

Skittering Sands of the Endless Sunrise

Applejack's forehead ached as she craned her neck up from the cold stone floor. A faint glow emanated from behind her, offering a small bit of warmth to the room. She slowly picked herself up off of the floor. "R-Rarity? Pinkie Pie? You girls here?" she asked, turning to face the glow. She was greeted by a massive stone archway, inscribed with deep etchings that appeared to be ponies along its frame. At its center was a small glowing orb, and in front of it her two friends were strewn about on the floor.

Rarity shook her head, trying to shake stars from her vision before her eyes squinted to see Applejack. "I think so... though I'm more than a little shaken up after... whatever *that* was." She was barely on her hooves before Pinkie Pie hopped between the two, giggling under her breath.

"Hahaha, are you kidding Rarity? That was fun!" Pinkie's balance was wavering as she continued, "Can we go on it again?! I mean it was all like vroom fizzle whip crash! And there were all these cool colors and it was super dizzy, like, I don't think I can sta- Woah!" Pinkie fell down, still giggling as she landed on her side. "Whoops, there I go!"

Applejack tried to hold back a chuckle while she helped Pinkie up, looking over the gateway. "Well, that sure looks like what we walked into. Though I can't say if we're in the right place."

Rarity flexed her legs before trotting over to her friends. "I certainly hope so. I don't want to do that anymore than absolutely necessary. You think something designed for travel wouldn't be so jarring. And why does it have to be so dark in here?" She felt the panels of her armor flex and bend, reflecting the light of the orb to illuminate the cave, the stone archway's etchings becoming clear. "... Well that's certainly helpful."

At the top was a brilliantly etched sun and moon, with earth ponies scattered along the arch's sides. Those on the right side appeared different, with stripes drawn across their forms. Applejack looked at the high level of detail in awe before her attention was drawn to the other side of the cave. Rarity's light managed to illuminate a small tunnel leading out of the cavern. Applejack motioned for Rarity and Pinkie to follow her as she trotted towards it.

It was not long before Rarity's armor relaxed to its original position, and her own horn lit itself to accommodate. The group trekked down the tunnel for what seemed like an eternity before they saw a light at the end of the tunnel, and it wasn't the normal moonlight they had grown so accustomed to. It was daylight.

Applejack galloped forward, not wanting to believe the possibility. Rarity and Pinkie did

their best to keep up, the rough whistling of the wind outside filling their ears as they grew closer. Applejack slowed down just as she reached the tunnel's entrance and gasped as her friends finally caught up to her.

Stretched out before them was a vast desert, an ocean of sand that rose and fell like waves frozen in time. Winds whipped sand into the air across the desert's length, and in the east, they saw a sight that was both welcoming and perplexing. Frozen in its earliest moment was the sunrise, its light casting long shadows across the desert, and its form giving off enough heat to keep the desert scorching. Applejack shook her head, trying to make sense of the situation.

"This don't make a lick of sense. I didn't think this place was *that* far from Equestria..." She stepped out of the cave onto the soft sand, feeling her hooves sink in as its warmth slithered up her legs. She looked back to the others, motioning them forward. "We best get moving girls, don't wanna stay in one place too long."

"How are we even supposed to find where we're going?" Rarity asked, shaking her saddlebags lightly. "We can't just pick a direction and wander aimlessly. We only have so much we could carry with us. And I doubt we'll find another cave to rest in for miles."

Applejack rubbed her hoof lightly as she looked around, seeing nothing but sand in every direction. Her eyes squinted at a shimmer of light to the north, and a thin trail of smoke rising above it. "I reckon that's about as good a bet we're gonna get."

Pinkie hopped around in the sand, gazing in the same direction as Applejack. She giggled, "Yay, then we can start making even more friends. I wonder if zebras make good cupcakes. Do you think we'll-" Pinkie was stopped as Applejack tried to hold her back.

"Pinkie, this is serious. We ain't here for sightseein' or enjoyin' ourselves. Everypony else is countin' on us to find these zebra that are... hopefully out here." Applejack's voice sank low for a moment before she started trotting in the direction of the smoke, "Let's... just get movin'. I'm sure somethin' has to be makin' that smoke." Pinkie frowned before falling behind Applejack and Rarity.

