daniel cut her off with a high-powered laser. She swung upwards well in time, as though used to the Delta Squad tactic of attacking in the middle of a conversation.

"You know what? I have nothing to say to you anyways." Twilight Sparkle zipped left and right, making frequent changes so as to lessen the predictability of her movements. She managed to swoop across behind one of the large tapestries on the other side of the room and kept out of sight.

Daniel fired off another laser bolt, searing a hole through the fabric, though the lack of the beam's staying power on the tapestry as a target kept it from catching flame. "Get back here! You have a lot to answer for! I would just prefer to hear you scream it out! Where the hell are you?" As he kept an eye on the tapestry for even the slightest sign of a ruffle, a straight beam of glittering magenta energy thrust like a pole through Nirvana's left arm. Pain radiated out in a way he had never experienced it before but one time. He had felt phantom pains when the ring and little fingers of his right hand had been cut off by Milano Mash. Up until a dirigible crash had taken his mind off it, the pain of losing his father had been greater, so it was no preparation for this sensation. Phantom pains sprang out from his arms like several other arms had been freshly cut away no earlier than a day ago. Naturally, he screamed.

He surprised himself with his ability to carry Nirvana out of the way, scuttling backwards as his arm was filled with pure pain. Worse, it stopped moving. His arm went numb, and Nirvana's left arm fizzled with a pulse of magenta electricity and wouldn't budge. He tried to will his fingers to move the weapon's triggers, but he couldn't hear so much as the clacking of Nirvana's internal gears and doo-hickeys. He forced himself to focus on his surroundings. Where the hell had that attack come from? He looked up and saw Twilight Sparkle fly from behind one tapestry to another, then she emerged from behind a completely different tapestry and disappeared behind yet another. He realized she had to be bilocating. What had Trey said they called it? Winking?

When she spoke again, her voice echoed all around the chamber with no way to pinpoint its origin. "No matter how far you've come, you'll never succeed because of our ideals. Are your ideals worth ignoring what is past?"

Daniel sought cover behind one of the large plant vases. He thought the numbness in his left arm might be receding a tiny bit, but Nirvana's left arm still wasn't working. He couldn't take another surprise hit like that. "You destroyed our past! In exchange, we have come to take your future." He took a pot shot at her when he noticed her fly past again. She gasped and came to a screeching halt before colliding with Nirvana's laser, then fled back in the opposite direction. Daniel tried to fire in front of her again, but the laser couldn't fire that frequently. It ran a very high risk of overheating, and as it was, his right arm was already perspiring.

Twilight Sparkle's voice echoed around the room again. "Your cosmonaut drew first blood and murdered one of our own kind. We did everything we could to learn about your species and culture, only to see how inferior and repugnant you are. This is to prevent genocide!"

A bolt of magic ploughed into the vase Daniel hid behind and shattered it into minute pieces, spilling dirt and the plant out over the floor. He hurried to the next avenue of shelter, a statue further along. If he could get around to the other side of those tapestries, he might be able to see the trick behind her deceit. "You bimbos really think you are the centre of the universe, do you not? I do not need a lecture from a race that equates hairstyles with individuality! One murder cannot excuse others. And worse! Your friend raped me!" There was a strange lull in their conversation. Daniel eyed the stairwell and wondered if he could hide around the side of it.

"Those were different lives. When Kaiser Celestia revived us, she used a template from before this war began. Still, even we've needed to adapt in a short span of time to this new War Equestria. We have slain many of your kind, but you only ended up fighting harder. What if you no longer wanted to fight?"

"That will only happen when every one of you lies stinking dead." Daniel skirted around the side wall of the grand foyer until he spotted Twilight Sparkle flapping her wings and hovering behind one of the tapestries. He knew that the Goliaths made an unfortunate amount of noise trundling around, so both parties were able to dodge their next lethal blasts.

Twilight tumbled into the tapestry and spun down its length before correcting her errant flight. Evidently her flying skills could've used some polishing up since she'd been resurrected as an alicorn a few days ago after a lifetime spent as a unicorn. "Should you ever face Kaiser Celestia, you will lose your will to fight. I'll let her tell you why genocide will only end in defeat for the victor."

Something about her pompous threat just fell flat in Daniel's ears. He glared at her hard a second, trying to see what she'd do next, but she just hung there like an old west standoff. He fired his laser gun at her again, and at the last second, she vanished in a hard gleam of light. *Crap*, Daniel thought. *Where the hell did she go?* She reappeared in a similar light, perched on the balustrade at the top of the staircase. Daniel had worked himself up to a trigger-happy paranoia and reacted on a dime. The rockets in Nirvana's heels sputtered with just barely enough force to launch him sideways away from her next shimmering, babbling beam of wailing energies.

"God damn! Why did you not use magic before? You could have won the war in a week!" The words just kind of slipped out of Daniel's mouth as he was panicking.

Twilight Sparkle stared blankly at him for a moment then smiled. Daniel could feel another one of her lectures coming on. "Your world doesn't possess magic. We took it all with us in order to break off Equestria to its own dimension in ancient times. Even so, magic is not a solution to everything. We can't just wish you all to death. Thinking that just shows a lacklustre academic comprehension of the arcane arts. Since the Guardians forbade its use, I determined we needed to fight with you on your own terms in order to keep up with you, so I studied your history, your tactics, the very worst you could throw at us. Nazi concentration camps of the Holocaust, Japanese medical experimentation in World War II, Joseph Stalin of the U.S.S.R., *Cannibal Holocaust* by Ruggero Deodato. Here, though, in Equestria, in our own world, I can wink around this room all I want. I could even teleport inside of you and blow you apart from within."

The threats were getting to Daniel now, as the thought of being ripped apart by Twilight Sparkle's body greatly disturbed him. He could only wish she was bluffing, but he had no reason to believe she wasn't. He furrowed his brow, though. She seemed to have a weakness for hearing herself talk. "Who are the Guardians? More ponies? We'll defeat them all, every last one of them!"

Twilight Sparkle frowned. "No. No, they're not ponies. Maybe one day, if we're lucky, but it's Kaiser Celestia's place to speak of them. We have no need of gods. Faith may move mountains, but only knowledge can move them to the right place." Once more, she winked out of apparent existence.

Daniel's heart was pounding now. His HUD was telling him so. His heart rate was reading a hundred and fifty-four over ninety-seven, whatever that meant. How was he going to fight an enemy he couldn't see? An enemy which didn't obey the laws of physics he himself scarcely had a grasp on? He spun around in place as fast as he could turn Nirvana's legs, firing off his laser gun in a constant stream, aiming both high and low in hopes that somewhere she would be struck. He had to stop to see if this tactic worked and because Nirvana's right arm was hissing. A vase flew right at him out of the blue and smashed across Nirvana's visor, smearing damp dirt across the glass. A good deal of Daniel's exterior view was now obscured, but not enough that he couldn't discern what could be going on. He retorted with a swift beam from his laser cannon, but again Twilight Sparkle was quick on the draw of her magic. She evaporated in a twinkle once again. Daniel tried to give a jump inside of his Goliath when he felt the most unsettling sensation pour through him. It was like the buzzing of the electric hair clippers from the haircut he received in the military. All his hairs stood on end like he'd just received an electric shock, and he felt like he was being pulled upward. He didn't know for himself, but the feeling reminded him of a story he'd once seen on television about a teen-aged child who'd been struck by lightning. The feeling passed soon enough.

This time, Daniel tried to remain calm. He couldn't quite quell the panic inside of him that his foe could pop up anywhere and launch a surprise strike as many times as she needed to, or wanted to. In fact, it may have been his only hope that she was every bit as vindictive and sadistic as he knew her to be, and she would want to draw this battle out long enough for his allies to join him. He couldn't think about that now, though. He would have to survive if he was going to be saved by his stalwart comrades. "Can you hear me, you invisible, cheating bitch?" he yelled.

"I'm not just invisible, I'm intangible, and there's no call for your potty mouth." Once more her voice echoed through the chamber.

Daniel knew she was prone to chatting at length. If he could just lure her into another conversation, he could prolong this fight. "Even if you kill me, my comrades will avenge me. You have made enemies of the human race, but you have also made them friends with one another. We have united in common fellowship against you and your cause of warped vengeance."

"You know nothing of friendship. There are bonds you couldn't understand that grant my friends and I potent magic, and if Kaiser Celestia is to be believed (and she always is), even the veil of death cannot part us! Our elements of harmony will prove far greater than any weapon your armies could devise."

"Your petty, shallow friendships over consumerist stereotypes mean nothing. The friends of my enemy are still my enemies, and I will gut you all," Daniel said. "I will demonstrate my belief in my friends." Daniel lowered the right arm of Nirvana. The left arm remained immobile. He shut his eyes and drew in a long, deep breath. If this was how it was meant to end, so be it. After all these years running from the spectre of his older brother's death, Daniel decided here and now that he wouldn't die like James did. She could do what she would with his body. He decided he would come to his end feeling no pain. He regretted that he had momentarily lost touch with the Buddhist teachings the monks had given him, the very best gifts he had ever received, but he knew he could draw them forth yet again. He allowed the zen of a hollow mind, serene and devoid of the useless clutter of the world outside his head, to enter him. He could no longer detect what Twilight Sparkle was doing out there. He started to lose his memory of what the castle foyer looked like. In a way, the war ended right there, because his consciousness succumbed to oneness with nothingness.

He was not alone. The him in his head opened his eyes and watched. His body could feel that sensation of energy passing through him, of lightning calling down from on high. He knew where Twilight Sparkle was.

Twisting his body about, he raised Nirvana's laser cannon. It didn't matter how slowly he moved or reacted. Time was meaningless to him right now. He fired another searing beam dead on target. Twilight Sparkle re-emerged from her teleportation spell right in the direct path of the laser. Daniel felt as though he'd emerged from a pool where time had no flow. Twilight Sparkle was screaming at a horrendous volume. Flames burst from the hole shot through her torso, and her body was soon smouldering to death. Daniel could feel his arm heating up inside of Nirvana, dripping with sweat and soon stifled with incredible heat. Still he kept the laser going until the weapon sputtered and shut off for the sake of energy conservation. From the wound outwards, Twilight Sparkle's body had become a charcoal briquette. A smoking carbonized cinder. Her fur had singed away elsewhere, showing bare, burnt flesh. Burn marks marred a great portion of her body, including half of her face. Only one eye was left intact, and it gaped at him. When she collapsed to the floor, dead, it gazed blankly ahead at nothing. The nothing where her very soul now dwelled, if she ever even had such a thing.

