

Friendship is Mercenaries

[Chapter Thirteen: Haunted Axe Droppings](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: The Stare Mk. II](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Inventor of the Key](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Chapter Thirteen: Haunted Axe Droppings

"Oh...dog bollocks. I wasn't expecting that."

"Heads heads heads!"

"Calm yourself, my friend. I have a Plan B."

"Headheadheadheadhead?"

"Relax. I know what I'm doing."

"Oh, stop whining! You're an axe!"

"Heads heads heads!"

"We need to chop down a tree to block the path so we can slow these ponies down!"

"Headsheadsheadsheadsheads!"

"We need a lot of time to set up my trap! We have to slow them down somehow! Now, how did that infuriatingly quick fellow put it? Ah, yes... Suck it up, you freaking wuss!"

Chop.

Chop.

Chop.

"You have got to be kidding me. You cut down a tree half an hour ago, and now you won't cut two bloody ropes?!"

"Heads heads heads..."

"You should consider yourself lucky we made it across that bridge alive!"

"Head head head head."

"You know what I mean!"

"Head...headsheadsheads..."

"We'll get him. Don't worry. I just need more time than I've been given to set up my ambush. And chopping down the rope bridge across this chasm is the only way to do it. Without the bridge, the ponies chasing us will be forced to go around. It'll buy us at least half an hour. Now will you *please* stop being a baby and sharpen yourself

again?!”

“Head, headsheadsheads...”

“...Fine. I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but I *do* know how to perform an exorcism.”

“Headsheadsheads?!”

“Watch me.”

Shing.

“Thank you! Honestly...”

“I think we’ve lost them...”

“Heads heads?”

“That’s not what I meant. I mean we’ll have enough time now.”

“Headheadheadheadhead!”

“Yes, I know. Now...in order for this to work...I need Haunted Metal.”

“Head?!”

“I knew you were going to say that.”

“Headsheadsheadsheadsheads! HEADS!”

“I know, I know. It’ll be hard for you. We’re both running low on energy here. But I don’t need the full six. Just give me one ingot, and we should be okay. You can manage one, can’t you?”

“...Heads...headsheadsheadsheads.”

“Yes, we likely will need to acquire more energy after this. I’ll handle it.”

“Headsheadsheads, head?”

“Trust me—it’ll work.”

“...Heads...”

“I will not tolerate any more of your whining today!”

“Headsheadsheads...”

“That’s it...that’s it...You’re doing great, don’t worry...”

The Soldier and his procession of ponies had been following the tracks of the monster they were tracking for around two hours now. Aside from a tree having fallen onto the path and a rope bridge having mysteriously fallen, the journey had been uneventful. Subsequently, the team had amused themselves by telling stories.

"Wait...wait, it gets better!" Rarity said, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. "Once everyone finally showed up to rescue me, the Diamond Dogs *demand*ed they take me back...and they offered the gems as payment!" The Soldier could barely walk straight, he was laughing so hard.

"All of them?!" he choked out in between wheezes of laughter.

"Every last one!"

"Oh, my God..." the Soldier said, guffawing heartily. "Either those dogs are the worst kidnappers ever, or you're the worst hostage ever! ...I mean that as a compliment!"

"Yes, I got that," Rarity confirmed, finally slowing her laughter. The Soldier let out a huge sigh of content.

"Ah...You girls tell the funniest stories," he finally said, clearing his throat.

"Thank you, Salvo," Rarity said, smiling pleasantly.

"Hey, what's this?" Rainbow Dash suddenly said, landing on the ground ahead of the group and leaning in. The Soldier quickened his pace to get a closer look at whatever Dash had found.

"What've you got there, missy?" he said, trotting up beside her.

"I'm not sure..." Dash said. The Soldier bent down, trying to get a closer look at the object. It appeared to be a bar of some kind of purple metal. Soon enough, the entire herd had gathered around to look.

"What is that?" Spike asked nervously from his perch atop Twilight's back.

"I think it's Haunted Metal," the Soldier said, nudging the bar gently with his nose.

"Haunted metal? That's just silly!" Pinkie chirped cheerfully, giggling softly to herself.

"Maybe," the Soldier said dismissively. "But it means we're getting close. The Horsemann's axe is made out of this stuff. The metal's haunted, so a spirit resides within the blade. And like I said earlier, the spirit needs to feed by killing things. Once it's well-fed, it'll excrete this stuff."

"So we're basically lookin' at haunted axe droppin's here?" Applejack said, leaning back a bit.

"Basically, yeah," the Soldier said. Everyone reared back this time.

"Ewww!" Rarity cried out.

"It's disgusting, I know. But it means he's definitely been this way."

"Wait..." Fluttershy said, looking around the clearing. "Where did the tracks go?" There was a brief silence as the herd looked around the clearing they'd found themselves in, trying to find the footprints of the creature they'd been following.

"Where'd they go?" Rarity said. "They just stop here!"

"The creature can't teleport, can it?" Twilight asked, nervously.

"No...it can't," the Soldier said, just as nervous. "If this is where the tracks end, then...it must...still...be here..." Suddenly, the truth of the situation dawned on the Soldier.

"Oh...shit," he murmured. A split second later, before anypony had time to react, the area around them was suddenly engulfed in purple flame. The seven ponies (and Spike) were flung backwards by some unseen force. The sound of eerie organ music, accompanied by a low, sinister cackling, filled the air. The Soldier's head slammed against a tree, and he fell to the ground, dazed.

Oh, shit! he thought to himself, scrambling to his hooves. *Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit! We've got to get out of here!* Suddenly, he realized that nothing was happening. He didn't hear any heavy footsteps, cries of horror or pain, or the sound of blood spurting from a headless neck. He looked up to where he'd seen the Haunted Metal. He saw something there that he had never expected to see.

As he'd expected, a skeletal giant clad in decaying black cloth stood in the center of the clearing. It clutched a silver axe with a malevolent grinning face carved into its blade in its gloved hands, and a jack-o-lantern with a nearly burnt-out, dimly lit candle rested on its neck where its head should have been. That was what he'd expected to see, and nothing was unusual about it. What he hadn't expected to see was this: in the middle of rising out of the ground ominously, the creature's heavy leather boot had gotten stuck.

"You've got to be bloody kidding me!" A deep, raspy voice emanated from the pumpkin atop the creature's head. The pumpkin did not alter its facial expression at all as the creature spoke, which made sense, but it was still a little disturbing to see a monster talking without moving its mouth. Surprisingly enough, the creature's voice appeared to possess a Cockney British accent.

"Heads, heads, heads!" a second voice stage-whispered. This voice seemed to have come from the axe, but there was no surprise about that.

"Well, I'm used to rising out of control points!" the British monster yelled at its weapon, its mouth still not moving as it spoke. "They have smooth, uniform metal surfaces! Excuse me if I'm not that good at rising out of soil!"

"Headheadheadheadhead! Heads heads heads!" the axe whispered, exasperation clear in its voice.

"Now that was just uncalled for!" the monster shot back, trying unsuccessfully to tug its leg out of the ground.

