

Chapter Two

On the Ground

"Who would have thought that such a beast could have existed...?"

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

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

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

It was a while before anything happened; the first leg of my journey was entirely uneventful. I spent most of that time trying to mentally come to grips with just how strange a turn this mission had taken since I discovered that archway in the island base. Throughout my career, I've always been able to recover very quickly in the face of the bizarre, but there is a great difference between a floating psychic in a gas mask reading my PlayStation memory card data, and waking up in a barn apparently owned and operated by a red horse with an apple tattoo on its ass. And after passing through the town, watching diminutive horses talk and smile and laugh and do decidedly non horse-like things, my mind was working in overtime preserving my sanity in the face of increasingly insane developments, just the latest of which was this overgrown forest where the air hung stale and heavy and damn near palpable.

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

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

The path, already faded and worn, disappeared after a while, leaving me with nothing to indicate where I was going, if indeed I was going anywhere worth going to, or if I was simply getting more and more lost in a forest that looked at times like it wanted to grind my bones to make its bread. What kind of PMC would set up shop in such a place, I wondered? The kind that wanted to avoid detection, keep its activities strictly clandestine. What better place to hide an army than in the one place you know that nobody will bother looking for one? I had to give Pegasus Wings' commander some credit on that one. Tactically, it was a good decision to choose the

scariest damn place in the world to hide a Metal Gear. The atmosphere alone acted as a deterrent, never mind whatever may have been lurking within.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The lion rebutted my taunt by unfurling a pair of leathery red wings and raising a multi-segmented, scorpion-esque tail of the same color. And by roaring. Loudly.

I may not be as familiar with mythological creatures as some of my more educated acquaintances. But I knew what a Manticore was. And that, my good reader, was a Manticore.

I was just asking myself how I could have ever missed seeing those wings and that tail when the Manticore lunged at me. I fired again, but the shot went wide right, and the beast crashed into me before I could

load another round, knocking my gun from my hand. It flew out of sight behind me as the Manticore pinned me by the shoulders, snout pressed against my face, its hot, stinking breath searing my skin. Try pressing your face against a radiator covered in rancid meat and taking a big whiff sometime; you'll get an idea of what it was like to have that thing's breath in my face. Just as it had with the pony, it bared its fangs to me, opened its mouth and dove for my head. I caught it with both hands, straining hard to keep it away from me as it snapped its jaws and shook wildly to dislodge my grip.

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

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

So, as I often did in impossible situations, I changed my tactics.

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

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

Something sharp dug into my right shoulder, just beside my neck, and a searing liquid heat suddenly spread into my body. I cried out in equal parts shock and pain, and the Manticore, taking advantage of my lapse, threw me off of its body. I rose to my feet again, shakily this time. The heat in my shoulder spread rapidly, to my arms first, then to my legs. My limbs felt like they weighed a ton each, and I struggled to hold my balance.

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

I thought about Otacon, and wondered if he'd be able to follow my instructions. I trusted him, trusted that he and Jack could get the job done without me. I was about to die, but at least the mission would be in good hands. And at least I'd make sure my last act had some meaning to it, if it meant keeping that idiot child alive.

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

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

The filly - I could barely make it out by this point, even with it standing less than a foot away - looked at the gun, then at my hand, and without further hesitation kicked it closer to me, right into my palm. I made an expression which I hoped turned out to be a smile, wrapped my fingers around the grip, rolled onto my back, cocked the gun, raised it into the air, pointed it at the Manticore and fired.

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

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

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

The response was terse. "Is she here?"

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

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

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

fresh in her mind.

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

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

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

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

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

"We had a fight," said Applejack. "Things were said. Leave it at that. I ran for Big Macintosh the second I noticed, but I couldn't find him anyplace. Figger he started early out in the orchard, took Winona with him. I didn't want to waste time findin' him that coulda been spent findin' Applebloom. He can take care of himself. She..." Applejack's voice hitched again. She coughed and cleared her throat. "Anyway."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fluttershy hiccuped.

"But I need you on my side right now," added Applejack hastily. "I got a sister runnin' loose in a big ol' world chock fulla all manner o'nasty things that'd look to hurt her. A filly's a filly; to hay with what she says." She

stepped closer to Fluttershy, smiling guardedly at the pegasus. "I need to find my sister, an' I could use an extra couple'a eyes. Think you can spare yours?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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