Daniel needed a moment. His head still felt empty and pure, and he knew there would probably be severe consequences in his brain for pulling off such a feat. All the memories of James's suffering, of his father's suffering, of the suffering of his friends and everyone else in the world, of all the struggles that had led him up to this tragic bookend of a climax to his journey, would come for

him, but later. He knew that. For now, he needed to return to his comrades, and they needed him. Instead of delving deeper into the castle, he walked back outside the front doors.

When Daniel emerged, he could see Inescapable Truth and Mercy Kill standing on the path. Even further beyond them, he could make out Deliverance and Fealty heading their way. "Tom! Tom, tell me that you are alive!"

He could hear the gladness in Tom's voice. "It's me, Dan. I'm alright." Another shudder rocked the ground harder than the quakes before.

At this development, the five members of Delta Squad gathered together. "Where's Irish?" Nick asked.

Logan shook his head inside Fealty. "We couldn't find him. We couldn't find a trace of him. I'm sorry. We couldn't spend another helpless minute in that tunnel. We had to catch up and help you end this."

Daniel's heart sank. So did Nick's and Tyrone's. "We need to end this," Daniel said. "Their main six generals lie dead once again. We are closer than ever to finishing this. Their leader, Kaiser Celestia, must die this day!"

"I sort of wish we'd come up with some kind of catch phrase we could say for moments like this," Logan said. "Suffice it to say, we're all in agreement! Eh, mates?" The others agreed.

Their little proposed trip into the castle would have to be postponed. Delta Squad wished they could shield their eyes from the glaring light that now descended from some higher location of the Canterlot royal palace. They stepped back into a row to catch a glimpse of what was happening when they realized. Kaiser Celestia herself was descending from up on high to meet them. She stopped on the platform just before the doors to her castle and folded her wings to her sides. The harsh glare of light surrounding her dimmed, and they could see she was adorned with a silver helmet that covered her eyes. She flung it away with a roll of her head, unleashing the full length of a flowing red, orange and yellow mane which matched her tail. She glared daggers at them all, but this stare was cold like a long-dead corpse rather than alight with fury and rage. This was a killing machine who had ordered and deployed forces meant to bring an end to the entire human race. This was the being that had triggered the end of all their loved ones, all their enemies, the destruction of the world they had grown up in and the loss of their society. Each of them craved her demise with a passion.

Morbid curiosity got the better of them as Daniel asked, "Whore Celestia. You have been found guilty of crimes against humanity and condemned to death. Have you anything to say before sentence is carried out?"

"You keep saying those words," she said. Her voice was calm but loud enough to be heard with clarity by each of them, like a royal decree was being delivered. "My death could never account for all the deaths you have suffered."

"I...well, no, it could not," said Daniel, who was expecting a more defiant response along the lines they were used to from ponies by now. "Nevertheless, we cannot permit you to keep murdering humans. Despite how much I would love to kill you straightaway, I am morbidly curious as to your justification for this war."

Kaiser Celestia appeared thoughtful for a moment, staring at the pathway and canting her head. "If I told you why I commanded all of Equestria into war with Earth, would you believe I wasn't trying to blame our actions on the influence of others?"

"What? I do not understand."

"I suppose it can't be helped. Humans of Earth, though we have long warred beyond the hyperbole of atrocity, there is an enemy we both share. The Guardian Council is nothing less than gods, and it was their representative who approached me, just as they approached your leader, once a central authority was appointed by you."

Delta Squad looked even more confused by her words. Daniel thought she might have been referring to his father, Peter. He'd been appointed a sort of central authority over the Human Resistance, although James had been the actual leader of the troops themselves.

"Come on, Daniel, let's just kill her!" Tom said. "We don't have time for any more pony horseshit."

"Did you not suspect that some things had to have been orchestrated?" Celestia continued. "As a task, I have been like a goddess to Equestria for over a thousand years, and these Guardians proved to me that they were the creators of our two races. They were able to synthetically spawn new organisms from the genetic code of our early ancestors. Then they told me they did this out of love. They loved us so much they commanded us to fight to the death to see which of us was stronger! They promised eternal

salvation to the race who survives the war, a seat on their council, but do you really believe they intend to deliver on this promise? We're their equivalent of a blood sport. Our evolution into such aggressive creatures is a threat to them, and a rabbit does not survive in a lion's den."

"Does this go on for very much longer?" Logan asked.

"We have six years of catching up to do, plus all the time since our worlds parted ways. There will always be tales to tell that will be left unsaid," Celestia replied. "Unfortunately for you, you will not be around to tell those tales." She walked down the palace steps and onto the path before them, sauntering at a leisurely pace their way.

"Fire!" Daniel ordered. "Kill her and don't stop killing her!" Except for Tyrone who was out of ammunition, the remaining four members of Delta Squad unleashed the fury of their miniguns upon the alicorn. Nothing seemed to happen after the first volley. There wasn't a wound on her. There wasn't a sign of any bullet even hitting anywhere near her if it missed.

"I was not bragging when I said I was like a goddess to Equestria," said Kaiser Celestia. "As you must well know by now, every pony has a special talent. Every unicorn has some spell she or he uniquely casts better than her or his peers. My power is dominion over the sun."

Delta Squad tried firing at her again when she stopped. They backed away at the same time to put some distance between her and them, but just like before, there was no damage. "The bullets are just disappearing!" Tyrone said. "Whenever they get close, they just vanish!"

"What are you saying?" Tom asked, even though he had heard Tyrone perfectly.

"Guys," Nick said. "Apart from any attempts by pegasi to control the weather, it hasn't been night since we arrived." Their visors protected them from the perpetual glare of the sun after a moment of looking up at it. The sun in Equestria appeared much, much larger in the sky than the Earth's.

What the hell does it mean? Daniel wondered. The tremors snapped him out of his mind-wracking. One of the garden statues broke away from its display stand and crashed to pieces on the ground. Kaiser Celestia was marching forward again. Delta Squad opened fire once more, continuing to back away.

"Stop shooting! It's not working!" Tyrone shouted. "Our bullets are useless against her. Look!" He fired off another one of his remaining heat-seeking missiles. It shot off towards the alicorn almost immediately, then each member of Delta Squad watched in horror as the missile melted in mid-air before their very eyes. It crossed into hoof's reach of Kaiser Celestia then melted away on contact with the air around her.

"We're wasting our ammo," Nick said. "It's time we fought fire with fire!" Stepping to the fore of the group, Mercy Kill's chainsaw whirred to life.

Celestia boldly approaching him without so much as an ounce of fear shown in her regal demeanour. "If you want to shine like the sun, then first you have to burn like it."

The chainsaw veered close to Celestia's head as she deftly swerved aside. A torrent of calm flame arose from her horn like a sabre. She flicked her head in a downwards strike. The next thing anyone saw was Mercy Kill laying on its right side, its right arm and leg utterly gone. "Nick! Oh my god, Nick, no!" Tyrone screamed.

"Motherfuck." Nick coughed. The heat had cauterized the wounds of his lost arm and leg. He had been so overwhelmed he couldn't even feel the pain he should have felt. Celestia then swung her head downwards in the other direction. Mercy Kill slumped limply. It no longer had a headpiece. Nick no longer had a head.

The next earthquake was worse than the last, and at first the surviving members of Delta Squad couldn't be certain it was a sensation outside of their suffering souls. Someone yelled, "Fuck!" as they witnessed the entire royal palace shifting downward. It lurched into an angle, and then the entire world as they knew it fell away. The mountain was avalanching; it was throwing itself up like a hard night at the pub. Celestia flapped her wings and rose into the sky above to watch as Delta Squad, the royal palace, and in fact all of Canterlot just fell away from the mountainside and plummeted to the world far, far below.

23. Racing the Sun

The stress of the avalanche tore whole buildings apart as they toppled down the vacating mountainside. Families were crushed inside their own homes. Citizens galloped through the streets only to find the ground vanishing from under their hooves. Nothing less

than pandemonium struck in the few moments before all of Canterlot went toppling along with its structural support from a mountain weakened by the explosive destruction of a steam engine wreck. It would seem that the karma from the fall of Moscow had finally been visited upon the pony race.

It was a stunning sight to see an entire castle hurtling through the air down, down. Logan was transfixed by this, even as he, too, like so many boulders, pieces of construction, and ponies fell along with him. Although the majority population of Canterlot was unicorns, there were a few pegasi among the ranks, although with so many rocks and debris and their fellow ponies tumbling about, many of them were struck down in their panicked bids for escape. Fealty went spinning about as the back of its headpiece was struck by a falling member of the royal guards.

Tyrone remembered a fleeting instant he had tried to catch Mercy Kill as it fell past him, but he had missed his reach, and the headless, one-legged, one-armed corpse of his once friend went tumbling far, far away from him, and in more ways than one, never to be near to him again. He thought of Irish, who had been lost in the tunnel after the train's destruction, who must have been somewhere amidst all this free-falling earth that was by now already forming a huge cloud on the ground below. Tyrone didn't care that they'd fallen from a much greater height on their first arrival into this demonic world of Equestria. He was scared. They were all scared. Fear is an instinctive emotion. One cannot simply "get scared later", because the moment fear hits for you to need to do that, it's already taken you. It did not mean, however, that he was helpless. Tyrone, upside-down, fired Inescapable Truth's claw at the mountainside. It was a long shot, but he had a long reach. A boulder scraped the thick cable and the arm lost its grip on an already-loose boulder that came tumbling down with him.

Tom fired the last of Deliverance's harpoons. It shunted into the remaining face of the mountainside. He and Daniel had instinctively set their Goliaths to grab one another's manipulators, locking each other together by the time they swung up against the newfound cliff. They were battered relentlessly by the falling debris, watching in stupefied awe the surreal sight of a donut shop and other pieces of civilization hurtle beyond their reach to an inescapable doom. All sorts of things were falling past them: Carriages, municipal infrastructure, factory surplus goods of all varieties, enough water to fill a rainstorm, kitchen sinks, and so forth. They thought they would let go against their best wishes. They thought they would lose their grip, or the remaining mountain wouldn't hold out. They just had no way of knowing what the outcome would be.

Tyrone's spinning levelled out, and he tried again to catch hold of anything. At first he thought his aim had betrayed him, but he felt his entire body jerk like his arm was going to pull out of its socket, and he crashed up against the mountainside many feet below Daniel and Tom. To his misfortune, he could feel his support shaking, losing an inch here and there as further debris kept colliding with him or his claw grip.