"Heads heads! HEAD!"

"I'm trying, for God's sake!" With one final mighty tug, the monster freed its boot from the ground. "Ah! Finally!" Relieved, the creature looked around the clearing. The seven ponies and one dragon he'd displaced were scattered around it. They'd been thrown against various trees by his sudden rising, but they had all gotten to their

feet now, and were staring at him oddly.

“...Oh, you’re all still here?” the monster said, looking around the clearing. “You all decided to not run from the menacing undead monster rising up out of the ground, and instead you all just...stayed there and waited for me to free myself? ...Well, that was nice of you.”

“Heads heads heads heads...”

“Alright, he’s got a point there. It was bloody stupid, but it was nice of you. Now, where were we...?”

“SCATTER!” the Soldier bellowed. He took off into the forest, fleeing for his life. The rest of the ponies charged off in different directions, screaming in terror.

“YOU CAN’T RUN FROM ME!” the monster screamed, charging into the woods after Rarity. “MY BLADE THIRSTS FOR YOUR BLOOD!”

The Soldier threw himself behind a nearby tree, hoping the Horsemann wouldn’t find him.

“Salvo! What is going on?!” demanded a terrified voice from his right. The Soldier whipped his head around to look. Twilight was hiding behind a different tree nearby, and Spike was clinging to her back in terror.

“Keep your voice down! He wants to kill us!” the Soldier stage-whispered back.

“What’s going to happen to us?” Spike asked softly, whimpering in fear.

“I think he’s going after Rarity right now,” the Soldier whispered. “Rarity is ‘it,’ as we used to say. He won’t stop chasing her until he’s killed her. And that’s very bad, I know, but for what it’s worth, he won’t kill us unless we get between him and Rarity.”

“We’ve got to stop him!” Spike whispered, horrorstruck.

“Well, we can’t reason with him at this point, so that’s out,” the Soldier said, placing a thoughtful hoof on his chin. “If we want to stop him, we’ve either got to prove to him that we’re more powerful than he is or kill him.”

“We can’t kill him!” Twilight said. “What if you can’t get back to your reality without him?”

“You’re right...” the Soldier muttered to himself. “Summoning all those pumpkins must’ve seriously lowered his energy levels. If we killed him, he might not be able to re-form, and then...I’d be trapped here.” The Soldier shuddered at the prospect. “We’ll have to prove we’re stronger than he is, then.”

“How?” Twilight asked.

“We need to make it scared of us...Scared that we *will* kill it.” The Soldier suddenly felt a light bulb go off in his head.

“I’ve got an idea...” he said slowly, “but I’m going to need a distraction.”

Chapter Fourteen: The Stare Mk. II

The axe thudded into the ground once more, coming within inches of Rarity's tail. Rarity cried out in terror and quickened her pace. The Horsemann let out an angry snarl and yanked his axe out of the ground.

"Damn it, hold still!" he shouted.

"I don't think so, filthy beast!" Rarity shouted back. She didn't break stride. She was working her way around in a circle, back towards the clearing. Maybe in the clearing, she thought, she could have a better chance at disabling this thing. Rarity glanced back over her shoulder. For some reason, it was crouching down and spreading its arms out wide. Rarity didn't have a clue what it was doing.

An instant later, she found out.

"BOO!"

Any semblance of rational thought fled from Rarity's mind, replaced with sheer terror. Against her will, Rarity let out a terrified "waHAAH!" Her legs locked up beneath her. Carried forward by her momentum, she tumbled forward. She rolled along the ground once and wound up on her back. This decidedly slapstick-esque scene was accompanied by the sound of a goat bleating.

"Well, that worked better than I thought it would!" the Horsemann shouted. As it spoke, he charged up to the prone unicorn. He raised his axe high into the air, preparing to bring it down on Rarity's neck...

...and his leg gave out. His right knee shot forward and he lost its balance, falling to his hands and knees. His axe slipped out of his hand and skidded away to somewhere unseen.

"Rarity, run!" Rarity scrambled to her hooves and tried to gallop away. Her legs were still locked up, however, and she only moved in an awkward shuffling gait. The Horsemann tried to get to his feet, but a second blow to the back of its leg knocked him fully to the ground. And before he knew what was happening, something was on his back.

"Now what?!" the Horsemann bellowed as he leapt to his feet.

"YEE-HAW!" came the response. Applejack had climbed onto the Horsemann's back and was clutching on for dear life. Not only was she not knocked off by his leap to its feet, she was still holding on. The Horsemann was being ridden by a horse.

"Get off me!" he bellowed, stumbling blindly around the dark forest. The Horsemann stumbled around in a rough circle for a few moments, crashing into trees in a manner that would've been very painful if he had any nerve endings left. "This isn't right, having this thing on me!" Suddenly, the Horsemann dove to the ground.

"Aw, po—" was all Applejack had time to say before the Horsemann rolled over. When he completed a full revolution, he leapt to his feet one more time. Applejack had been removed rather forcibly from his back, and was lying dazed on the forest floor. The faint sound of birds tweeting could be heard as Applejack's eyes rotated quickly in

opposite directions.

"Headtaker! Where'd you run off to?" the Horsemann shouted.

"*Head, heads!*" shouted his axe. The Horsemann rushed over to the place where the voice had come from, and sure enough, his axe was lying there on the ground. The Horsemann quickly bent down, scooped the weapon up, and charged back over to Applejack.

"Any last words, farmgirl?" snarled the Horsemann, raising his axe into the air once more.

"Look out behind ya," responded Applejack. An instant later, another blow to the Horsemann's leg was delivered. The Horsemann only took a knee this time.

"Take that, you ruffian!" shouted Rarity from behind him. The Horsemann leapt to his feet and slashed blindly at the ground behind him. Rarity only just managed to leap out of the way in time.

"Confound you ponies and your agility!" shouted the Horsemann, pulling his axe out of the ground once more. Suddenly, a massive blow connected to the side of his makeshift head, not only knocking him off his feet but sending him flying. He landed on his stomach several feet away from the point of impact.

"Take that, jerk!" shouted Rainbow Dash from somewhere above him. The Horsemann snarled and leapt to its feet.

"Oh, bloody hell...no!" he snarled at his assailant. "I have much easier targets to attend to right now. You ponies are hard enough to hit—I'm not going after one with wings!"

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash shouted indignantly, "'cause you're a coward! Don't wanna take on the fastest flier in Equestria, ya rotten murdering punk?!"

"MY HEAD IS NOT ROTTEN! YOU TAKE THAT BACK!" With that, Dash shot into the forest, and the Horsemann charged after her. There was a brief silence. Applejack remained, dazed, on the forest floor. Rarity, unconcerned with the Horsemann now, charged over to her.

"Applejack! Are you alright?" she said, concerned.

"Ah'm fine," Applejack said, slowly getting to her hooves. "Ah'll walk it off."

"Commendable," said a sudden male voice from the dark forest. An instant later, the Soldier shot out of the undergrowth, followed closely by Twilight and Spike.

"Salvo!" Applejack cried, shocked. "How long've y'all been there?"