Even with the sun on the edge of the horizon, its heat still blanketed the desert, and the three ponies' journey was not as smooth as the soft sand under their hooves. It took nearly an hour before the pillar of smoke began to grow closer, blending into the sparse clouds above their heads. Applejack let out a groan as her heavy hooves sank into the sand with each step. "Ya know... this'd be a whole lot easier... if I didn't have ta wear all this junk..."

Rarity sighed, her own armor shifting loosely along her flank. "You can say that again, and this air is so dry. Though it's still more bearable than a humid summer night in Ponyville." She felt her hooves stumble as the sand shifted underneath, a faint rumble coming from below.

“D-did either of you hear that?”

Applejack stopped while Pinkie continued to hop forward rhythmically. She held a hoof up to her ear and looked to Rarity with an eyebrow raised. “Hear what Rarity?”

“It... I’m not sure. It sounded like, well, something moving.” She started moving again as her eyes scanned the surrounding sand, its shape shifting subtly, although her eyes could barely make it out. “I-I’m sure it was nothing.”

Pinkie giggled, turning around to look at the two. “You two are worrying too much, what could there possibly be out here? It’s so empty and boring...” Pinkie’s bouncing ground to a halt as the rumbling grew, pits forming in the sand around them. Dark chitinous claws jutted up from the vortexes, four of them in total around the ponies and each one about the size of their heads. They backed themselves into the center of the circle they formed as the monstrous claws clung to the surface of the desert, pulling up the bodies they were attached to.

In seconds they were surrounded by four large creatures. Their shapes were similar to that of a scorpion, but more twisted with bits of chitin jutting out like spikes along their shells. Their tough hides were segmented, and colored a mix of black and orange, barely hiding a bright pink membrane underneath. Their claws cracked open and shut as they closed in on the girls, their tails curling, preparing to strike at a moment’s notice.

Applejack’s spear extended from her side as her front hooves bent down, prepared to charge. She turned her head just enough to look back at Pinkie and Rarity with one eye, her helmet locking into place. “Girls, I think we mighta stumbled onto some trouble here,” Applejack said, turning back to creature before her, its dark yellow eyes piercing through her.

Rarity inched back into the others, an arrow floating up from her quiver as she kept her focus on one of the grotesque scorpions. “I think that’s an understatement darling. The only question is what are we going to do now?”

Applejack kept her voice hushed, “I don’t know Rarity... We can’t sit here between all of ‘em, or we’re gonna end up even worse off.” Applejack’s mind raced trying to search for some way to turn the tide against... whatever these monsters were. She was interrupted as she heard the familiar sounds of Pinkie’s giggling.

Turning to face the noise, Applejack was greeted by the pink filly hopping onto one of the scorpion’s heads, barely avoiding its claws and tail as she landed behind it. Its stinger was left impaled through its tough hide, the beast’s body writhing in pain as its claws and legs twitched uncontrollably. Applejack turned to Rarity as the other scorpions seemed distracted, and shouted at the top of her lungs, “Rarity! Let’s move, now!” Applejack kicked up sand as she galloped out of the circle, her spear retracting as she jumped over the incapacitated bug.

Rarity followed close behind Applejack. The mirrors along her flank flexed and sent

flashes of light behind her, blinding the three that tried to give chase to them. The fillies galloped quickly through the shifting sands, hoping to at least reach the smoke, in hopes someone would be waiting there. The sounds of clattering claws and skittering legs followed behind them, and the smoke grew ever closer with each moment.

Applejack started to shout as the source of the smoke appeared in her vision, its form resembling that of a campsite, "Somepony! Anyone! We need help!" Applejack's head turned around to see Rarity and Pinkie right behind her, and their three pursuers close behind. She was astonished that they moved so swiftly, especially given how large they were. She saw a glimmer of light as Rarity let loose an arrow at the closest scorpion, the sharp tip bouncing off its rocky hide, barely leaving a scratch.

Rarity cursed under her breath. "Really?!" She tried to take aim with another arrow, her magic bending around it like a bowstring drawn taught before it sailed through the air. She heard a small squeal of pain as it embedded itself between the thick plates of one of the beasts. However, her look of pride at the accomplishment faded quickly when the scorpion's pursuit was barely hindered by the arrow. Rarity picked up her pace as she conceded that any further damage would have the same effect.

"We're... almost there... girls," Applejack stammered between heavy breaths as her armor grew heavy along her haunches, "Keep up... the pace!" It was another minute's trot before they arrived at the smoke's source: a small tent over a large clay pot, its contents smoldering as if they'd been burning for days. Applejack stopped, shouting once again, "Someone, is anyone there?!" She turned back to see their pursuers closing in, cursing under her breath as she extended her lance again.