Logan wanted to die. He thought he could find his sweet release here from the life of a backwards-headed freak. Yet even in this brutal catastrophe, as it transpired all around him with a whole city obliterated by this disaster, he could not allow himself to abandon his comrades. His friends. Even the ones he suspected were dead by this point. Despite it being a projectile weapon, Logan fired off one of his bolas nets. He caught it with the same arm using Fealty's manipulator to grab hold of it as the net shot out. The net was not sufficient as a parachute because of all the holes in it, but he wasn't going to use it as a parachute. He instead used it to catch one of the many falling boulders descending right past him. This anchor wasn't going to help him fall, however. It was going to help him fly. Carrying the boulder in his snare net like a sling, he aligned Fealty's feet with the great rock and, at the same time he released his grip on the net, he kicked off of the huge stone's surface and sent himself falling in the direction of the uneven mountainside. The further down he fell, the greener and less rocky it got, so he fired out another snare net and caught this one with the manipulator on the same arm as well. He fell past several trees before seeing one come up that he thought might be the right size. He hooked the net over the semi-barren branches and smashed so hard against the steeply sloping terrain that he blacked out.

The terror wasn't over yet, because at that moment, they all witnessed their foe, Kaiser Celestia, descending to their level like an angelic host, flapping her wings and radiating sunlight. Daniel told himself this was where they'd die, helpless and at their greatest, most powerful enemy's mercy. Yet they did not. It seemed she had a bigger gambit in store for them. Focusing a beam of magical energy from her long horn, she lifted a black box, the last known black box if the reports were true, into the air well above her, even well above the mountain. The largest vortex Delta Squad had ever seen in living memory ripped open in the sky, black and swirling in such a manner that they couldn't rightly identify whether it was spinning clockwise or counter clockwise.

Kaiser Celestia naturally spoke to them. "Again and again I have turned back the sun, turning back the days to your arrival in this world that I may slay you in all manner of horrific ways over and over again. To be honest, this is the closest you have ever gotten. That traitorous Tree Barker, being stained by both worlds, was somehow immune to my temporal magics and has no doubt done his best to guide you down this path after your countless failures. This day will not see just the death of the Human Resistance, but of all the human race! My sun will fall, dragging your Earth with it in a blaze of glory that shall wipe out both human and ponykind as an affront to the Council of Guardians that made our meaningless existence as it was!" After saying her piece, the alicorn tyrant raised high into the sky then shot off to some point in a vast sprawl of forest below.

The sun was immense in the sky. Gazing through the portal, Daniel and Tom could make out a large, bluish circle with white streaks that could only have been the Earth. The Earth. The entire planet. They saw what Kaiser Celestia wanted to do. She wanted to drag the planet through the portal and obliterate everything either race had ever known to kingdom come.

Racing the Sun

"How the hell are we supposed to get down?" Daniel asked. "The Goliaths cannot exactly climb!"

"We're going to have to fall," Tom admitted. "Think of it this way: At least we won't be buried under tons of rubble. Besides, I think I saw a mattress store go by us. Maybe we can land on that!" Although what they were experiencing was not comical by any means, although they had just seen a beloved friend brutally murdered before their very eyes by an almost impossible villain, it is a long-established fact that when faced with unbearable crises, sometimes people will try to distil their horror with comedy. Laughing in the face of danger is but one coping method people have against unbelievable tragedies such as a collapsing skyscraper, an incredible tsunami, or only having a pair of ugly golf pants to wear. Some people chew their nails down to the bed, some people chew their beds down to the nails, some people yank out their hair in clumps, and some people tell bad jokes, no matter how unfunny they are. One colleague knew an entire industry of people who, when faced with the horror of being singled out from a crowd on a stage with only a brick wall and a microphone to back them up, would tell horrible, oftentimes spiteful jokes.

Daniel laughed in spite of himself. "Who do you think you are, Irish?" He regretted reminding them both of their lost friend who, in this chaos, was undoubtedly lost under a city and half a mountain of detritus. "Tell me I do not have to let go."

As their bodies swayed and rotated, dangling from that cable, Tom tried to look down at Nirvana. "Never, Daniel. We've fallen greater heights than this mountain before. Remember the plane to Berlin?"

"That was already going down. Who knows how low it was?"

"Okay, how about when we arrived in Equestria?"

"I do not remember how high we fell. It all happened so quickly."

Tyrone's voice interrupted their debate. "Might I remind you that we suffered a lot of damage falling from that high even in the Goliaths, and we've sustained a lot of damage since then?"

"Tyrone! You are alive!" Daniel was glad to hear another friend's voice again.

"Nice point, but I think if we don't bite the bullet soon, we'll miss the time we had to argue about it," said Tom. "Daniel, I'm going to release the cable."

Daniel shut his eyes and tried to prepare his mind, though the monks usually meditated without performing particularly mobile activities such as jumping jacks. "Do it."

"Wait, let's go on a three-count!" Tyrone said. "I'll release my claw when you guys drop."

Tom counted. "One. Two. Three! Drop!"

"Did you say drop after three?" Tyrone had already let go. Inescapable Truth's back scraped along the steep side of the mountain. He was airborne several times before he was launched away from the mountain side and free-falling the rest of the way down. "This is gonna suck!"

Daniel and Tom kept their promise of holding on to one another and fell together. Their height evened out and they both gazed at the mountainside rushing up to meet them. "Now might be a good time for me to ask how you do that calm zen shit," Tom said.

"It is not shit, and first, you close your eyes," Daniel answered. Closing their eyes was about all they had time left to do. They hit the slope of the mountain and the impact forced their manipulators apart. They each went rolling down, veering away from one another as they bumped and banged down the mountain side, throttled so violently that Daniel feared they might die anyway from being spun so rapidly. There was no way this would end pretty, he told himself.

In the end, these three members of Delta Squad found themselves scraping and sliding across the mass of uneven detritus and broken construction. Scarcely a fragment of Canterlot was even distinguishable anymore from the mountain rubble. They picked

themselves up off the ground, groaning and reporting that they were each A-Okay. Tyrone noticed Fealty first. It was lying on its back, so Tyrone had to turn it over to see Logan's face. Logan had his eyes shut and appeared to be unconscious. "Logan? Logan!" Tyrone belted out the volume as loud as he could at his comrade, which disturbed Daniel and Tom greatly because they were all on the same channel.

It must've been a worthwhile gesture because Logan winced and stirred. "Feels like my head came off again," he griped. Both Tom and Tyrone helped to pull Fealty to its feet, and after a fair bit of groaning, Logan assured them he'd had worse from hangovers alone.

"Comrades, what is this 'incoming transmission' message I am receiving?" Daniel was referring to an indication noted in the corner of his HUD. He tried to remember how to open the message up and got a display full of gibberish speeding up the inside visor at him.

"Yeah, we're getting it too." Tom looked at Fealty. "Logan, you worked with Franz Bandelt. You know what this is?"

Logan was quiet for a moment. "Yeah. Yeah, I know. Airplanes used to have this thing called a 'black box' which would survive crashes to report what caused 'em to crash. Dunno why they never made the whole plane out of the stuff. Franz found some ancient technology known as 'microSD' from before the event that's capable of storing a vast amount of information in a very small physical space. The Goliaths are constantly recording information, so that if something should happen to us, someone will be able to figure out what went wrong. Ordinarily we're constantly sharing small bits of info all the time with each other as backup, but during certain emergency instances, a Goliath will dump its entire knowledge in any other Goliaths within range."

Tyrone hung his head. Daniel just felt confused by all the technobabble. Tom volunteered to ask the question. "What emergency?"

"If the Goliath no longer reads a life sign inside of itself. If the pilot is dead, or missing. We're receiving the entire info dumps from Irish and Nick right now. You can see the transmitter handle." Logan neglected to mention to any of them that Scorn & Spite hadn't transmitted when it was still caught in the tunnel. The radar hadn't indicated he'd fallen out of range back then. "That's the reason why we were told to record our thoughts in the events of our untimely deaths, if we had the time to do so, or just periodically."

Daniel wished he'd done so up 'til this point. He'd thought it was a bit too morbid. All of a sudden he now understood all too clearly the importance of their legacy to the Human Resistance. To humanity in general. "The purpose of an army is for people to die for others. We cannot afford to be replaced this far in, though. No life can be replaced." He wasn't sure he truly believed that. After all, wasn't a benefit of unity that one person should take another's place for the common good should that other fall? He didn't want to wrestle with that in his head right now. He needed clarity if he was going to kill Kaiser Celestia. "Come, comrades. We need to press onwards. Kaiser Celestia's grave awaits us, if only we knew where it was."

"She went shootin' off into this forest. The one we're half on top of." Tyrone indicated the morass of trees spreading untold distances in every direction away from the mountain and its littler mountain of rubble.

"Wait, hold up, lads," Logan said, and they stopped to hear him out. "These data streams have something important. It's clear we're heading into the most extreme situation any of us has ever endured, right? This data Nick and Irish have given us contains absolutely all the information, even the hidden stuff in the Goliaths' operating systems. It's, uh, let me remember. Well, the HUD doesn't just happen, right? It's all programmed in. Some things are automatic, like the visor tinting, for example, but even that's still linked up to the computer. There are also safety parameters keeping things in check like voltage output, internal temperatures and so forth."

"Um, okay, but how can that help us?" Tom asked when Logan paused to catch a breath and see if they were following him.

Logan continued. "With access codes to something called the BIOS, we can overclock the system, we can override safety limitations, and we can adjust things like the visor's tint. That could give us a leg up with Kaiser Celestia's flashing lights and whatnot. If we see how cold we can endure it, we may be able to stave off the heat a bit longer as well."

"It all sounds a bit sci-fi to me," Daniel said.

Tyrone tried to wave Inescapable Truth's arm. "Right, and I remember, too, somethin' about solar energy. The Goliaths use nanobanana photon torpedoes or somethin', yeah?"

"Nanotech photovoltaics," Logan recited in a deadpan tone.

"The more sunlight, the more energy we get back, and if Kaiser Celestia is powered by the sun..." Tyrone held out both of Inescapable Truth's arms.

Logan nodded his head sideways inside Fealty. "Alright, yeah. Maybe. Barring the upper bandwidth limit. I don't really get all this electronic junk myself. That was all I wanted to say. It looks like we have a trek, so I can work on it on our little walkabout."

As they tread along the uneven rocks and debris, Tyrone called out. "Hold up a sec, guys. I found Nick." The group adjourned in the direction of where Mercy Kill still lay partially jutting out from under some masonry. Or it could've just been more stone. It was hard to tell.

"I cannot look." Daniel averted his gaze. He did not want to see Nick's body in such a state. He wanted to imagine Nick in one piece, like he deserved to be. His would-be brother-in-law. He told himself that was how he'd always remember him. Tom, who'd seen Logan decapitated once before, also felt squeamish at the prospect of a close friend's headless corpse, or any headless corpse, really. Even Logan shut his eyes in remembrance, leaving Tyrone to stare at Mercy Kill. Truth be told, he couldn't even really see any part of Nick's body from this angle.