"Ever since the Horsemann rolled you," responded the Soldier. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Twilight, Spike and I have to chase this guy. We lost a good chance just now, and we've gotta get after this guy quick, before he gets Dash. Let's go, Twilight!" The two ponies took off after the Horsemann, Spike still clutching Twilight's mane for dear life.

"Oh, and before I forget," the Soldier said as he vanished into the woods, "good work, you two!"

"Hold...still...you...coward!" the Horsemann cried out, punctuating each word with a swing of his mighty axe.

"You can't catch me!" Dash sang, flying around the creature's head.

"I'm going to slaughter you!" the Horsemann shouted, swinging his axe at the spot where Rainbow Dash had been moments before.

"Not unless you can catch the fastest flier in Equestria, you can't!" Dash shot off back towards the clearing where the axe-wielding Horsemann had first burst out of the ground, and the Horsemann charged after her. He broke through the undergrowth into the clearing. Dash wasn't there. The Horsemann whipped his head around, trying to find his target. Suddenly, he felt a powerful impact against the small of his back and stumbled forward. An instant later, he could see nothing but rainbow-colored light.

"Try this on for size!" said Dash's voice from all around him. The Horsemann could barely stay on his feet, nearly incapacitated by the whirlwind the pegasus was generating around him. The Horsemann growled menacingly. He swung his skeletal arm in a wild right hook, hoping to stop the powerful winds. By sheer luck, his hand connected with the body of the pegasus whirling around him. She cried out in pain and shock as she was knocked out of her lightning-fast orbit around the Horsemann. Her body flew limply through the air and slammed into a tree on the opposite side of the clearing. The Horsemann charged over to his incapacitated target. Dash groaned in pain, trying to get to her hooves, but could not find the energy.

"...That's...that's all you got?" she panted.

"NEVER SCREW WITH ME, YOU WINGED BITCH!" the Horsemann shouted, raising his axe above his head. Rainbow Dash squeezed her eyes shut. Images of the Soldier's headless corpse flooded into her mind. She knew that she was about to die, and yet, all she felt was calm.

This is it, she thought. I'll miss you, everypony...

"How dare you?!" a sudden, infuriated voice screeched from somewhere above her. Dash's eyes shot open, and she looked up. The Horsemann's axe hung limply at his side. Fluttershy was hovering in midair in front of him, an expression of pure rage on her face. Dash had seen this look and heard this voice only once before, and the combination of the two had been enough to shout down a fully-grown dragon. Fluttershy had unleashed the power of The Stare.

Thank Celestia... Dash thought weakly.

"Who do you think you are?!" Fluttershy shouted. "You think that just because you're bigger and stronger than we are, you can *kill us*? Just to satisfy the whims of your axe? That's just not right! I don't know what they let you get away with in your dimension, mister, but I will not, I repeat, *NOT LET YOU HURT MY FRIENDS!*" The Horsemann's expression was unchanged, as it had been ever since it had appeared. Dash wasn't even sure it could be changed.

"Now," Fluttershy shouted, her face pressed right up against the monstrous pumpkin, "I want you to march

straight back over to the portal you came out of and head back to where you came from! And if you hurt a single hair on the head of any living thing in this dimension on the way there, I'll have half a mind to find your mother and tell her what you've been up to! You got that?!" The Horsemann simply stared at Fluttershy for what seemed like ages. Suddenly, the worst-case scenario suddenly came to be. He burst out laughing.

"Did you honestly just try to scare me straight?!" he said, cackling evilly. Fluttershy lost her concentration. The Stare vanished from her face, replaced by an expression of shock and terror as she slowly hovered backwards away from the Horsemann.

"Listen, madam," the Horsemann growled, any trace of amusement vanishing in an instant, "first of all, I never even *knew* my parents. I was pretty much raised by my brother, and he's currently a little busy haunting a battlefield. I think he'd be damn *proud* of what I'm doing here. Secondly, I'm a vengeful bloody spirit! You can't just scream at me and make me see the error of my ways! If I don't kill, I'll run out of energy and my soul will just cease to be! I need to kill, and I'll keep killing until I find the peace that will let me move on from this world to the next! And finally, you don't really expect me to be *scared* of you, do you? You're a bloody yellow-and-pink talking pony!" The Horsemann raised his axe once more.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he said, "I have an infuriatingly quick pegasus to decapitate." The Horsemann looked down at his feet, preparing to bring his axe down on the neck of the pony he'd hurled into a tree. Suddenly, he stopped.

"...You're kidding me," he said softly. The pegasus pony had disappeared.

"That was just a bloody distraction?!" Fluttershy whimpered in fear. She ran into the tree Dash had been thrown into, halting her progress away from the Horsemann. "Well, you know what?" The Horsemann reached out with his left hand and grabbed Fluttershy. Fluttershy screamed in terror as she was brought slowly closer to the Horsemann's face. "I think the rainbow pony can wait," he growled menacingly. "You just became it."

Suddenly, the Horsemann heard something he had forgotten he was looking for: a male voice.

"Hey, asshole! Pick on somepony better equipped!" The Horsemann whirled around, clutching Fluttershy in one hand and his axe in the other. A red earth stallion was standing at the other side of the clearing. A reddish-purple aura surrounded his body, and he was standing on his hind legs. There was a red Viking helmet on his head with a rainbow hovering above it, a retractable trench shovel was clenched in his teeth, and he was carrying what looked like a Mann Co. Rocket Launcher over his right shoulder.

"Ah, *there* you are!" the Horsemann said, unceremoniously tossing Fluttershy aside. The Horsemann raised his axe above his head and the two creatures charged at each other. As they approached the halfway mark, the pony suddenly aimed his rocket launcher at his hooves, leapt into the air, and fired. He flew through the air with surprising grace. His back hooves were on fire, and a trail of smoke followed their progression from the ground to midair. He let out a bloodcurdling scream of rage around his shovel as he flew through the air toward the Horsemann's face.

The Horsemann brought his axe down a fraction of a second too late.

Before he knew what was happening, the pony smacked him across the face with his shovel. He was knocked off-balance by the impact. His grip on his axe loosened, and it slipped from his hands. He whirled his arms

around wildly, trying to keep his balance. The red pony would have none of that. He delivered a flying one-legged kick to the Horsemann's chest as he fell towards the ground. The Horsemann stumbled backwards and lost his balance completely. He fell to the ground, collapsing against the tree he had hurled Dash into. There was a split second afterwards where nothing happened. Then the rocket-jumping earth pony launched himself into the air again, sending his rocket launcher away to parts unknown, and landed on his chest, all four hooves pounding with full force. Somehow, the wind was knocked out of him (despite the fact that he didn't even need to breathe).

"Get his axe!" the pony shouted, looking back at something behind him. There was a faint humming noise. The Horsemann looked down to see his axe, surrounded by a reddish-purple aura, being dragged away from where it had landed...away from him.

"No! Headtaker!" gasped the Horsemann, reaching out to stop the axe before it was out of his grasp. But it was too late. The axe slipped through his fingers.