Rarity moved behind the tent, taking aim with an arrow once more as her mirrors bent to shine the early sun at their attackers. One of them stalled from the burst of light, and another from an arrow's impact. The third's advance quickened as Applejack steadied her stance, bending forward for only a second before she leapt forward at it. Her spear twisted past its claws, impacting the shell roughly as it started to crack. The rough sound of the hide's sharp spines scrapping against the spear mixed with the clattering of the creature's jaws as its claws tried to grab Applejack.

Applejack tried to leap away, but found one of her hind legs trapped in a massive claw. Her armor creaked as the claw clamped down tightly, lifting her off the ground easily. Her other leg tried to buck at the claw, but her attempt appeared feeble, the spear retracting into her side as she shouted in pain. Rarity tried to keep the other two at bay with a spree of arrows as Pinkie dug into a saddlebag at her side. She pulled out a few small balls, which bore what looked like the shape of a green splatter on their surface.

Applejack's cries of pain stopped as the massive claw released her, her body hitting the sand hard as she looked up at the beast whose vision had been obscured by a green slime

stuck to its body. Its claws tried to wipe the substance away as its tail curled to strike Applejack, missing her as she rolled away and back to her hooves. The other two scorpions suffered a similar fate, with one's tail stuck to its back, and the other's claws meshed together.

Applejack took heavy breaths as she moved beside Pinkie, nodding to her. "T-thanks for the help there... Pinkie Pie," she said between breaths, looking back at the empty "camp" behind them. "Dang it! There's no one here, and I don't think we can just outrun... whatever these things are." Her spear extended as she looked back at Rarity and Pinkie. "I think we're gonna have to find some way to stop 'em..."

"But how?" Rarity asked, readying another arrow as a scorpion managed to free its claws from the green muck. "They don't seem to be backing down, even after all we've thrown at them." Her breathing became unsteady as her horn flickered slightly, the arrow barely reaching its target. "And... I can't keep this up forever."

"I-I know Rarity but... It's the only option we got," Applejack said, kneeling forward to prepare for another charge. "We can do this girls. I know we can."

As one of the freed scorpions began to charge forward, its tail raised, Applejack extended the lance as far as it could reach. She sprinted forward, trying to keep her aim steady before the tip impacted its shell, shattering the chitin plate as the spear sunk into the soft flesh beneath. A thick purple liquid sprayed from the wound as its body convulsed, falling limply into the sand with a cry of pain.

Applejack took a few steps back, sweat dripping from her brow onto her hot metal armor with a sizzle, the two remaining scorpions freeing themselves from the green goop. Applejack was prepared for another assault before a shout came from a hill behind the three fillies, "Please! Over here!" The voice was deep, heavy with an accent the girls could barely comprehend from so far away, and belonged to a cloaked figure at the top of the ridge.

Applejack's eyes darted between her friends and the stranger before she turned back to the scorpions slowly advancing towards them. It only took a second for her to make up her mind as she galloped towards the hill, Rarity and Pinkie soon behind her. As the figure grew closer, its striped legs became barely visible underneath the beige cloak draped on its haunches. It reached down to its neck, holding onto a length of rope with three small gourds attached.

Its head pulled back, the cowl sliding off to reveal a smooth black and white striped face with a short mane, colored a pale mix of grey and black. The zebra's head shot forward, and the rope sailed through the air. The tips of the three gourds ignited with a faint spark as they fell down towards the ground, just in front of the scorpions' path. With a crack the gourds exploded in a burst of fire, their contents aflame as they rained down on the sands, halting the scorpions' charge. Their clattering claws and screeches filled the air as their legs scampered back, turning to try and run away.

The flames continued to burn as a faint odor wafted through the wind which smelt like burnt grass mixed with stagnant sewage. The scorpions faded into the distance before burrowing down into the sands, leaving the three mares alone with the zebra. Applejack tried to suppress a cough as she breathed a sigh of relief, turning to face their "saviour". "T-thanks for the help there. Things might not ah gone so smoothly if you didn't show up."

The zebra's face was stoic and silent as he trotted past Applejack and the others, heading past the dieing flames to the camp below. Applejack looked at Rarity and Pinkie who could only offer a shrug. Her helmet retracted, along with her spear as she followed him, shouting as she tried to catch up, "Hey! I was talkin' to ya!"