After a few silent words, or even just wordless thoughts on behalf of Nick, Tyrone spoke. "I'm gonna grab his ammo. I'm completely out." Nobody needed to say anything along the lines of "That's the way he would've wanted it," or "Nick's still fighting alongside us." Once Tyrone restocked his minigun from Nick's supply, the four were on their way towards the sprawling Everfree Forest.

Though the canopy was thick, the forest still had a bright glow to it thanks to the descent of the sun overhead. Daniel tried not to think about how fast the Equestrian sun must have been moving. What alarmed him more were the intermittent earthquakes that he thought had been consigned solely to the mountaintop. These felt bigger, somehow. Much more ominous. Nobody wanted to say anything about them, though. The placid forest took their minds off things a while. Logan spent his time trying to crack the Goliath BIOS, or whatever he said it was called. Daniel turned off his radio to work on recording what might very well be his last thoughts as far as he could guess. The forest only remained calm and inoffensive for so long. The picturesque trees turned gnarled and crooked, then adopted ghoulish shapes. The ground's hard dirt turned soft and muddier. A greater density of shrubbery and underbrush flourished, obscuring their visibility more. Branches reached out to them, though scraped harmlessly off of their powered armour. At certain points, the party just got fed up with going around the terrain, and Tom and Tyrone pushed aside boulders or felled logs. The clustered, low bushes they didn't have much choice but to tromp right through, uprooting them with the Goliaths' shins.

Then Logan asked something. "Oy, Tyrone. You think this place has Timberwolves?"

Tyrone thought about it. "I hadn't really thought about it before, but I'd imagine so. Lotsa trees. Kinda creepy. Why you ask?"

"Just wanna be prepared for them and the drop bears," Logan said.

"I think wood's gonna be the least of our worries with our suits, man."

"That's true."

They all felt a little less settled, glancing about more frequently and observing their surroundings with greater care. They naturally took to positioning themselves so they kept an eye on a wide albeit incomplete radius around themselves as their training warranted. None of them regretted their rise in paranoia as it staved off the complacency on what was so far an uneventful hike through some rather bizarre forest. Out of nowhere another path sprang up more or less in the direction their compasses told them they were going, so they followed its easy tread onward. They were led into the hollow of a once-mighty tree, its sides still rising up out of the ground a good story and a half so it still looked rather mighty. The tree had two open gaps like doorways, and a more-or-less flat wood floor. The top was open, and they could see foliage and the sky up above. It was hard to imagine how such a beast could be formed and then end up in this state. It was even larger than the redwoods of California. It must have been the central nut vault in squirrel heaven or something.

Daniel halted their march inside. "Alright. We do not have time to camp, obviously, but I will declare base here. It is a somewhat noticeable landmark. We do not know exactly where Kaiser Celestia is, and Trey never gave us much intel about this location. Should we all fan out?"

Tom sounded doubtful. "I dunno. How far you want to split up?"

Tyrone offered his suggestion. "It doesn't have to be a wide dragnet. We could keep in visual range of each other."

"Little problem though." Logan stood by the opening they hadn't yet passed through and pointed with Fealty's left arm. Outside was a vast, sickly-brown swamp that stretched outwards and forwards, potentially impeding progress. They could tell just by looking at the bubbling mire before them that although a few islands of parched yellow grass poked up in mushy mounds, there were untold depths that threatened to swallow any one of them up with just a wrong step.

Each of them was starting to get a sense that the closer they got toward the expected end of their journey, the harder it was to move forward. They'd lost two of their closest comrades and were certain that this time, they would never be coming back again, ever. Maybe none of them would. Maybe they'd fulfil their job of saving humanity and their only reward would be to be trapped alone with each other until their deaths in this pony dimension. As unappealing as that outcome sounded, any outcome in which they finally avenged humanity's defeats and destroyed their most hated enemy of Equestria was preferable. They stood there, ruminating on their next plans, hoping to keep moving onward for as long as they were able, gazing out over the harrowing scape of fetid, alien nature ahead of them. They each said good-bye in their heads. Logan said good-bye to nights spent carousing with prostitutes and cheap beer. Tyrone said good-bye to reuniting the gangs to recreate the United States. Daniel said good-bye to Russia, the land he once admired back when its country existed, and Tom said good-bye to a world that hadn't really been so great to him, taking away family after family, both loved ones and liars who'd betrayed him. Logan and Tyrone in particular had more to lose, but their bonds as Delta Squad unified them.

At Daniel's bidding, they moved forth to enact their plan. While their Goliaths protected them from the stench, they could still imagine it from the gross movements and flatulent release of swamp gas from the semi-solid terrain they now trudged into. They spread outward from the tree as agreed and sought the muddy islands, but the intense weight of their machine bodies sank them into the ground.

Tom had sunk in to Deliverance's chest. "Fuck! This isn't going well, guys!"

"Just try to relax," said Logan. "Remember the Goliaths are air-tight. Panicking is only going to move more mud around and get you stuck."

Daniel had one of those sudden epiphanies that just strike out of the blue. "Guys, how does Kaiser Celestia melt bullets which get near her?"

"She said her powers were the sun," said Logan. "And the sun is really hot."

"Maybe she's surrounded by a corona just like the sun," Tom suggested.

"How come only bullets melt then, and not, like, the grass or the dirt or what have you?" Daniel asked.

Tyrone tuned out their scientific debate. He tried not to think about Irish as he listened to the noises of the swamp gurgling around him. He considered just turning off the external sounds, but knew this would be careless. With another particularly loud bloop, Tyrone felt a rush of water slap across the back of Inescapable Truth. "What the heck, man, why you splashin'?" He turned around, but there was nothing there behind him except the empty terrain he'd just traversed. He built the suspense further in his own mind when he looked back and forth at his comrades. Detecting nothing out of the ordinary, he looked forward again to continue listening to the random cursing from the others. Then he did a double take, a phrase which here means "take a second look". He'd only spotted two of his comrades. "Who's missing?"

Tom sounded rather vexed, a word which here means—oh, just look it up. "I just got through saying I was sinking! Pay attention! I'm just gonna keep walking and hope I hit an easy slope on the other end."

"Just make sure it's been over an hour since you've last eaten," Logan said.

"Hey, do these Goliaths have flotation devices?" Tom asked.

"No," said Logan. "Another feature Franz wanted to add in a future model."

"Okay, well..." Tom trailed off. Deliverance breached the surface of the filthy muck water and rose higher and higher. Pretty soon he was out of the water completely, and he could see what was lifting him up. A thick, scaly body, easily as thick as a Goliath and then some, had pushed underneath his feet. He'd slipped, and the thing had caught him under Deliverance's front side. "Um, thank you, I'd like to get off at this floor, please." He tried to thump Deliverance's arms on the creature as it continued to rise higher and higher out of the water. Pretty soon he was alarmed to find himself about four Goliath heights high.

"What the fuck is that?" Tyrone got an up-close view of the creature as another dense length of scales rose up, this time draping around him in a spiral. Broad muscle grappled Inescapable Truth and carried it up into the sky as well as he flailed uselessly.

"It is another damn creature!" Daniel said. "Some kind of lizard with four heads!" He could see the entire awkward form of the monster's body. Its scales were the same sickly yellow-green of the bog around them. It had two stubby trunks for legs, and indeed had four heads at the end of four very long necks. Its faces looked almost flat, like smushed human faces in a way, with big, angry yellow eyes, and strange fin-like protrusions on either side of each head. The mouths appeared particularly toothsome and fierce. "We do not have time for another god-damned monster!"

"Well it's making time for us, mate. Lunch time!" Logan opened fire with one of his high-density assault rounds. He knew as the others did that their minigun rounds, even explosive as they were, probably wouldn't be very effective against such a gigantic creature, at least not as a first resort. The high-density rounds tore bleeding gashes into the creature's scaled flesh, but the wounds were each still too tiny when compared with the hydra's overall size. The creature's vital portions were out of range of Daniel's shotgun, so he fired off his laser, but the creature moved its head too quickly.

Tom was having difficulty in finding a good shot from the position he was handled in. Somehow, simply sliding off was taking some doing, but he managed to scramble backwards and fall from the hydra's neck. As he plummeted, the hydra caught him again with a lower portion of its prehensile appendage. The creature leaned its menacing face down as if to scold him for his attempted escape. It hissed at him, waving its forked tail about then lunged. Tom slipped himself off the wet, round neck again, and the hydra's fangs tore into its own flesh. Tom crashed into a muddy hillock below, splattering it beneath Deliverance's weight, and he was glad that something didn't go completely wrong for once as he landed on his back, rather than his visor.

Tyrone had a better opportunity for aiming. Pinched between folds of throat from one neck, he fired off his claw at the adjacent head as soon as it leaned close enough in his direction. He grappled the thing right in its face then dragged it closer by withdrawing Inescapable Truth's claw. When it was halfway reeled in, the hydra doubled its efforts to pull away, straining the claw's cable. Tyrone fired off a heat-seeking missile directly into the reptile's face, releasing it from his claw at the same time. The hydra took the brunt of the explosion and reeled back in pain. As its entire colossal body tipped over backwards, it dropped Tyrone into the swamp with a splash.

Daniel this time fired another laser at the hydra's much larger torso portion, but something about the damp slime that covered its body was resistant to burning. "Ah, hell. Just run! Keep going to that line of trees down that way! We do not have time to waste on this thing!"

Delta Squad was in assent. They took off running for the far shore of the bog, splashing mightily, trying to follow the dotted islands of mud to avoid sinking too deep. Logan could feel Fealty dipping below at one point, but he took a leap through the water with his heel boosters and went sailing cross to another patch of higher level and kept running. He was able to keep an eye on the hydra while making sure he followed where his friends' radar blips went to avoid any obstacles, and he could see the hydra was giving chase. Its heavy, stamping footfalls sent huge waves of fluid grime washing over them, pushing and pulling at their mechanical armour as they dashed through filth at least knee-high.

Tom kept slipping on patches of soft mud, falling behind a few more paces due to poor luck. Luck is a word which here refers to unforeseen circumstances following a disproportionate trend of extreme boon or woe. He dropped onto Deliverance's back, and the thick layer of mud carried him along on his forward momentum. He slid well past his comrades and up the steep embankment just ahead. He fought to get to his feet as fast as he could, took aim at the reptilian beast pursuing them with his sniper rifle, and fired. The name "hydra" engraved itself on the bullet. He struck one of the heads in one of its eyes, and the hydra didn't appreciate that one bit. It wailed and roared in agony, twisting its necks around in a panic at it suffered severe damage to one of its vital organs.

Delta Squad took the opportunity to escape from the mire. Tom helped Daniel clamber up the embankment which Logan crawled up, and Tyrone, who was waist-deep in swamp sludge, grappled onto a thick tree with Inescapable Truth's claw and yanked himself onto shore. The tree ripped out from the ground, but by then Tyrone could ride his momentum to solid ground. Their last look at the raging hydra was brief. Though it was charging after them, they were sure it couldn't break through the numerous thick trees that formed a sort of cage around the bog.