"HEAAAAAADS!" the axe practically screamed as it was dragged away.

"Alright, you little undead menace," the pony standing on the Horsemann's chest growled, tossing his shovel aside as it spoke, "we gave Little Miss Hippie her chance. Now it's MY turn to teach you a lesson."

"Now, I understand you're a vengeful spirit and all," the pony began, trotting up the Horsemann's chest to stare it square in the eyes. "Axe has gotta eat something, and you've gotta exact your revenge on the world. I get it. But there are times when it's okay to fight and times when it's not. Let's say, for example, that your nephew buried you on his estate and you want to help protect it, as long as you're there. And then let's say your other nephew sent a team of mercenaries over to your brother's estate to claim the land by force. And let's also say your first nephew responds by sending his own team of mercenaries in to defend his land and the whole damn thing turns into a war zone. THEN it'd be okay to pop outta the ground and knock some sense into those mercenaries. You know why?" The stallion prodded the Horsemann's chin with his hoof. "*Because they started it.* They wronged you, and you are responding the only way you know how. But these ponies have never done a goddamn thing to you! They're not mercenaries! They didn't wrong you in life! They're innocent, dammit!" The pony suddenly began to scream violently, his face inches away from the Horsemann's.

"AND I WILL NOT LET YOU KILL THEM! I might have done some things I'm not proud of, but I am not going to let you make the same mistakes I did! I do not care what I have to do; I will protect these ponies with my life! I will give my life a million times over if it's what I have to do, but no matter what happens, I WILL NOT LET YOU SLAUGHTER THESE INNOCENTS! *DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?!*" The pony was so consumed by rage that his voice completely drowned out the sound of faint, tinkling chimes. Neither he nor the Horsemann noticed white sparks bursting off the pony's hind flanks.

The Horsemann said nothing, staring blankly back at the pony bellowing in his face. After a moment, he simply chuckled.

"All you had to do was ask, Soldier," he said. The Soldier blinked.

"Wait, what?" he said, his anger gone.

"I didn't want to kill the ponies to begin with! You've seen these things, right? They're bloody adorable! I only

wanted to kill you so I could send you back to the portal!"

"Send me back to the portal? Why?"

"Isn't it obvious? I want to go home, and we can only go back through together! Killing you was the only way I could make sure you'd end up back at the portal!" The Soldier said nothing, staring blankly back at the expressionless face of the Horsemann. Finally, he chuckled.

"Well, all you had to do was ask."

Chapter Fifteen: Inventor of the Key

Pinkie, in a very uncharacteristic manner, was hiding inside a rotting log. She was the one who proclaimed “Giggle at the Ghostly,” true, but that only applied to things that couldn’t hurt you. She had enough sense to know when to laugh and when to hide.

“Pinkie?” Upon hearing her name, she poked her head out of the end of the log and looked around.

“Who’s there?” she said to the forest at large.

“Pinkie! It’s me, Soldier!” responded a voice from the other side of the log. Pinkie crawled out of the log, turned around, and hopped to the other side with considerable speed.

“Soldier! Soldier! Thank Celestia you’re alright!” she cried, pouncing on the mercenary and wrapping her legs around his neck.

“Ow! Ow! Watch it!” he shouted. Pinkie let go of him quickly. “I just rocket jumped twice! Cut me a break!”

“Rocket jumped?” Pinkie asked, tilting her head to the side.

“Yeah,” the Soldier answered. “I fired my rocket launcher at my feet. It’s exactly as painful as you’d think it is, and I’m pretty banged up right now. So please...don’t touch me quite yet. But for what it’s worth, the Horsemann’s been subdued.”

“What happened?”

“I stopped him. He wants to talk to us.”

“Talk to us?”

“Yeah. He wants a chance to explain why he did what he did. Everypony else is in the clearing already. We’re just waiting on you. C’mon, time’s a-wastin’.” The Soldier turned back the way he came, back toward the clearing. Suddenly, Pinkie let out a huge gasp.

“Soldier! Soldier, look! We match!” she blurted out, leaping excitedly into the air.

“...What?” the Soldier said, turning back around to face Pinkie.

“Look!” Pinkie leapt into the air as she shouted this, and remained there for a few more seconds than gravity would normally have allowed. She pointed her foreleg at the Soldier’s backside. Confused, the Soldier turned to examine his flank.

It was blank no more. His brand-new cutie mark depicted three Mk 2 hand grenades arranged in an upward-pointing triangle. The grenade in the center was bright yellow with a bright red pin. The other two were bright red with bright yellow pins. In light of this sudden revelation, the Soldier’s jaw dropped.

“Oh, my *God!* When did that happen?!”

It had taken a while to round all of the panicked ponies back up and get them back into the clearing, but now they were all there. The Soldier had convinced them that the monster no longer meant them any harm, despite the fact that he'd been given his axe back, and he deserved a chance to explain himself. With the eight of them gathered around the monster in a semicircle, the monster cleared its throat and began.

"My name is Silas Mann," he said, leaning casually against the tree he'd been knocked into a few minutes ago. "My brother, Zepheniah, and I came to America in the early days of colonization. Zepheniah and I were both skilled businessmen, and we wondered if we could make decent livings in America. Zepheniah's sons, Redmond and Blutarch, had already gone to America. They became respectable businessmen, founding Reliable and Efficient Demolition and Builder's League United respectively. They wrote back telling tales of gravel as far as the eye could see. We instantly knew that we would strike it rich in America."

"Striking it rich...on gravel?" Rarity interjected, cocking her head to the side.

"It's a long story," Silas replied. "Anyway, on the journey over there, my brother was tortured by bad luck. He contracted hundreds of diseases on the journey to America. He very nearly died. But we finally did make it to America. He'd invested his entire fortune...our family's entire fortune, rather, on the journey. He'd bought huge amounts of land, hoping to strike it rich on the bountiful gravel. But when he finally arrived, it turned out that the tales of gravel had been...exaggerated. There was nothing but sand as far as the eye could see...fool's gravel.

"Undaunted, my father went on to found Mann Co., a munitions company. Mann Co. did surprisingly well, considering. But bad luck continued to plague Zepheniah, and he eventually died of illnesses contracted during his voyage. In his last will and testament, he made some good decisions. For example, he left Mann Co. in my hands and those of his aide and tracker, Barnabas Hale. But he also made a very, very bad decision. I remember the reading of the will like it was yesterday..." Silas looked up and sighed deeply.

"To my layabout, brain-defective sons, Blutarch and Redmond," he recited, "I leave the greatest curse of all—partnership. What land I have purchased in this new world is to be split evenly between you both. You have wasted your lives bickering over nothing, and so I leave you dimwits something of consequence over which to feud."

"That was the worst decision he ever could have made. Blutarch and Redmond immediately began to fight over the land. And I don't mean a lawsuit or anything civil like that, either. They waged outright war over it, each hiring a team of mercenaries to seize the other's land by force. What should have been a ten-minute land grab for one of them turned into an intractable stalemate for both of them. But—and this is the brilliant part—they supplied their teams with Mann Co. weaponry. The sheer amount of capital spent on the war quickly hurled Mann Co. to the rank of one of the world's most profitable companies.