He arrived at the camp as Applejack caught up, and pulled up his cloak up to reveal a slim saddlebag lined with a plethora of pockets, flasks, and satchels. He looked back to Applejack, bowing his head as he spoke again, struggling with his accent, "I'm sorry, please, this is important." He grabbed a small pouch, opening it gently before he poured the contents into the clay pot, adding to the smouldering pile within. He turned from the tent, his eyes locked on the still twitching body of the fallen scorpion as he approached it. "Kuraxis blood is volatile after leaving body. Must be preserved fast."

Applejack raised an eyebrow at him as she walked over to the corpse and noticed him take a small flask from his side, holding it up to the scorpion's oozing wound. After it was filled to the brim and its stop secured, he turned back to Applejack, bowing his head again. "Apologies, very important for research and ingredients... Name Zevra," he began before he raised his head and looked the three over.

"Nice ta meet ya Zevra," Applejack said, raising a hoof to shake Zevra's, "Name's Applejack, and this here's Rarity and Pinkie Pie." She motioned to the two as she introduced them. "Thanks again for helping us."

Zevra bowed his head once more before he scanned the desert the three fillies had come from and inspected the shattered remains of the scorpion's hide, muttering something incomprehensible under his breath. He reached back to pull out another pouch, holding it up to the girls. "Please, take one. It's necessary." Applejack seemed unsure as she looked inside the satchel, a few small green pellets scattered inside.

"Umm, what exactly is this?" she asked and pulled three from inside the pouch, handing one each to her friends. On closer inspection it smelled worse than the burning mixture he'd used to scare off the scorpions.

Zevra only repeated himself as he motioned a hoof at them, putting the satchel back on his side, "Please, it's important, eat, please." Rarity shrugged at Applejack as they ate the pellets slowly, while Pinkie had already swallowed hers whole. A bitter taste filled their mouths

as nearly all the moisture inside dried up, and left the three coughing heavily.

“W-what the?” Applejack stuttered between coughs, “What the hay was that?”

Zevra pocketed a few shattered pieces of chitin from the sand before trotting back to the camp. “Stops dehydration. Increase water retention. Necessary for conserving water,” he said, inspecting the camp to make sure the clay pot was properly stocked with enough material to keep burning. “Have to deal with dry tongue, but saves water,” he finished with a chuckle before securing the cowl of his cloak back over his mane.

Pinkie prodded her tongue lightly with a hoof, giggling. “Thif if phuni phelig...”

Applejack cleared her throat before speaking up, “Umm, r-right. Listen, we’re here looking for help and-”

“I know why you are here. I explain once we arrive at Komahra. Please, I need your trust...” Zevra turned away from Applejack as he trotted back up the hill and motioned the others to follow him. Rarity held Applejack back with a hoof, looking between her and Zevra.

“Look, Applejack... I’m really not sure this is ummm, the best choice we can make,” Rarity whispered as her eyes wavered back to Zevra making his ascent on the mound of sand. “I mean some zebra just shows up out of nowhere when we need help? And then he just happens to offer us a place to go, and some weird pills or... whatever they were.” Rarity cleared her throat with a heavy cough as she finished, trying in vain to wet her tongue.

“Rarity, we can’t just wander around here aimlessly looking for someone... And for all we know maybe this feller’s got our best interests at heart. I mean he did chase off those two... Kuh-racks-is whatchamacallits. If he wanted us gone he could have left us ta fight ‘em...” Applejack began following Zevra again as Pinkie hopped gleefully beside her. Rarity shook her head, muttering something as she begrudgingly followed them.

Their trek through the desert seemed to last an eternity as the frozen sun showed no passage of time for the three fillies and their zebra “guide”. At least that was as much a term they could use for a stranger willing to show them the way to some sign of civilization. Luckily Zevra’s promise about the pellets they had taken was correct, and despite having severely dry mouths, they had yet to feel thirsty, though Applejack still had to struggle with her stuffy suit of armor.

She let out a groan, trotted up to Zevra and tapped a hoof on his shoulder, pausing repeatedly to take breaths, “Umm, Zevra... Are we gettin’ any closer to this town of yours?”

Zevra turned his head back and offered a faint smile to Applejack. “Of course. Komahra

just over hill, promise. Please, keep moving. Kuraxxis do not stray far from Cluster, but some have been seen past border.” He pulled out a canteen from his cloak, taking a small sip before he continued forward, muttering something the fillies couldn’t understand under his breath once again.