As they walked forward, they could finally catch glimpses of a tall structure ahead of them through the foliage. They noticed the trees grew faded as they continued, less saturated in colour and moisture. Soon enough, and without further incident, they happened upon a clearing over a wide pit that surrounded an island of land. One thin bridge connected their side to the other, and smack dab in the middle of that island surrounded by empty space was a castle-like structure. Even at this distance, they could see how worn and weather-beaten the abandoned structure was. They marched, single-file, across the bridge, with Daniel taking the lead, and approached what they were certain was to be their final battle.

Delta Squad stood side-by-side outside the great double doors that barred the decrepit castle from entry. Daniel and Tom exchanged looks as they grabbed the rusted handles with their manipulators then pushed the heavy doors open. The resistance they bore was not due solely to weight, but also in part to rusty hinges and warped wood, not to mention a bit of debris on the other side of the doors. The doors themselves were also barred, but the wood was so rotted away that a few shoves broke the jagged, splintering bar apart. Giving the doors a good shove open further, they took their first steps inside. The interior was mostly dark, but a few gaping holes in the ceiling and roof allowed light to pass through, like an overpriced home in a United States ghetto. Mossy, filthy masonry formed the walls, with whole support beams of wood resting broken on the floor. A suit of equine armour was in a smashed pile against one wall, and the carpet was threadbare and bone-dry. Numerous archways passed into darkened corridors leading deeper into the construct. At the very far end was a sort of balcony with two sets of stairs leading to a very tall, very narrow window. High above were a few frayed and dismantled tapestries, though two particularly large ones depicting their nemeses Kaiser Celestia and Princess Luna were tattered but in more or less fair shape. Empty torch sconces lined the walls, leaving the room to bask in natural light.

"If I know royalty, she will probably be somewhere high up and important," Daniel said. "Let us split up and gain as many vantage points as we can. We need to learn as much about this castle in as short a time as possible." They marched into four separate doorways and lost visual contact with one another.

"You hear that?" Tom asked. Each of them confirmed the sound of soft, faint singing. They couldn't make out the words at first, nor at second, because they sounded to be in a language none of them understood. The tune was some placid, contented dirge, at least by their musical experiences. They didn't know what to make of it, and so said nothing, but they did reason that following the sound could lead them to Kaiser Celestia and a trap. Even though they knew well enough the limitations of their Goliaths by now, they still crept as slowly as possibly as if they could sneak up on their greatest enemy.

When he was halfway up a zig-zagging set of stairs, the entire region of Equestria took another terrible rumble. Fealty's foot slipped on a step and lost its balance, sending itself and Logan within crashing down step after step until they came to a painful halt in a heap at the bottom of the stairwell. The noise was cacophonous, and the castle had by their estimates only five occupants, so naturally the others called up over the radio. "I'm fine," Logan told them. "Just some old rubble breaking."

Logan's visor flashed brightly, and a colourful image of an alicorn lit up on screen. It sort of resembled Kaiser Celestia. "My sister's thrall," it spoke into his radio. How it accomplished this, Logan had no idea. He didn't have time to think too much on it, but whenever he did, he couldn't find a logical explanation, since nobody else apparently heard it. If he couldn't figure out how it worked, he wasn't certain he could figure out its weakness. He didn't like how much the ponies loved to talk them all to death, and he didn't like being reminded of his torturous resurrection at the hooves of the vampony Nightmare Moon. "She brought you back wrong, entirely without my knowledge or concern."

"Here's where you try to tempt me with fixing my head back 'round the other way in exchange for you genociding my entire species, am I close?"

"No. The best cure for you would be to put you out of your misery. I can make it so quick it'll be painless. Let's say you do defeat me and every other last pony and somehow return to your home world. You'll still be stuck with that freakish impediment. Are you able to go back to the life you once knew? Hardly. How long, then, must you endure your consciousness until it's snuffed out?"

Logan thought on his head, because that was how Fealty had landed. He flexed Fealty's arms as hard as he could and tried to shove them against the stone floor. "Nah. I don't think I came all this way just to commit suicide." He now started to scrape Fealty's arms along the floor and pushed his Goliath's upper body up. Slowly he began to drag himself off of the end of the stairs. "I don't think I'll be abandoning my mates. Thanks, but no thanks. Every day I'll be stuck with one good thought."

"And that is?"

Fealty's arms bent under itself, and Logan went crashing to the floor again. "Every day I'll remember how my comrades and I saved the bloody world from you monsters." He dragged the arms back outright underneath himself and pushed Fealty up once more. "I think I'll take a page out of Daniel's Buddhism book. I won't succumb to the idea that I'm going to die." With that, Logan tipped Fealty back onto its feet and stood up again. He turned himself around and headed up the stairs from the beginning all over again.

Tyrone couldn't see more than a few feet in front of himself, so he clicked on Inescapable Truth's headlamps. What he saw were a lot of odd, unlit torch sconces extending from bent stone protrusions. It took him a while to realize these were pony legs extending from the wall. Though he wasn't scared, he couldn't shake the growing feeling like he shouldn't have headed downstairs. He'd had a hunch heading down might be just as important as heading up, but now he was getting the inclination that he was heading nowhere. This hallway looked like something from the silent film version of *Beauty and the Beast*, and there was no telling where the end of it led. It curved around someway, and as Tyrone walked forward, he started to lose his sense of position within the ruin. Around the bend up ahead, Tyrone noticed something odd about the walls, but he couldn't tell what it was. He clicked his headlamps back off for a second (he told himself) and realized there was a light on up ahead. Leaving his lights off, he kept moving forward.

An echoing voice emanated toward him like it was spoken inside of his chest. "Why are you here?"

A couple of seconds passed before Tyrone recognized the cold, harrowing tones of Kaiser Celestia. "I'm here to kill you, aren't I? What kind of question is that?"

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"Shit. Like I'd tell you." The hallway seemed to stretch on forever.

"So you humans lie by omission."

Tyrone scrunched up his face. "There's no such thing. Omission is omission. Lying is lying. You can't just tell an enemy the truth."

"So lying is inevitable with your species."

"You can't be trusted. You don't just give out trust blindly. That cheapens the truth."

"And what of your history? When you win, what lies will you spread about what happened here? Will you declare how just your mission was? How victorious you were against the ponies for those six long years?"

"I can't decide what the history books will say. If anyone asks, I'll tell 'em how it went down. What other people say or do, that's not mine to control."

"History. Your history is made up of wars. We decimated your planet and brought your species to the brink of extinction. Even should we die, the wound we wrought shall remain in your past forever. How do you like it when someone else writes your history for you?"

Tyrone felt at once that it was an issue he'd consider for a long time if they ever ended this war. Not knowing how to answer, he responded by changing the subject a bit. "Let me ask you something. You're so hyped up against lying. If I head down this corridor, will I find you, or should I just turn back around and try a different way?"

There was a soft chuckle. "I'll never tell." Then the voice was silent, and the light up ahead faded away.

Tom had found an undamaged hallway on the upper right-hand side of the abandoned castle. It appeared featureless and barren, as though to suggest it may at once have housed some sort of ostentatious decor and banal finery in its day. The broken, dusty remains of a display table were one of the few traces of the corridor's ages-old glamour. In fact, most of this corridor was dusty and cobwebbed. Walking further along, he encountered a flapping tapestry hanging on the wall to his right. When he stopped to figure out what was so puzzling about the sight, he realized he didn't see any source of wind. There must have been a secret passage, so he thought, so he lifted the drapery and moved on through. By the time he noticed the bright, sunny outdoors, he had already stepped out onto the balcony. He heard a stone slide shut behind himself, but was too busy for the next few seconds staring at the ground far below him. He was getting quite annoyed at the constant prospects of falling, but more importantly, he didn't want to delay catching up with his friends if they had caught up with Kaiser Celestia by now. He loosed an expletive when he turned around to confirm the way back had been blocked off from him. Spinning the rest of the way around, he nervously sidestepped along the balcony, wondering just how sturdy it was when the rest of the structure was in such stark disrepair.

The sun above was getting brighter. He was sure of it, anyway. The glare was intrusive and blinding, although the enhanced tint of the visor that Logan had unlocked was a boon. The glare flicked and wavered like candlelight, and out from nowhere, he too heard the voice of Kaiser Celestia speaking to him as if by telepathy. Of course, he knew telepathy wasn't real, but then he'd seen these ponies perform all manner of strange feats since entering Equestria. "Thomas, why do you have a hyphen in your last name?"

"What the shit?"

"Do not be afraid of my voice. It's being slain in the final battle that you must be concerned about. I do not wish to fight an opponent who will not give their all. You've seen the folly of that already."

"How do you know about my surname?" he asked. "I don't think it's any of your business." Sometimes when you ask a question, an obvious answer may pop into your head once the question has left your lips. This happened to Tom now.

"As Equestria's leader, we have gained much intel on your 'Delta Squad'. It perhaps would have been for the best had you disbanded, but even I know the importance of keeping your strongest subordinates together."

Tom looked around just to make sure the alicorn wasn't merely waiting somewhere out of view to pounce. He couldn't find her anywhere, so he decided he really needed to continue his trek. He wasn't sure yet where he was going, but the other way was blocked by a gargoyle. Then a chunk of balcony broke off under Deliverance's foot and he felt his heart nearly jump up his throat (not literally). When this happened, Kaiser Celestia spoke again. "Are you really willing to die for your friends? I wouldn't want to be defeated by only the second-best now."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Tom had reached another ugly draconic gargoyle and was running out of places to go.

"It means that even if humanity wins the war, you yourself may die in the process. Can you really live the short remainder of your life knowing this?"

"I'm not gonna die, cunt-flaps. Don't bother trying to psych me out." Tom turned around and looked at the roof of the castle. Toward the back of the structure, the roof was mostly intact. The roof over the entrance hall appeared to suffer the most. Not having a clue where else to go, he tried moving Deliverance onto the sloped shingles.

"Will your allies remember you, I wonder? What will they remember you for?"

"I really couldn't care less," Tom lied. Suddenly a thought hit him that he hadn't really considered in his life before. If he did die, would Daniel really be heart-broken? Well, of course he would, but beyond that, how would he react? Would he give up everything? Would he remember Tom's name in honour and miss him for all of his days? Or would he try to block out the painful memory by pretending to have forgotten about Tom altogether? That last probability struck Tom the hardest because he worried it was something he himself would do. It wasn't something he was proud of, but he'd never been able to clearly express his feelings before until just recently. He'd always been misunderstood until he'd reunited with Daniel.

"Do you fight for revenge, or for your leader?"