"You would think that I would have been thrilled that my company was doing so well. But the only reason we were doing so well was because my nephews were waging eternal war. I lost quite a bit of sleep over it. However, in those sleepless nights, I had a brilliant idea.

"Mann Co. shipped its products in sturdy wooden crates. They were so strong that hardly anyone could open them, which meant the Mann Co. shipments could not be stolen. But the security was too great. Customers

were rarely able to smash the crates open without damaging the products inside. So I came up with the idea of Mann Co. Supply Crate Keys. They could be used to open the locks that protected the crates from theft. But in order to protect our products from theft, Keys and Crates would be sold separately. That way, the crates could not be opened by anyone other than their intended recipients. If thieves bought keys in an attempt to open stolen Mann Co. crates, it would simply be a matter of finding out who they were and bringing them to justice.

"I thought it was a brilliant idea, but I was laughed at. People thought I was crazy. The general consensus was that having keys and crates sold separately would be cheating Mann Co.'s paying customers. I was laughed out of my position at Mann Co., and I died a pauper without even the money to pay for my own funeral. But I knew I was right. I knew that keys would revolutionize the way Mann Co. was run. And until someone—anyone— recognized my brilliance, I could not pass on to the afterlife.

"I was grateful to my nephew, Redmond, for burying me, but I didn't want to hear any more about his war. I wandered Redmond's grounds for some time, not harming anyone. Then one fateful day, while I was lying in my crypt, I heard the sounds of a battle. The war had come to Redmond's estate.

"It was only then that I realized that the war was responsible for what had happened to me in life. Everyone in Mann's Land had no money to spare. The war made them poor. They had to spend any extra money they may have had repairing their property and buying Mann Co. weaponry with which to defend themselves, should it come to that. It was at that moment that I realized how much I bloody hated mercenaries. That was the moment I became a vengeful spirit. In no time at all, I'd whipped up a physical manifestation and forged a haunted blade out of the metals that Barnabas had buried with me. I burst out of my crypt, ready to exact revenge upon the purveyors of the war that had distracted the world from my brilliance." Silas paused here and sighed heavily.

"And I kept on doing that for several years," he continued. "Then one day, I was...well, I was teleported into a very deep pit and sucked into a black hole. I'm not quite sure how it happened. Before I knew what was happening, I entered the Everfree Forest and just...collapsed. I collapsed into nothing but a pile of bones. Evidently, I don't handle inter-dimensional transport well. I had no idea what was going on at the time, but luckily, my axe was there. He knew what was going on...somehow, and he explained to me that something had come through the rift with us. We both wanted to go home, but we couldn't. The rift would only let us back through if the other creature that went through the rift came back with us. We spent the next day or so looking for the creature. I ultimately left the forest in my search. As luck would have it, I just happened to stumble across a small town inhabited by talking ponies.

"When I first arrived at Sweet Apple Acres, my axe had the idea to place a Haunted Halloween Gift there. I did it, but it was only then that I realized that something had happened to my blade and me. During our search, we had come across a very silly-looking...snake...chicken monster of some kind. Its gaze turned me to stone, and it took a lot of energy to break free. Our energy sunk to dangerously low levels. I knew we had to kill in order to regain our energy, so I set about searching for some easy prey. And then I ran into the Soldier.

"Of course, I didn't know it was the Soldier at the time. I was just as surprised to see a talking pony as I imagine the Soldier was to see me. I'll admit I may have a soft spot for ponies. They're unbearably cute, in fact, and I couldn't bring myself to kill the Soldier...until he tried to kill me with a shovel. Of course, I responded by decapitating him, and I then learned that ponies have very little usable energy. So killing the Soldier didn't help me much, all in all. It was *then* that I realized this was, in fact, the Soldier. And then I realized there was a witness to my crime, and I beat a hasty retreat back to the portal. Unfortunately, in my weakened state, I didn't make it there in time to intercept

the Soldier as he respawned.

"Now, I knew that the Soldier was...something of a psychopath, and thus he wouldn't want to hear me out long enough for me to explain what was going on. I knew I'd have to kill him and intercept him back at the portal to have any hope of being able to go home. I concocted a plan then. I managed to track the Soldier to Miss Fluttershy's cottage on the edge of the Everfree Forest, and over the course of the night, I set up a trap for him. I created a large number of Pumpkin Bombs and set them up all over the field. It wasn't until I was halfway done with this that I realized the Soldier was sleeping outside and I could have just killed him right then. But I decided I'd used a damn lot of energy to make the Bombs, and I was going to use them. ...Clearly, I am not the cleverest man when death is bearing down upon me.

"Now, when you sidestepped my little ambush, I concocted a backup plan. I would lead you here, deep into the forest, to a spot a hair's breadth away from the portal and kill the Soldier there. But I needed Haunted Metal as bait, and producing it left me and my axe at undeath's door. Any more magic would kill us, and we only had a few hours left alive. My only hope now was to kill someone, or somepony, and soon. I kind of lost my head, and I went after the first pony I saw rather than going after the Soldier. And, of course, you all know how well *that* turned out."

"So, Silas? Feeling any better now?" the Soldier asked.

"Much better. It feels good to explain all this," Silas responded. He looked as though a large weight had been lifted off his shoulders, but the candle in his head still burned as dimly as ever.

"Heh...you know what the best part about all this is?" the Soldier said. "You were a vengeful spirit all that time, so you would have had no way of knowing this...but Mann Co. has recognized your genius." Silas reared up like he'd been given an electrical shock.

"They have?!" he blurted out.

"Affirmative. Mann Co. Supply Crate Keys are being sold in massive quantities across the world today. Have been for years. It's a part of a system that has been dubbed the 'Mann-Conomy'."

"...That's even the name I came up with for the system..." Silas said. He suddenly began to laugh. "This means...I can pass on! They recognized my brilliance, and I can pass on to the next life!" Silas's joyous laughter rang out across the clearing. "Soldier, you've released me! I...I...How in the world can I possibly thank you?" The Soldier smiled.

"You can wait," he said. "Don't pass on yet. I can't go back home without you."

"Oh, right! How...how silly of me," Silas said, massaging the back of where his neck would have been, if he had had one, in an embarrassed fashion.

"Where's the portal, Silas?" the Soldier asked.

"I'll take you there, don't worry. But...you should say your goodbyes first." The Soldier's smile vanished. It was only then that the implications of leaving really sunk in. If he went back home, he'd have to abandon his

newfound friends.

"So...this is goodbye, then?" he said.

"It sure looks like it," Applejack responded.

"...I'm not the best at giving speeches...or farewells..." the Soldier said mournfully as he walked to the center of the semicircle, "so let's get this over with." He trotted slowly up to one end of the semicircle and began his speech.