Applejack slowed down, and was soon beside her friends once again. “So... what do you girls think?”

“That it’s hot, dry, and bright,” Pinkie said before she stopped her hopping, “Oh, you mean about Zevra... Well, he seems nice enough, and we don’t wanna be stuck with nowhere to go out here. Besides, if he is a meanie we can just defend ourselves.”

Rarity offered Pinkie a weak smile. “Hopefully we’ll just have to talk to these zebra and be out of here in no time at all.” Rarity’s smile wavered as she spoke, “Isn’t that right Applejack?”

“Uhh... Of course it is. I’m sure once we tell ‘em what we’re here for, they’ll be more than willin’ to lend a hoof. I mean it’s only a matter of time before Nightmare Moon shows up here right?” Rarity and Pinkie nodded in response before Zevra stopped in his tracks at the top of the hill.

He pulled his cowl down and looked back at the others. “We’re here,” he stated plainly as Applejack, Pinkie, and Rarity arrived at the crest of the mound of sand. Before them in the bright glow of the sunrise was a massive village, though from its size it could have been called a city, built around the trees and glimmering water at its center. A mixture of tents and tan, adobe buildings of all sizes took up the majority of the space around the gleaming central oasis.

However, the closer the ponies’ eyes drifted to the center, the more sparse the buildings and tents became, as if the oasis itself were untouched, and stood as a pristine core of the metropolis. All through the streets zebras walked as if everything were normal, and at the edge of the city they could see several citizens preparing for journeys through the desert. Zevra began his trek down the calm slope towards the city as Applejack and the others paused to take in the sight.

“This is... it’s incredible,” Rarity said as she breathed a sigh of relief at seeing civilization once again. “All of this in the middle of the desert?”

“It doesn’t sound too impossible Rarity. I mean they’ve been out here for a while,” Applejack whispered, keeping her voice low as she followed Zevra. “And they were pushed outta their homes, or at least left ‘em when Nightmare Moon came knockin’. They probably had ta make do quick.”

“I know, but,” Rarity paused to gaze over the city again. “It’s still impressive...” Their

conversations ended as they approached the bottom of the hill, a few zebras' gazes drifting from their work or preparations to the new arrivals. The on-lookers began to mutter amongst one another as the strangers continued slowly into the city. Zevra sighed as he turned back to his "guests" and tried his best to ignore the stares and hushed words.

"Please, keep moving. I promise everything is fine. They are just not... accustomed to seeing ponies." Zevra forced a chuckle as he continued, "Very, well, odd sight." Zevra closed his eyes for a moment before he looked forward again.

The streets of the city itself were well-maintained, and there was plenty of activity, although it faded quickly as the ponies grew close. It wasn't long before their path was blocked by a large crowd, just as they were within a stone's throw of the oasis. The mass of zebra parted as two guards stepped forward, armed with spears across their flanks and rough chitinous armor on their sides. With them was an aged stallion, a wound underneath his eye and his mane shaved completely off.

His voice was rough as he spoke in a language the three mares couldn't comprehend, his eyes locked on Zevra. The only words they could truly grasp were Zevra's name, and the word "pony", though it was uttered with some hatred. Zevra's response was filled with fervor, though it was similarly incomprehensible, except for one new word: Zecora. The conversation intensified with each speaker's turn, Zevra suddenly stopped at a shout from the stallion.

His stoic gaze shifted to the three strangers before he finally spoke, laboring to form his words correctly as his rough voice became deeper, "I will speak like this, so you can understand. You are not welcome, never. Leave, now, or you will be removed."

Applejack stepped forward, mouth agape in confusion for a moment. "W-what are you talkin' about? We haven't even done anything!"

"And that is the way it will stay," he stated plainly, "I will not risk peace in the Chieftain's absence, not now."

Zevra pushed Applejack to the side as she was about to speak, and shouted, "Baeloc! They are here to help us, the Zecora told me-"

"*The* Zecora has told you nothing Zevra, and has said nothing of importance to the Chief." Baeloc's gaze shifted back to the ponies as he continued, "And if you think I'm going to believe this rabbl-"

"They came from the Cluster!" Zevra shouted. The bickering within the crowd quieted as Baeloc shook his head. He began to speak before Zevra interrupted him again, "They couldn't have come from Equestria! No one could have trekked across the desert, around every village, every patrol, and somehow ended up there. They couldn't have even survived coming from the

end of the desert!" His shouting stopped as he glanced back at the three mares, "I-I don't know how they came here, but they are not here to hurt us."