Deliverance had safely begun to climb a few paces up the castle roof then slipped. "Why do you care?" Tom shouted. When he considered the question, he had his answer. "For Daniel. I fight for him."

"Do you know what he fights for, though? Do you understand the world he strives to create?"

"One without ponies. That's all I need to know."

"So you don't share in his beliefs? His political views, his religious ones? Do you know nothing about your closest friend?"

Deliverance slipped again, but Tom was gaining more ground. He wondered what he was going to do if he reached the top. "Seriously, why are you so interested in my thoughts?"

"I want to know who's going to defeat me. I said so already."

Tom tried to glare at the sun glaring back at him, but Deliverance wouldn't move that way easily. "I don't really understand Daniel's beliefs. It's all a bit outside my reach. His ideals are my ideals, though."

"How can you say that without understanding them? He wants to eliminate the divisions of ownership and eradicate commerce. Do you know how to survive in such a society?"

"I thought you believed we'd lose even if we won?" Tom asked. "I remember you saying something to that effect before, whatever the hell it was."

"None of us know the future. Even I, who have turned back the sun countless times, can't tell what might happen the next time around. If it were always the same, I would have no power, after all."

Tom had come close enough to the top to decide it wasn't going to get him anywhere. He looked at the massive gaping hole that led either two or three stories down to the entrance hall by his estimate. "Listen to me. I don't care if Daniel wants to watch the world burn. Nothing's going to convince me not to give it my all to support him from here on out. Maybe you should've tried your little mind games a few years ago, huh?"

There was a momentary pause. "Oh, the world will burn," Kaiser Celestia intoned. "You can be certain of that." And then she didn't speak again. The glare seemed a bit less harsh now, and Tom turned around to look up at the sky. The blazing, giant sun was still there of course, beating down a deathly haze of heat, but something more important caught his eye. Up there in the sky was still the swirling portal the Kaiser had opened back to his world. Unreachable from its position, he could still spy through it the unmistakable image of his home, the entire planet Earth. It felt a lot closer than it looked right now.

Daniel had started his way up a spiral staircase. He never did like spiral staircases. They made him dizzy. He kept walking up, up, having trouble with balancing Nirvana's large feet on the narrower portion of the steps. By the time he decided he ought to have been a quarter of a mile up, he wished he'd been counting how many times he'd gone around in circles. He let out a sigh as he immediately recognized yet another trick on the part of scheming Equestrians. He spoke to the emptiness around him. "Do we really frighten you so much that you will hold off on the inevitable for as long as possible? You are like children who do not want to go to the dentist."

"Dental surgery! I knew there was another level of pain we could inflict after crucifixion," Kaiser Celestia said. "So tell me, what do human leaders do besides fail all the time?"

"What do pony leaders do besides betray each other all the time? I think you killed your own generals more than we killed them."

"I'm simply curious what use you are to your soldiers. You're not any more powerful than they are. You're not even necessarily smarter."

Daniel scowled. "Most human leaders are not usually more powerful than those that work under them. There was a time those men were corrupt and manipulative. Although the world I strive for has no need of leaders, I keep my friends close because I value their expertise and experience. The burden falls on me to make decisions on their behalf. It is the people who are the greatest asset the Earth has!" When he turned around the next loop of spiralling staircase, he saw where the steps ended and an open doorway led into the next room.

Daniel found a fairly bare room that had managed to escape the damages of the deteriorating castle. The ceiling was mostly intact, sparing the majority of the chamber from too much water damage. The main feature of the room was the far wall which Daniel couldn't tell if it was at the back or the front of the castle structure. Six narrow stained-glass windows with diamond motifs remained unbroken in the wall. Below them was a small raised platform where Kaiser Celestia was slouched over the side of a throne. She was scraping at a bit of rubble that might have once been another throne beside it with the front of her hoof.

She was speaking in a melodramatic fashion to thin air. "You can be at peace now, sister." Daniel found it odd she could be so sentimental after all she'd perpetrated. She straightened her posture out somewhat and faced Daniel, still speaking as though she were talking to a ghost from her past. "There is no more need to fight. The battle is finally triumphantly lost."

Daniel felt ambivalence. He knew he couldn't just shoot her, and he knew he couldn't approach her. A giddy sort of elation rose within him, almost akin to a kind of madness at seeing the end before him, the last period before the story of this miserable fate of humankind could be laid to rest. It was almost like laughter, and he had a most peculiar notion of playing this by the book. That and he needed to stall for time. He managed not to laugh. "Kaiser Celestia, you are under arrest for war crimes. You orchestrated an attempted genocide against the human race, sanctioning the murders of six billion human lives. You have attacked our culture, our infrastructure, and our history and have shown no remorse for the murders of civilians, including children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, not to mention all non-combatant medical personnel."

Kaiser Celestia didn't look like she cared one whit when Daniel paused to take a breath. She spoke again once he had stopped speaking for a few seconds. "I will never be known as the one who ended this war, because no one will be left alive to speak of it." A spark of light riveted up the length of her horn, and with a shudder, the six stained-glass windows broke open. "You can already smell Equestria beginning to burn, but take a look. The sun isn't the only thing up in the sky."

Daniel took a look, and didn't like what he saw. That portal to Earth was still open, gaping wide enough to show his entire home planet. He asked himself on what principle she managed to do this. He changed tack, a phrase which here means that he took a different approach. "I killed Twilight Sparkle even when she was bilocating around me. There is nothing—"

The Kaiser interrupted him. "This sun's gravitational pull will yank your entire world through the gate and collide it into Equestria in ball of fire. Bodies will be crushed, set ablaze, and left in the airless vacuum of space. I've read their corpses will be preserved more or less, but I imagine the bodies will fall into stars, or be obliterated by space dust. The point is every single organism will die, down to the very last tardigrade. And that's assuming the entire Earth even manages to get through the portal. It's very likely it'll just be torn in half, lost between two dimensions, never to meet again. How very fitting for a species that could never stop fighting itself. Maybe the Guardians were wrong, and you were never meant to survive after all." She dismounted from the throne and took a few steps toward Daniel.

Daniel took a step back. "You are wrong. Humanity can choose to unify. When they come to learn the fundamentals of Communism, they will understand each person has a choice. We have already been united in a common cause, just as you have already lost."

When Kaiser Celestia grew bored of Daniel's boasting, she resumed her steady pace. Daniel hadn't even noticed when Fealty entered the room. Logan burst in and held one of Fealty's legs aloft. "Back off, you minge-bitin' slagger." Daniel was surprised to see a thin jet of dark, shiny substance squirting out from Fealty's knee. Logan waggled about as best he could, spraying what looked like lubricating oil in a kind of line in front of the Kaiser. She reared back as the oil spontaneously burst into flames.

"How in the hell did you do that?" Daniel asked.

"Those hacks that let us turn these into freezers. Thanks to the damage I took earlier, I can dispense lubricating oil by upping the pressure a bit. It's flammable, and she's got that aura of heat." To the Kaiser, Logan said, "Betcha can't lick flames, can ya, drongo?"

Kaiser Celestia stamped her front hooves about and reared back, glowering at the rising flames spreading out in either direction between herself and her enemies. She said nothing at them this time, just let her scowl speak for her, but it spoke volumes, telling them she was finally being backed into a corner. Her frantic motions, kicking her front hooves at the air, warned them she was working out her way to break free. Sparks flickered from the flames and singed her mane, spreading through her hair quickly due to all the hairspray. She managed to control the wavering of her mane and tail, which made sense or else it would have drifted in front of her face half the time, and kept her vulnerable coiffure out of harm's way.

A noise like a modest cannon and the scraping of chains zoomed down from overhead. Daniel and Logan watched as some massive, round object fell so fast as though it had been shot and couldn't be identified. It hurtled straight for the Kaiser at a sideways angle. As it entered the radius of her aura, it steamed and fumed. Gaps formed like Swiss cheese as portions of the rock's lower liquefaction points succumbed first to the heat. The holey boulder struck the alicorn in the right neck and shoulder, forcing her to stumble off-balance, and the rock melted into molten slag where it stuck to the floor. Daniel and Logan looked up. There, at the brink of where the roof was broken, stood Deliverance, its spent harpoon gun reeling in its chains, the end of which were gleaming red. Daniel was about to dispense congratulations at the first blow struck when he saw what was going to happen.

The broken roof where Deliverance stood crumbled beneath the Goliath's heavy weight, throwing the precariously balanced machine armour forward. Tom had leaned over too far to take his risky shot, and was falling behind the line of flames, into the lethal reach of the Kaiser's plasma sabre. He was already falling when Daniel screamed for him to watch out.

Deliverance was struck in mid-air, snatched from certain death by the giant claw of Inescapable Truth. Tyrone's reflexes had to be at their peak, and as he snapped himself back to yank his friend with all his might, he thought they might never have this much demand put on them. He thought he might never be able to pull off such a miraculous rescue stunt again. Lifting a whole other occupied Goliath was tough, but he managed to pull Tom back through the flames before Deliverance even hit the ground.

"Alright, Tyrone!" Logan shouted. "After four years, our luck is finally beginnin' to turn!"

Kaiser Celestia laughed, long and clear and sinister, and Daniel wasn't satisfied that it sounded desperate enough. "You insolent little fools! You think I need to fight you to win? Didn't you hear what I told you? The sun is careening down on Equestria! Your Earth will be ripped along with it! At this point, my death would be unable to stop it!"

Tom picked himself back to Deliverance's feet. "You're bluffing, and even if our worlds are doomed, getting to cause your death personally is still at the top of our bucket lists."

"All our tests indicated the portals don't remain open for very long without maintaining them," Tyrone said. "You must still be activating the device."

Logan fired off his bolas snare, the metal cables of which the Kaiser's plasma sabre cut through like a sun though, well, anything. The gas from the grenades, however, wasn't particularly privy to being sliced. In fact, her corona set the gas off, blowing searing waves of flame at herself involuntarily. She shrieked and stumbled, but instead of advancing, Delta Squad retreated back downstairs on Daniel's command. The journey back down was far swifter than the one up.

"Bring the place down!" Daniel commanded. All four of them shot at the ceiling where they estimated Kaiser Celestia to be. Tyrone's heat-seeking missiles applied the most damage, and the floor over their heads broke apart, falling like grains of sand through a wide-necked egg timer. They could see Kaiser Celestia above them, scrambling to find footing, but she took to her wings and hovered above them.

"The roof! The roof! Fire!" Daniel commanded. Delta Squad resumed firing, breaking the already deteriorated structure to pieces. One large plank of shingles struck Celestia just above her tail, and though she yelped, she kept on flying until she slipped through a window.

"There's nowhere for you to run, you fat bitch!" Tom shouted after her.