"Applejack and Rarity. I honestly cannot wrap my head around how you two get along so well. You're two of the most stubborn ponies I've ever met, and your personalities are farther apart than I ever thought possible...though, now that I think about it, you remind me of a couple of people I know. And yet, you're the best of friends. I just can't figure it out." Applejack and Rarity exchanged a knowing look. As one, their minds flashed back to Twilight's first—and last—slumber party.

"But you know what?" the Soldier continued. "It got me to thinking...if two people who are so radically different can put aside their differences and become friends, then maybe we can do the same back home. I was starting to doubt it after fifteen years of employment, but after seeing your friendship, I'm starting to think...hell, starting to hope...that maybe someday there could be peace in Mann's Land." Applejack and Rarity both gave the Soldier a warm smile, but said nothing. Satisfied, the Soldier moved on down the line.

"Rainbow Dash, it's always nice to talk to someone who's into explosions as much as I am...and sober. Beyond that, though, you're a brave little sucker. You may not realize it, but you very nearly died today. You saw Silas decapitate me yesterday, and you still rushed in to protect your friends...to give your life to save them. You looked Death right in the eye and said, 'Screw you. Catch me if you can, you son of a bitch.' Never lose sight of that." Rainbow Dash gave the Soldier a cocky smile. She jumped into the air, beating her wings to keep herself aloft. Without saying a word, she gave the Soldier a crisp salute. The Soldier chuckled softly, then moved on down the line.

"Fluttershy, I'm sorry for what I did to you...and what I tried to do to you. You didn't deserve either of them. Your kind nature is a refreshing change from what I'm used to, and I'm really going to miss it when I go back to work. I learned a valuable lesson back in that cottage of yours." The Soldier looked down at his hooves for a moment before continuing. "The slaughter of innocents is never worth the benefits. I knew that all along, I think, but somewhere along the line, I forgot it. I was just fighting because I *could* fight, without caring about the collateral. But then, when I...got angry at you, your friends rushed to your aid...and Pinkie gave me the scare of my life. That was when I realized how wrong I'd been all these years. So you're all technically responsible for that, but I prefer to think you're the most responsible for it. You, primarily, have shown me the error of my ways." Fluttershy gave the Soldier a faint smile. She was good at getting fierce creatures to see the error of their ways. Salvo was no dragon, sure, but now he was just another name on the list.

"Twilight, I've always said that no team can exist without a strong bond of trust. Take me, for example. If I can't count on the support of my teammates out on the battlefield, I have nothing. And it's clear to everypony that your friends trust you, and you trust them. You should count yourself very lucky for that. I've seen too many friendships die due to a lack of trust." The Soldier sighed sadly, remembering a time gone by, then looked up to

Twilight's back.

"Spike, don't think I forgot about you. You've got a lot of good traits to you, but I think the best is your loyalty. I mean, you're a baby dragon. Sure, you're a dragon, but you're a *baby*, for God's sake. You could've just asked to not come with us into the Everfree Forest, and we would've obliged. But you didn't. You stuck with us to the very end, even in the face of mortal danger. You might have just given Rainbow Dash a run for her money." Spike smiled broadly.

"Aw...you're embarrassing me..." he said. It was obvious to everypony involved that he wasn't. The Soldier chuckled again, then moved on to the last pony in the line.

"And Pinkie Pie..." The Soldier sighed deeply. "Pinkie, I think it's safe to say that we've both learned a lot from each other over the past two days. And thanks to you, I've learned something very important about myself. Before I came to Equestria, I didn't realize how important it is to be happy. But after I met you, it all became clear to me. I understand now. If I don't enjoy life, then really, what's the point?" Pinkie sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes with a handkerchief she'd seemingly pulled out of nowhere. The Soldier smiled. Typical Pinkie Pie.

"Girls, these three days I've spent in Equestria have changed my life. I may never look at things the same way again. I've come to a few shocking conclusions about myself. And I couldn't have done any of it without you. I...can't thank you enough." The Soldier looked down at the ground. "Odds are we'll never see each other again...but I want you to know that these three days have been the best three days of my life." The Soldier paused here and, after a brief moment, began sniffing. Tears began to roll down his face from somewhere beneath his helmet.

"I'm gonna miss you, everypony." Before the Soldier knew what was happening, he had suddenly become ensnared in a group hug.

"We'll miss you too, Soldier!" Pinkie said. She caught the Soldier's eye and gave him a happy, albeit wet, smile.

"Heads, heads, heads..." whispered Silas's axe.

"Shut it, you," Silas whispered back. "Can't you see he's having a moment?" Oblivious to the insensitive nature of Silas's axe, the Soldier disentangled himself from the pile of ponies and trotted over to Silas.

"Okay, Silas. I'm ready to head back now," he said.

"Er...aren't you forgetting something?" Silas replied.

"What? What do you—oh! Right! I almost forgot." The Soldier turned back around. "Twilight, I need you to turn me back into a human before I go."

"Oh, right!" Twilight said, a bit embarrassed that she'd forgotten. Without saying another word, she closed her eyes. Her horn began glowing gently, filling the air with a light whirring noise. As it grew steadily brighter, beams of light began to snake around the Soldier's body...

Dear Princess Celestia,

I am thrilled to report that the creatures from another dimension I reported on earlier have been successfully returned to their native realm, and the portal appears to have closed behind them. I'm equally thrilled to report that they were both misunderstood. This is not to say that they weren't both incredibly dangerous creatures. However, they both appeared to have opened their hearts to the magic of friendship. They both return to their native dimension changed beings. These creatures have both learned a valuable lesson: If somepony's done nothing bad to you, you shouldn't do anything bad to them. And I have learned a lesson of my own from this ordeal. I've sent a lesson very similar to this one in a previous report, but first impressions are often wrong. Just because somepony may seem scary doesn't mean they actually are. A full report on the incident will be arriving as soon as it is transcribed. I can assure you, it's a story worth waiting for.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle

Epilogue

Half of the abandoned village was simple wooden buildings with thatched roofs. The other half was stone huts of the same dimensions. In the center of the village was a stone plaza which, though almost completely empty, served as Town Square. The village looked like every other tiny European village where a horror story would be set, right down to the dark castle of eldritch magic looming ominously overhead which would be framed by the rising moon in the evenings and invariably draw lightning strikes whenever there was a thunderstorm in the general area. There were, in fact, only three deviations to the formula of this village.

First, in the geographic center of Town Square was a quite modern circular metallic platform with a white question mark hologram floating above it. Secondly, it was located in the New Mexico desert, five miles to the east of the RED Team's Headquarters. Third, it hadn't actually been built yet.

"We could call it Mannsylvania," the Soldier concluded, grinning an eager grin at the miniature television strapped to the messenger's chest. "What do you think, ma'am?" On the other side of the screen, an elderly woman in purple took a long drag from her cigarette.

"It's an intriguing idea, Mr. Doe," the Administrator responded, "and it certainly has the potential for a spooky, faux-haunted atmosphere. If Merasmus is open to the idea of constructing a battlefield just to the west of his castle, I see no reason why we couldn't make this arrangement work." The Soldier grinned wider. "Of course, he is still living on the RED Team's land, so rent payments will be expected from him."