"That's right," Applejack said as she stepped forward again, "We're here lookin' for your help. We're from the Wilds near Equestria, where ponies are tryin' to stop Nightmare Moon, the reason that sun is hangin' there in the sky."

"And the reason that you lost your lands," Rarity stated, joining Applejack. "It's only a matter of time before she wants more."

"Nothing more than empty words," Baeloc responded, spitting into the sand. "Zevra... you can take your *guests* with you... No one else is to offer them aid until the Chieftain has returned." He repeated himself in the strange tongue the ponies couldn't understand, and the crowd dissolved at his urging. He began to trot back to the oasis, the two guards at his side joining him as Zevra was left alone in the streets with the three ponies.

Zevra sighed and turned to face them. "... I am sorry, that you received this kind of greeting... Please follow me, I can explain more when we are safe." He began to trot through the maze of streets with the three strangers at his back.

Zevra's path was jagged as he twisted through streets and around buildings, but the three mares managed to keep up with him. It was nearly a half hour's trot before they arrived at a quaint hovel, shaped like a series of domes and built out of the same tan adobe as its counterparts. However, its design seemed more planned and intricate, rather than begin thrown together simply at a moment's notice. Zevra pulled a green and blue curtain that served at the home's door away before he led his guests inside.

Applejack was surprised when she and her friends were greeted not by the same scalding heat they had felt outside, but a cool breeze flowing just inside the doorway. They found themselves inside of a large central room, with a few small curtained doorways leading to the rest of the building. All around they could see various flasks, bottles, and gourds filled with substances they couldn't identify, or that were simply labeled in a way they couldn't understand, seated on shelves built into the walls.

Across a few similar shelves near the entrance were several saddlebags, already packed to the brim with supplies for future journeys or the fruits of past ones. One bag in particular was stuffed with shards of a material that looked very similar to the chunk of chitin Zevra had taken from the fallen scorpion in the desert. At the center of the room was a large wooden table and a bed surrounded by notes and scribbles littered on the floor.

Zevra placed his saddlebags onto a shelf before trotting to a doorway, motioning his guests to sit. "Please, make yourselves at home. I apologize it not much." The girls all took a

seat around the table in the center of the room. Applejack flexed her hooves, sand falling out of the loose plates of armor and forming a small pile on the hard floor.

Rarity let out a calm sigh as she did the same, though her pile did not seem so substantial. "I suppose it's from one mess to another then?"

"'Fraid so," Applejack responded, hearing the clash of pots from the doorway Zevra had taken. She made sure to keep her voice low as she continued, "What do y'all make of this? I mean with how that Baeloc guy was treatin' us?"

Rarity glanced at a few of the scribbles strewn about the table. "I don't really know darling. Considering everything that might of happened to them, maybe they have the right. We barely know anything about them other than they left their homes so long ago... Maybe we should ask him."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Applejack replied with a bit of irritation. "I mean he's willin' to give us help like this, maybe we shouldn't be a bother by jumpin' down his throat with questions so soon."

"But we can't just be clueless," Rarity whispered as she glanced around the room. "Besides, he said he'd tell us what was going on, so it only makes sense for us to ask."

Their conversation drew to an abrupt close as Zevra returned to the room, carrying a small teapot with four cups hanging from it spout. He laid them out, carefully filling them before he took a seat across from the three mares. After taking a short sip he smiled. "Please, do not be shy. I understand that things may be... confusing for you."

Applejack looked at her friends before turning to Zevra as she spoke, "How exactly... did y'all get out here? I mean we know that zebras left their home a long time ago and..."

"Yes... My ancestors decided to abandon our homelands when your... Queen decided that it was her grasp and right. Their hope was to avoid unwanted bloodshed, and so we fled across the mountains of the east, and back to the site the first zebra trotted upon."

"Wait," Rarity interjected, "But Savanra was your people's homeland, wasn't it?"

"For the longest time, yes. However, our elders and ancestors speak of a time long before, when zebras first walk on the earth in a vast paradise. It was Komahra: "origin" in our tongue. For hundred of years zebra lived in their paradise away from the rest of the world. However, our race was sinful in the paradise, and did not share bounty with others, and the land was stricken by calamity. All of Komahra began to wither and die, and in its place there was only lifeless sand."