She would have found the world outside a dismal place, a very real rendering of Hell. Her castle was surrounded by giant flames, and the skies were choked with smoke. She must have wondered how this could have occurred without her noticing. Plunging herself into nihilism had given Delta Squad time to make their preparations. Because of the sun's descent, the land was drying out quickly, and Delta Squad had lit up the castle grounds so that every tree and bush burned, and no blade of grass remained un-torched. She coughed and sputtered. She did not have a Goliath to wear. She had to breathe in the murky, inhospitable atmosphere of her dying homeland. She flew back into the castle on its first floor and glared daggers at her sworn enemies.

"I always hoped to meet Delta Squad since they killed my prize pupil. She studied far too much, but I had always hoped to turn her away from the pursuit of intellectualism over to partying and twerking. I never truly thought you would survive this far."

Daniel laughed. "Know what I cannot believe? That after all this time, defeating the supreme villain of them all will be this *easy!* We may have been fighting you for years, and this battle may have gone on for hours, and you may have finally managed to slay in cold blood our two best friends, but now that it has finally come down to who will send who to a puddle of their own blood, you are weak! You see the difference between us now? I've learned a lesson that a leader believes in his friends, but a tyrant is powerless without her peons!"

As Daniel spoke, Equestria rumbled harder than ever. This time, the rumbling wasn't stopping. It shifted in severity from low to high, but they were now aware of its constant presence. Pillars and tapestries fell. Stairwells caved in on themselves, and a sinkhole

opened up at the far end of the entrance hall just before the exit. Whatever was jostling around under the ground triggered some kind of mechanism within the castle. The floor slid open around where Delta Squad was standing. One of the stone slabs collapsed inward, but it was nudged aside by a rising, rotating obstacle. Clockwork gears could be heard as a spherical sculpture arose from the floor. Spinning around it like orbiting planets were smaller spheres on stone arms that bore diamond-shaped insignias on them.

"What? What is this?" Kaiser Celestia took a step or two back.

Daniel didn't know. He didn't care. "It is your castle, is it not? Who cares? Now die! There will be no time for you to prepare!" He said that, but he still wasn't certain what they could do next. The castle was almost demolished. They could try to bring down the walls next and smother her in smoke, but he wondered how much of a fight she still had to put up.

Then the smaller spheres of the weird pedestal emanated light without any discernible source. Still focusing on Kaiser Celestia more than some gimmicky bit of uninspired decor, Delta Squad stood side-by-side to face down the wicked Kaiser. A strange thing happened then. To either side of them, they were certain they could see some mirages in the vein of the visages of their fallen comrades, Irish and Nick. Their friends were without their Goliaths, but smiling proudly as if bidding them adieu after a peaceful visit many years ahead of themselves. Perhaps it was the light of the sun refracting strangely through the atmosphere, but Daniel was sure he could see a prism of colours connecting them and the Kaiser.

"The elements! How could humans gather them? You're not of Equestria! Oh, but we were one once!" She swept head from right to left as her horn glowed iridescently. A giant spark flung across where Delta Squad stood. A second later, a blaze of fire crossed them, blowing against their metal shells, but did no damage. She swept her head from left to right, sending another such leading spark that was tailed by a similar wake of solar fire. It seemed scalding, deathly temperatures could not breach the equilibrium of the marines standing before her.

"Shut your twat, you talky cunt!" Tom raised his sniper rifle and fired. Within the chamber, at high velocity, the words "Kaiser Celestia" etched themselves into his final bullet. The bullet whizzed through the chamber, expelled into the open air, and whirled as it whizzed straight for its victim. The bullet swept closer and closer and closer, and finally smashed its way through Celestia's forehead about near to where Pinkie Pie had shot her over a year ago.

Kaiser Celestia looked fazed. She went rather stiff, but there was still the spark of maddened rage keeping her awake from death. She took half a step forward before a barrage of minigun bullets tore into her flesh. Her wings were ripped to shreds, sending bloodied feathers scattering through the air. Her body lurched and toppled this way and that as the pain, the flinching, the force of the bullets jostled her around. She was no longer keeping herself aloft. The bullets exploded within her, tearing her body to sickening gashes, until she scarcely had a visible face. Her once-white fur was a mass of matted blood, and her body slumped into not so much a heap as a pile of slop.

Just as Delta Squad ceased fire and were listening to the sounds of their own heavy breaths, Equestria's rumbling reached a terrible clamour. They were starting to lose their own balance, and tried to interlock their Goliaths' arms together to keep from falling. "Looks like this is it, lads," said Logan. "It's been an honour fighting with you!"

As the sun fell on the land, everything within view was obscured by a blinding white light.

24. Just Deserts and the Death of Death

The Earth was shaking. Every last square inch of it. Floods coursed the shores, and even airborne things were rent by turbulence. The great tower at Moscow fell, and the situation aboard the Red October was death-defying. It was all Sabal Kareem could do to cling to his chair as he, like everyone else, was throttled to immobility. He could taste blood, and then the Red October gave a horrific, groaning shudder, and he was bucked headlong across the floor. "Can't we do anything to stabilize it?" he shouted.

One of the voices of an engineer he didn't know as well responded. "We're going to be torn apart!"

"Calm down, Stanson!" Sabal shouted. "First, keep your head level!"

Franz Bandelt was next to communicate to him from afar. "Sabal, check your radar!"

"Having a little trouble with that right now! What's your deal?"

"It's only a gravitational anomaly. Something's coming through that portal and crash-landing somewhere! We've got to track it!"

"Can't we close that portal using our own device?" Sabal asked. "We could cancel them out, or rip a hole in the time continuum or whatever the hell it is! I don't care!"

"Ha ha ha, don't be silly, sir. This isn't science fiction."

There was some kind of scraping sensation. The reverberations became much faster, almost like the whir of an enormous band saw. Sabal could actually feel his teeth rattling in his mouth and the blood rushing to his head. This was it. He could already feel the strain of the great ship ready to be torn apart.

Then everything stopped. The ship still groaned, but was more or less levelled out. There was a heave as whoever was in engineering fought to bring the ship back into a rising status. Sabal's heart was still pounding as hard as the ship had been quaking, and his stomach was still doing flips. He could hear the reports of casualties coming in from all over the vessel. Just when he was picking himself back up into his seat to steel his confidence for the aftermath, or whatever new dangers ahead this reckoning might have signalled, Franz chimed in again over the radio communicator.

"You boys alright over there?" he asked. Without pausing for an answer, he added, "Now would be a good time to pick up that object I traced."

Though it was the last concern on his mind just then, Sabal dispatched a contingency of marines and scientists to Cannes, France. There, after much searching downtown, Sabal and Franz found themselves standing outside the Eglise Notre-Dame de Bon Boyage, basically a French stone church. Franz crossed his arms gleefully over his large automatic rifle which hung over his shoulder.

"What're you smiling about?" Sabal asked.

"I may be a scientist, but I'm a soldier first. What'd you think I did in the Viet Cong? Build robots? Heh heh. Look." After his unhelpful bon mot, he pointed toward the circular window toward the top of the front of the building.

Sabal looked at it. It had been smashed through. "Uh, yeah, there are a lot of broken windows. Ponies love their Kristallnacht."

Franz shook his head. "Haven't you kept up to date on your French architecture? This building wasn't damaged in the French raids. Let's have a look." Franz jogged inside as though he weren't over sixty years old, and Sabal followed him.

He didn't need another smart aleck remark from Franz to find what they'd come to see. There, smouldering in the centre aisle of the church, its fist punched into the floor so it remained upright, was the empty left arm of Mercy Kill.

JUST DESERTS AND THE DEATH OF DEATH

The rumbling stopped. There was nothing to see but white. The survivors of Delta Squad were no longer aware they were even standing. They weren't even able to discern the light itself until it dimmed to a heavenly glow. Squinting through his eyes, Daniel raised his arm in front of his face and realized that he was no longer inside Nirvana. With concentration he was able to discern that he was looking at a backdrop of space, but everything around this dark rectangle of bleary stars was horrendously bright.

The light was radiating sound that transmuted into what sounded like a heavenly chorus. From above their range of vision descended what looked like a very oblong table or desk, shared by an arced pew in which sat several very vivid figures, most of whom none of the four humans could get a very solid look at. They were bizarre and freakish in their features. One had a very wide, almost rectangular head atop a knobbly, triple-jointed neck. It had a stubby beak in the very middle of its nearly-flat head, with two equally round eyes toward the edges, and it kept clicking this beak. Its arms resembled many feathery chicken wings. Another alien had very angular eyes, a dainty, pointed nose so far as any of them could tell, and three very pointy, smiling mouths. From where its shoulders might have been jutted two limbs that appeared to end in small wheels. Another figure was incredibly shaggy, like a bad glam rock wig from last century, with the only other visible feature being several black horns that curved upwards no matter what position it tilted its body in. Still another looked like a very small figure with a large face that on second glance actually bent inwards into its head rather than the other way around, and its skin was made of some substance that didn't resemble flesh, feather, fur or scale. Toward the edge of their visible range of sight was a creature that they were certain had its bones on the outside, and a transparent skull. Another alien was a great circle of arms and hands, and at its centre were three enormous, weepy eyes and a mouth with an enormous pair of lips. Tom thought he saw an alien that appeared to have three breasts on its forehead, but he tried his best to ignore it.

Of this ensemble, the strangest figure sat in the centre and looked almost human. It was hard to tell, really, but he might have had gills. Weirder still than his comparatively mundane appearance was that Delta Squad recognized his appearance as being unsettlingly similar to a sell-out exploitation television show host named Jerry Springer. He had frizzy grey hair, a big nose, a very

lumpy, wrinkled face, and big, ugly glasses. He did, however, have a very toothy smile, and he wore a nondescript robe they had trouble making out any features on. He held out his arms joyously and greeted them.

"Congratulations."

The survivors of Delta Squad were at a loss for words.

"We are the Council of Guardians, your creators. We met with your father and with the leader of the Equestrians to announce that the last war of their species would be fought and only won when one side prevailed. Now that you have defeated all of your enemies' leaders, Equestria has absolutely no chance to stand against the Earth. Humanity has prevailed, and for it, you shall be infinitely rewarded!"

"Uh, okay?" Daniel wasn't sure what the hell he could say. He was pretty sure that wasn't it. He could feel this was some kind of momentous occasion, but he was trying to remember how he had gotten here.

"Are we dead?" asked Tyrone.

Strange, soft sounds drifted from the members of the council. Their central figure chuckled. "No, of course not. Far from it, in fact. Explanations shall come all in good time, and we will be happy to answer anything you need know about the war you have just fought.

"As I said, we are the Council of Guardians, supreme beings evolved beyond mortality to master over the fabric of the universe. We created both humans and Equestrians, and many other races as well. As each one grew, we soon had to judge their worthiness to bask in the gifts that we, their loving creators, would bestow upon them. We tried the whole creation thing. Kind of have a flair for it, really, but it was never as popular as destruction."