"Naturally, ma'am," the Soldier said, rolling his eyes underneath his Tyrant's Helm but not losing his grin.

"But yes, provided the BLU Team is willing to cooperate, I think Mannsylvania will be constructed. I applaud your creative thinking, Soldier, even though it did seem to take you a long time."

"How do you mean, ma'am?" the Soldier asked.

"Well, normally, you would have handled this type of situation by angering Merasmus and being sent to another dimension...again. But instead you seem to have embarked on a two-day diplomatic mission which has actually yielded success. You have succeeded in the field of diplomacy."

"Is that a compliment, ma'am?"

"Hardly. I only sent you to Merasmus's castle because I knew you would fail to reach a diplomatic agreement." The Soldier's smile faltered. He paused and placed his hand to his chin.

"The assignment was to fail?" he said confusedly. "So...I succeeded when I was meant to fail, and if I had failed, I would have succeeded?" A devilish smirk spread across the Administrator's face.

"You succeeded where you were meant to fail, and therefore you have failed me. Had you failed, true, you would not have failed me, but you would still have failed. Failure was mutually assured in this assignment, Mr. Doe...but you've somehow managed to pull a brilliant success out of it. You have simultaneously failed and succeeded, and though you have failed me, which is far worse than mere failure under normal circumstances, you have succeeded in creating a venue for others to fail and succeed. So you have failed me, but you have succeeded

in a way I failed to recognize it was possible to succeed.” There was a brief silence while the Soldier attempted to process what the Administrator had just said. “Was I not clear, Mr. Doe?”

“...With respect, ma’am, not really,” the Soldier responded. The Administrator laughed dryly.

“Excellent. It’s always a pleasure watching the gears in your primitive little brain spin. I wish I could have witnessed the two-day diplomatic mission, but no matter. Shall we see whether your streak of failures or streak of successes continues next?”

“How do you mean, ma’am?” The Administrator smirked.

“I have a new assignment for you. Since you’re already on the line, let me give you a briefing. A group of...businessmen contacted me recently. They are shipping some of their...wares...across the territory of some of their...competitors. They fear their...competitors...will launch an attack on the convoy, being...unreasonable businessmen, and have asked for an experienced mercenary to protect against this possibility.”

“...Ma’am, I don’t mean to sound forward or disrespectful, but...are these...businessmen....drug dealers?”

“Absolutely not, Mr. Doe. They’re stolen weapons dealers.” The Soldier donned a look of confusion.

“We support stolen weapons dealers? Isn’t that a little counter-intuitive?”

“They do not sell Mann Co. weaponry. Even after over a century, Mann Co. weaponry remains impossible to steal. They sell weapons manufactured by Sarif Industries. Augmented weaponry is the way of the future, Mr. Doe. Bullets and laser weaponry, together in a glorious amalgamation of technology we understand and technology we don’t. Of course, it’s impressive as hell, but it’s very expensive. These brave pioneers are bringing it to the masses for cheap. Think of it as a kind of Robin Hood operation, only with augmented weaponry instead of currency. Personally, I often use the two interchangeably. You may meet with the dealers at The Harvest Event at 1330 hours tomorrow. Your contacts will be wearing the Deus Specs.”

“...With respect, ma’am, I don’t think I can do that.” The Administrator stopped smirking and raised an eyebrow. “I follow the munitions scene. Sarif Industries’ attempts to reverse-engineer Dr. Grordbort’s weaponry haven’t been paying off. Their weapons misfire more often than not, and sometimes they just burst into flame for no reason. They’re more dangerous for their shooter than their target. I don’t want to support the distribution of faulty weaponry.” There was a brief silence.

“...You’re refusing the assignment?” the Administrator finally said.

“Affirmative, ma’am. If Sarif Industries’ weapons are distributed, then innocent people are going to be hurt.”

“Who, of course, only wanted these weapons because...?”

“Maybe to hunt, maybe to murder, maybe to shoot for sport. That’s their business. It doesn’t matter why they wanted the weapons, ma’am. These are real people we’re talking about. People with families, children...friends. I can’t accept a mission knowing that someone could be hurt as a direct result of my efforts.” The Administrator blinked and plucked her cigarette from her mouth.

"I'm sorry; there was a very strange bit of interference just now. Could you repeat that?" The Soldier went back over what he'd just said and had to fight back the urge to slap himself. Instead, he began enunciating clearly.

"I said I can't accept a mission knowing that somebody could be hurt as a direct result of my efforts."

"Yes, that's...what I thought you said," the Administrator responded. There was a brief silence. At the end of it, the Administrator placed her cigarette back in her mouth. "The two-day diplomacy mission...it wasn't all diplomacy, was it? Merasmus did send you to another dimension, didn't he?" The Soldier hesitated, then sighed.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered. "He sent me to E—" The Soldier paused. Inter-dimensional banishment and subsequent return was nothing new to the RED Team, least of all the Soldier, but what was he going to say? He was sent to a hitherto undiscovered dimension inhabited by brightly colored talking ponies and gained a new outlook on life as a result of what he'd learned? His sanity was in enough doubt already.

"Yes, Mr. Doe? He sent you to...?"

"...The Underworld, ma'am. I was taken hostage in the Underworld."

"I see. I trust you showed the tentacled sons-of-bitches how we do things downtown?"

"Affirmative...ma'am." *I would never...not without a good reason.*

"But I see you didn't get out completely unscathed." The Soldier glanced up.

"Yes, ma'am. I seem to have been cursed. Or at least, that was the idea—they ended up just giving me an Unusual. And...I'm not sure, but I think it might be permanent." The Administrator arched an eyebrow.

"Permanent?" she echoed. "The effects stay with you after respawn?"

"Affirmative, ma'am. I prefer to see this as a generous gift, rather than a curse."

"You enjoy wearing a rainbow above your head?"

"Well, an Unusual is an Unusual, ma'am. If I could have chosen, I would have preferred a stormcloud, or balloons, or maybe butterflies, but this works."

"Butterflies," repeated the Administrator.

"Did I say maybe? I meant even," the Soldier said quickly.

"Well, no matter," the Administrator said after a moment. "Have there been any other long-term magical side-effects?" Without even realizing he was doing it, the Soldier placed his hand on his hip.

"None, ma'am," he said. "Not that I've noticed, anyway." The Administrator took a long draw from her cigarette.

"Very well, then, Mr. Doe. I'm going to offer you a choice." The Soldier arched a hidden eyebrow. "You can accept the mission and preserve the status quo, or you can call the police and tell them that the arms dealers will be

at the Harvest Event at 1330 tomorrow. Those are your options. Follow your orders, or do what you think is right. Make your choice. Miss Pauling, cut the feed, please.” The screen went blank. His mission complete, the shadowy informant drew his trenchcoat closed, concealing the television contained within. He stepped out of the Soldier’s bunk room without saying a word and closed the door behind him.