Zevra took another sip before he continued, "As our people left the shifting sands,

pockets of land were left unharmed to remind us and all of our mistakes. Luckily, the vast grasslands of Savanra, spared from the catastrophes in Komahra by the mountains that separated them, were plentiful enough to support us. And so it was there that we stayed, until *she* came.”

“So y’all have just been livin’ out here since then?” Applejack asked, staring at the cup of tea in front of her, deep in thought.

“Yes. Lucky, very little here that she wants,” Zevra said with a chuckle. “No zebra has seen pony for... nearly five hundred years. Not even a single one.”

“But... how are you so calm about us?” Pinkie asked. “And why was everyone else so mean to us back there?”

“... They fear all of you are like her. As for me... I have heard words that... convinced me when you arrived.”

“What do you mean?” Rarity asked, her cup of tea hovering up as she took a sip.

“... From one connected to our ancestors: a Zecora.”

“About that,” Applejack interrupted, looking up from her cup, “Maybe we... need to be a little honest with ya bout something Zev. Ya see...” She looked nervously at her friends as she paused. She waited for a timid nod from each of them before continuing, “We’re... not really from here... or the Equestria that tried ta take your land...”

“I... part assumed such,” Zevra said, letting Applejack continue.

“We’re from a long time ago... back when y’all lived in Savanra, and Princess Celestia and Princess Luna ruled together.”

“We don’t really know how exactly,” Rarity began, “But we woke up in the Everfree Wilds near Equestria nearly a month ago. We’re trying to help fix what we couldn’t stop, and we need your people’s help.”

Applejack nodded to Rarity before she turned back to Zevra, standing on her hooves. “Ya see, we knew a Zecora a long time ago, who was visitin’ a town called Ponyville.”

“You... knew a Zecora? The Zecora haven’t left our tribes in... as long as you say.” Zevra looked down, shaking his head from side to side. “No, that’s... that’s impossible. How could you have... come here, so much later?”

“We don’t know, but you two talked about *the* Zecora, and *a* Zecora... We always

assumed it was her name, but-" Applejack frowned as she adjusted her hat idly for a moment.

"Yes, it is title. Zecora are... shaman, connected to ancestors. You no doubt heard her use Modra, yes?"

"Mah-dra?" Pinkie asked after slurping down the last of her tea suddenly. "What's that?"

"It is... roughly means "rhythm". Ancestors, spirits from beyond are in... tempest, like sand storm." Zevra tried to motion with his hooves in an attempt to explain. "Very, very rough, and wild... chaotic. So many voice speak out and cannot be heard. Zecora and Modra are like... a drum, a beat in beyond. By offering beat, rhythm to spirits, ancestors can come forth with wisdom, knowledge, history..."

Applejack quirked an eyebrow, tapping a hoof against her chin. "I was, well, always kinda wonderin' why she did that..."

"It is very, very difficult skill to learn. Takes many year to master, and often becomes habit..."

"And you said a Zecora told you about us coming? Like a prophecy?" Rarity asked. Zevra returned a nod, Rarity rubbing a hoof along her chin in response. "But, didn't Baeloc say something about not '*the* Zecora'? What exactly did he mean?"

"The Zecora are few. There is only one to tribe. However, new Zecora are trained as current is close to... death." Zevra cleared his throat before he continued, "I did not hear about you from the current Zecora. The next Zecora told me, in trance. My sister: Avira."

Applejack started to speak up, but was interrupted as Zevra jumped up to his hooves, looking past the three mares. He started shouting, although they couldn't understand him as he trotted around the table and towards a doorway. As the girls turned to follow them, they saw a small filly rubbing a hoof idly across her eyes. Her voice sounded weak as she spoke, and her legs seemed barely able to hold herself up.

Zevra held a hoof against her forehead as he spoke. The filly looked at the three ponies with a frown before she looked back to Zevra, nodding as she replied. With a cough, the filly turned back into the room and vanished from sight.

Zevra sighed as he trotted back to the table. "I'm sorry... Avira has been ill for a few days. She should be fine with rest. Now, if you don't mind, I have few questions for you."

"Umm, fire away partner," Applejack said with a small smile.

Zevra walked over to the front door, grabbing the pieces of chitin he'd pocketed in the

desert and set them down on the table. "How did you do this?"