Anticipating another question, the man turned his unwavering smile at Logan, then at Tom. "As the heroes of the conflict, we whisked you away here. It would be a shame for such important figures to miss out on their award, and who more worthy to bring the news of victory back home?"

"What happened to Earth?" asked Logan. "Kaiser Celestia said she—"

The man cut him off with a gentle word. "It's all a bit scientific, but something like the gravimetric forces forced shut the portal, sparing Earth from a wasteful fate."

Daniel wanted to ask him something. All of Delta Squad did. His presence was intimidating on some deep-seated, intrinsic level. They could just see the cosmos behind the council, swirling at a manic pace, stars exploding and being born and collapsing and being swallowed up.

"Humanity may now ascend to immortality and need not fear death again. Your species may now be represented on the council where we exist beyond singularities and big bangs. Your age of plagues, famines and wars are over if only you should accept it."

Daniel was beginning to feel nauseous, and just as confused as the remainder of his team. Whatever was happening was happening way too fast for him to keep up, and the lights were beginning to give him a migraine. He'd just been fighting Kaiser Celestia to the death. He remembered killing her. He remembered the graviton forces of the sun falling. Then what, he was just plucked up wherever he was now? Abducted as if by some aliens?

The man answered his thoughts without them needing to be spoken. "We are aliens. Aliens made up of very many different species across this great cosmos. It's an empty, lonely universe out there, so we create species to join our council through the scientific process of evolution. Only the fittest survive. Again, congratulations—you're going home. Daniel, Thomas, Tyrone, Logan. Not to mention Nicholas and Iggy. We have plenty to explain, but you have plenty of loose ends to wrap up, and we know you're eager to return to Earth!"

This was the way in which humankind achieved immortality. Beyond our greatest defeats came our greatest reward: That no human should ever die from then on. But more on that later.

The survivors of Delta Squad found themselves deposited in the Buddhist temple in Kyrat where Daniel had gone into meditation so many months ago. They were not certain how they got there, only that the Guardians were involved and they were ecstatic to be back on their home planet. They also found their Goliaths deposited on the temple grounds, but they left those in a heap

where they were for the Human Resistance or the Red Hammer Platoon to pick up later if they so felt like it. What need could there be for them now?

"Man, I have done enough travel to last a lifetime," Tyrone said. His friends laughed. It was good to come home, and even better to have a home to come back to.

There were some loose ends, however, as the Council had told them, but Delta Squad had officially retired the moment they made contact again with the Resistance. This was a better retirement. They had all slipped away quietly before when they thought they were finished, but this time, they revelled in the festivities shared across the world. They spent over a month celebrating life, survival, victory, and comradeship. The new world Daniel had hoped for had come to fruition, with a worldwide communist government providing for the human race through Buddhist teachings. They were the ones to tie up those loose ends.

There were the remnants of the Iron Wolves Corporation still around somewhere, and their leader remained at large. It was entirely possible he hadn't even survived his flight from Kyrat, but there was no conclusive evidence to be found other than suspicious scraps from a tacky, overpriced suit that drifted onto a beach in Hawaii. In a different vein, Quan Chi, whom the Human Resistance had fought in Kyrat, was willing to give up all the secrets he knew of regarding the IWC, although he refused to remove his armour as he didn't want to be executed. When it was explained to him several times that human beings were immortal now, he still wouldn't take it off, but he wouldn't explain why not. Unfortunately, for his crimes, he had to be sentenced, and so what little remained of the Russian space program successfully exiled him to the moon. He sent back a few radio transmissions over the course of a few months, and the last anyone heard of him, he claimed he wanted to find if there really was an American flag up there.

Infrastructure had to be rebuilt, but now humanity had all the time in the world to devote. Tyrone returned to the United States which needed the most help. It was a nation of projects in dire need of revitalization even before the Equestrians invaded. He said he needed to unite all the gangs to get the work started, and that would take some doing.

Logan also parted company, saying something about wanting to find nature the way Dingo Raver once had. He departed from civilization to puruse whatever it was for which he was looking.

Daniel and Tom spent every moment they had with one another, and that is their business.

There were still some kinks to work out with it all, especially since the world had lost its training wheels and needed to relearn everything it had once known. Electricity was the hardest, but every once in a while the Red Hammer Platoon would get their heads out of their asses long enough to help out. The last black box in existence, the last portal-maker to Equestria, was used solely for the purpose of depositing all pollution into that world, just to be sure it would remain uninhabitable, although there was really no indication left if anything remained whatsoever.

It seemed there were no more chapters to write regarding humanity's enemies.

The Red Hammer Platoon, however, didn't want to stop buzzing about their triumphs, sometimes coming across almost as smug enough as though they believed it to be their sole effort through and through. These days, though, all they really sit around and do is hypothesize about the reports of what Equestria was like. They discoursed on the folly of magic, ruminated on explaining every discrepancy, and tossed about hypotheses that grew ever more philosophical by the day. Pretty soon they were merely old men with old ideas, and they too joined the world in savouring what they now had. In all their debates, they never believed the idea that infinite life could actually make people take the time to appreciate what they had. They didn't need to debate the new indestructible brains humanity had. They just had them.

The most popular activity after the final war was for people to return home. Everyone wanted to explore the world and find out just where they stood. They wanted to stare into the face of what had been robbed from them and feel at peace. They could do that now. It still seems unbelievable to think about, but they did that. Doing it just clicked.

They could pursue any hobby. They could go deep-sea diving without a suit. They could have toboggan races down Main Street. They could have it all, so long as they wanted it.

People reunited, or formed new relationships. They had children and raised families to watch them grow in peace and prosperity. Daniel's ideals of community had solidified, although he graciously turned down the offer of leadership. Multiple times. In fact, he and Tom took their dog Stud and found some cosy retreat to get away from it all. Some place out in the mountains where they could watch cable TV.

Getting Tom to speak about it took decades, which was just as well, because it took that long to track everyone down for their interviews. It took that long in most cases for them to come around. Rounding up all the notes from fallen colleagues, fellow war

reporters, missing spies and so forth was more than a hassle, I can tell you. Still, when you've got all the time in the world, nothing's out of your reach. You do everything.

Tom had never gotten over the scene. It was only a few weeks after the celebrations had died down and they'd run away together. Winter had ended. It was the first thaw of 2019. They were out running through open fields and picturesque hills with Stud, who was as energetic as he'd ever be, even with his new leg. Daniel had fallen behind, and it was the last time Tom had ever seen him truly happy.

Tom jogged back up the hill where Daniel had stopped among some red, nameless flowers. Stud was yapping at his heels and jumping up and down, but when he didn't get a response, he merely stood there, wagging his tail and gawking at them.

"What's the matter, mate?" Tom asked.

Daniel had a pained smile. "It's about time."

Tom furrowed his brow and put his hands on his hips. "Time for what? We just had lunch. Dinner's not for hours." He really had been lulled into a false sense of security.

"The Council of Guardians only granted humanity everlasting life in exchange for a human representative. Without me, humanity doesn't have its gift."

Tom shrugged in disbelief and slapped his hands against his pants. He could feel tears already welling up in his eyes. "You turned down leadership over Earth. Just turn them down, too. There's definitely several other candidates who'd wanna hang out with a bunch of weirdo aliens."

"They insist that I'm the one anointed to join the council. I won't ever be able to return to Earth. At least, not for a long, long time." Daniel could feel himself wanting to cry, too, but his tears were all dried out from the sun.

"How long a time?" Tom's voice broke. It was a struggle to get his words out past the lump in his throat.

"A *very* long time."

Neither of them said anything for a long time, but not as long a time as they both knew Daniel had to leave for. "So you're doing this for humanity?" Tom asked.

"Humanity's trials will never be done if they lose their reward now. I want you to live, Tom. I want you to live forever. I'd prefer it if you could live forever with me, but they just won't allow it."

"Well why the hell not?" Tom screamed at the open sky and at the mountains and land. Stud yelped in surprised and howled shortly. Tom knew, though. He had met the Council of Guardians just as Daniel had, and knew full well how powerful they were. They never saw what mechanism had granted humanity eternal life. The Guardians just did it, and they needed Daniel to keep doing it.

"I love you," Daniel said, his face red with emotion.

Tom wouldn't continue the rest of their story. The way he did tell it, he hugged Daniel one last time, and then just like that, Daniel was gone. To this day, he's still gone.

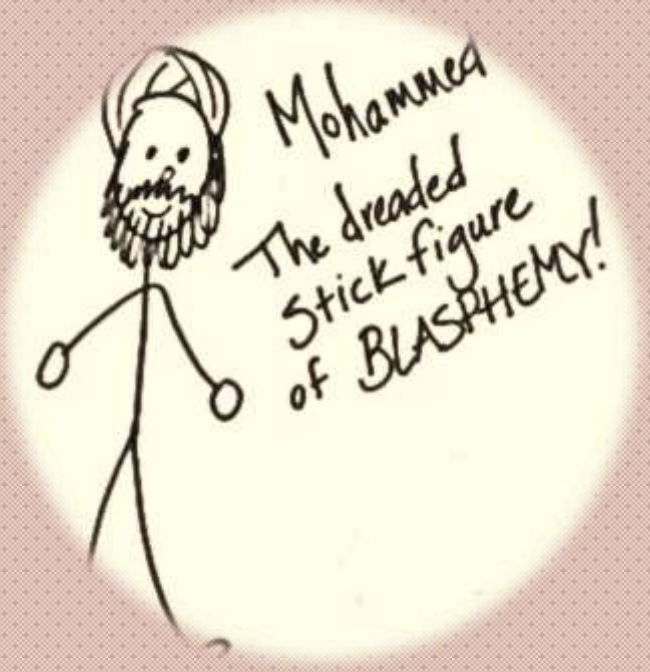
It's been one hundred years to the day now that Delta Squad returned from their mission to Equestria. We've all become a bit more thick-skinned as a result of our past ordeals. For Tyrone, the war never really ended. Although Daniel's dreams of communism have held out in the end, in the Americas, gang violence reigns supreme as factions fight to see who will rule their decimated wasteland. The last known sighting of Logan was that he retired somewhere to the Australian outback where nature's fiercest predators have reclaimed the land.

I'm stuck here pondering all the questions, and it's like the abyss that famed petulant contrarian Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote about. I'm not sure the questions aren't just coming after me instead.

Humanity may live forever now, but we're still only human. It's up to us to ensure our memories don't die off without us.

The End

Forever young.
I wanna be forever young.
Do you really wanna live forever?
Forever and ever.

\- *Alphaville*

Fonts Dafonts.com
Kansas *Carry on my Wayward Son*