The Soldier took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of his bed. The proposal had gone exactly like he’d imagined it would, and then it had all gone to hell. The only reason Mannsylvania would exist soon was Merasmus didn’t know the land belonged to the RED Team when he built his castle. Therefore, he hadn’t done anything wrong, and the Soldier hadn’t wanted to see him punished. That was a weak but decent rationalization. He even let Silas kill him after he turned back into a human. Sure, Silas was a vengeful spirit who’d been trying to wipe out the RED and BLU Teams for years, but he was a changed man now, and he planned to atone for his Earthly sins before passing on. The Soldier hadn’t wanted to see him die before he got the chance. These decisions were completely out of character for him, but he’d taken pleasure in making them. He’d been so damn happy with his new lease on life that he’d forgotten to consider the consequences.

He groaned, covered his eyes with his hands, and fell onto his back. “Damn these ethical decisions,” he groaned. Suddenly, a random thought popped into his head. *You know what I haven’t had in a few days? A shower. A shower sounds great right about now.* He sighed and got back to his feet again. *Why not? I’ve had dumber ideas.* The Soldier strode into his tiny bathroom and, with the kind of efficiency only hands could provide, removed his fatigues. He stepped underneath the rusted showerhead, squeezed his eyes shut, and twisted the knob.

The first blast of freezing water focused his mind on the dilemma he had to face. Was his loyalty to his employer, or his new morality? It was a simple question, but how would he answer it? The question didn’t get any easier to answer as the water got warmer. As the water got warmer, the Soldier lost focus. His mind drifted back to Equestria, what he’d learned there, and more to the point, the friends he’d made.

A thought occurred to the Soldier, seemingly out of nowhere. Long-term magical side-effects... Out of curiosity, he indulged one of the most surprising memories of Equestria he had. *“You sat on my face, remember?” I’m gonna spend years on a couch trying to figure that one out. What’s the verdict?* The verdict was, he felt nothing—certainly not what he’d felt at the time. *Ah, thank God. Human inside and out.*

He looked down and opened his eyes. It finally sunk in at that moment: he was human again, and *damn* did it feel good. Being a pony had been nice and all, but he still loved his human form to death. He was exactly the same as he’d always been—no fur, no tail, no hooves, just skin, flesh, bones, grenades, and hair in all the right places.

...Grenades?

A manic grin spread across the Soldier’s face, and he knew exactly what he needed to do. He threw his fatigues back on in record time, charged into his bedroom and skidded to a stop in front of his bedside table. He grabbed the receiver and jabbed a number in. A precious few rings, and then...

“Teufort Police Department.”

“Tomorrow at 1330 hours, arms dealers fencing stolen weapons made by Sarif Industries will be meeting up at The Harvest Event. They’re all wearing bridgeless gold-tinted sunglasses.” Without giving the officer any time to

respond, he slammed the receiver down.

"Well, that question's answered," he said to nopony in particular. "Guess now there's just one thing left to do." With that, he stood straight up, saluted an invisible flag, and did the only thing he could do to honor his newfound friends.

"My little pony, my little pony. Aaaaaaah, my little pony... I used to wonder what friendship could be... Until you all shared its magic with me. Big adventure, tons of fun, a beautiful heart, faithful and strong. Sharing kindness—it's an easy feat, and magic makes it all complete! Yeah, my little pony... Do you know you're all my very best frieeeeeeends?"

Across the inter-dimensional void...

"I was so close..." Lyra gazed around her once more. The area that had once been her bedroom was cluttered with research on the past of Equestria. Papers were scattered around the room like a tornado had just blown through. Lyra sat on the edge of her bed, her hind legs draped over it and her back relatively straight. She hunched over, and placed her head in her hooves once more. "I was so close," she said again.

"I'd say you're a bit more than close, dear." Lyra started and looked up. There was another pony standing by her window.

"What the—who are you? How did you get in here?" she stammered.

"I get that a lot," the faded yellow earth stallion responded in an amiable Trottingham accent, tipping his pith helmet to her. He gave Lyra a smile which had to be a little toothy thanks to his mahogany pipe. The effect, coupled with his superb white facial hair, jagged white tail and worn brown saddlebags, made him look like some kind of explorer. The mysterious stallion turned to examine the wall of Lyra's bedroom, allowing her to see his cutie mark: a silver oval framing some strange...machine?

"A comprehensive chart of human anatomy," he said. "You've certainly done your homework." Lyra gazed at the chart. It was nearly as tall as the room, lovingly maintained and clearly labeled. She sighed heavily and climbed off the bed.

"What's the point?" she said. "I was so close..."

"So close to what?" the stallion asked, turning back to her.

"I almost had it," she answered. "A real, live human in equine form...and I just let him slip through my fingers." The stallion gave her an inquisitive look—you mean hooves, he was clearly thinking—but said nothing.

"You don't have the concrete proof you need. So what?" he said. Lyra looked up at him incredulously. He merely smiled at her with a twinkle in his bright green eyes. "Just look at all this research you've done, my dear! Based solely on your theoretical evidence, you could bring the scientific community to its knees! You could easily apply for a grant to perform additional research, and then find your concrete proof. I think ponies everywhere would

be falling over themselves to support you.”

“You...think so?” Lyra asked, a faint smile gracing her lips.

“Certainly. If you just spend your life looking for concrete proof, you’ll never find the time to actually test your theories. I’ve lived my life by that principle, and look where it’s gotten me.” Lyra smiled for a moment, then seemed to remember something. She looked down at her hooves and sighed morosely.

“But...” The stallion tilted his head. “I may not *need* proof, but...it would’ve been nice. With proof, I’d be a respected pony...a genius, not just some crackpot hick from Ponyville. But without that human, all I have is theory. And that human’s...dead...”

“Oh, is *that* what you’re so concerned about?” the stallion chuckled. “You don’t have to worry about it, my dear. He’s fine.” Lyra looked back up. “There’s a system in his native dimension called ‘Respawn.’ When he dies, he returns to life in a matter of seconds. I’d explain how it works, but it would take more time than I have, I’m afraid.”

“...How do you know that?” Lyra asked.

“I’ve had my eye on Mr. Salvo for some time now, my dear,” the stallion responded. “I’ve had to keep his eye on him ever since he first began using my Oscillators. He’s gotten into some strange antics in the past, but this...this is probably the strangest of them all. I had to step in directly to get him back to where he belongs.”

“...Who are you?” The stallion gave Lyra a warm (if toothy) smile.

“My name is Dr. Grordbort,” he said, “but the alias I chose for this dimension is Dr. Quantum Leap. Dr. Leap is...was a scientist researching the theoretical field of inter-dimensional transportation. It was thanks to a thesis that he wrote that Salvo and his friends were able to figure out how to get him home.” The stallion chuckled warmly. “And when I noticed you, I thought I’d stop by and tell you to keep your chin up. It breaks my heart to see a young scientist lose faith in their field.” The stallion looked behind him and pulled something out of his saddlebag. He balanced the mysterious metal device on his hoof prodded it with his muzzle. “Extract,” he said.

With a strange, otherworldly whirl, the mysterious stallion slowly faded away into nothing, leaving nothing behind but the scent of tobacco and the two silver coins he had used as false cutie marks.