"What do you mean?" Applejack asked with an eyebrow raised.

"Kuraxxis shell is hard. Very, very hard. Zebra weapons are strong, but it takes many strikes to pierce, or great force. How did you break it?"

"Well, we were kinda distracted durin' the fightin', but... I think it was cracking after one hit from my lance." Applejack extended the spear from her side, but it was much shorter than it usually was.

Rarity nodded, an arrow hovering out from her quiver. "And I suppose a few of these, though I'm not sure how much I really put behind them..."

Zevra trotted over to inspect the two objects, muttering to himself, "I see, I see... This material is... it has to be very strong. Kuraxxis shells are hard, some more than others but..."

"Some? What do you mean?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"Kuraxxis is general term... Ones you saw are most common that we see on surface, but there are many others." Zevra trotted over to a book shelf across the room, pulled out a leather-bound manual and placed it on the table. It was stuffed with several loose papers that nearly went flying as Zevra flipped it open. His hoof pointed to four pictures spread across two pages. One seemed close to the giant scorpions they had encountered in the desert, but the other three resembled a wasp, beetle, and a centipede.

"Kuraxxis are like... ponies. There are earth ponies, unicorn, pegasi. Kuraxxis all have similar shell, organs. At the core they are the same, but structure, form, purpose changes. Designed for purpose."

"So you're saying there are more of these... *things*?" Rarity asked, motioning a hoof at the journal with a look of disgust. "How many are there?"

"We don't know entirely. In the hundred years we have seen them, dealt with them, only three or four. I think however they may be connected to something our people have dealt with before. Have you heard of parasprite?"

"Yeah, we had to deal with 'em once in Ponyville. Nasty little buggers," Applejack said.

"I found notes from before zebra left Savanra." He pulled a few small papers from the journal that appeared to be dissection notes of a parasprite. He pointed to several sections of it and the other drawings as he spoke, "Wing structure similar to wasp, eye patterns to beetle. I think parasprite may have been... separated from Kuraxxis and evolved on own, rather than with

hive.”

Applejack and Rarity tried to follow Zevra’s explanations before he closed the journal. “For the longest time we never had any problems here. Some zebras forming bandit groups or causing minor trouble yes, but... Then one day out of nowhere they showed up. It started with a caravan and then villages, cities destroyed as zebra fled further from the start of attacks. We found they never crossed a line, the border you saw, marked as warning. We call the first location the ‘Cluster’: a gnarled structure that jutted from the sands. No zebra has gone past the border enough to see it since the attacks began.”

“So... you said we came from there?” Rarity asked, looking up from the closed journal. “And this *Cluster* is... away from Equestria, enough that you think we didn’t come from there?”

“Yes... not to mention that so many others would have seen you first. If you are here... you came here to help us, yes?”

“Well, not exactly... We need your help in Equestria, your people’s help,” Applejack said as she trotted around the table to Zevra.

“I’m afraid my people will not aid you... Not when Kuraxxis still pose a threat, and not while the history of our exodus is in their mind.” Zevra sighed, trotting over to a few flasks on a shelf, idly checking their contents. “I do not think you will find what you were looking for.”

Applejack quickly followed Zevra as Rarity and Pinkie got up to follow her. “Zevra, there has to be someone we can talk to. Your chieftain or another village, someone.”

“Everyone else will treat you the same as the others. Baeloc gave me the benefit to let you stay because of where you came from... but I doubt that will go ver- Avira!” Zevra stopped as he looked behind the girls, moving around them to the small filly, once again in the doorway. “Avira, I told you to stay in be-”

“Time is short, the claws draw near. They seek the pillar while their shells sow fear,” Avira said, her eyes distant and unfocused as her legs shook. “The more important battle must be won, but first the deeds at origins must be done.”

Zevra tried to wave a hoof at the filly before he grabbed her lightly, the three mares stepping up behind him. “Avira, Avira snap out of it!”

“The harmony of old must crush this threat before all of the world by darkness is beset.” Avira’s eyes became focused only for a moment as she looked at Applejack and her companions. “Defend the pillar, defend us all, or everything you love will fall.” Avira’s body became limp as she fell into Zevra’s embrace, her breathing rapid and jagged.

Applejack, Rarity, and Pinkie Pie looked between one another with confusion and concern, just as a loud horn sounded through the air, and the calm of Komahra's streets was replaced by a stampede of hooves and screams of horror.

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