

James awoke the next morning a lot later than he usually did; he rarely slept later than eight or nine o' clock despite how often he would be working until the wee hours of the morning. He felt like he had wasted enough of his life sleeping in college and high school. He groggily looked up at the window of his room, from the position of the sun it appeared to be a little after noon. James' gaze then wandered over to his nightstand where the culprit of his unintended sleep-in sat, someone had disconnected his alarm clock. He sighed as he rose out of his bed, *Mary must be really concerned about this if she's starting to use magic to sabotage me.* Then again, he had slept all the way up until this point in time giving her argument that he was overdoing it even more credence.

He emerged from his room into the kitchen where his sister sat reading the paper while sipping some coffee. It had taken James a while to get used to seeing Mary use magic, but like everything else that had changed with the coming of the Bureaus, after a while it became normal. She looked over at him with a smug expression on her face. "Well look who's finally up."

"Yeah, yeah. Just be thankful I have today off or I'd be really pissed. You can't just turn someone's alarm off Mary."

"Hm, well my magic says I can." She said as she levitated a second cup of the steaming liquid over to him.

"Thanks." He said sitting down at the table and taking a long drink of the caffeinated beverage.

"So you have today off huh?" Mary was incredibly shocked at this, James almost NEVER had or took a day off. It was such a rare occurrence that she had actually forgotten to give him her victory speech about how she was right about him.

"Yep, I suppose miracles do happen from time to time." He said as he stared off into the distance. "So what're your plans for today?"

"I was going to go shopping with one of my friends from the Bureau, but that was before I knew you'd have today off."

He looked over at her, "Well don't let my having the day off disrupt your plans."

Mary bit her lower lip, "But... I-"

James cut her off, "Look, I'm going to be spending the evening with you and your friends anyways. How long have you been planning on going shopping with your friend?"

"Nearly three weeks." She admitted.

"Ok then, go enjoy your day and we'll spend the evening together. Besides I've got my own stuff to take care of."

She gave him a look of mock disbelief. "My brother actually doing something that doesn't have

anything to do with work!?” she gave an overly dramatic gasp. “I don’t believe it!”

“Ha ha ha.” He responded deadpan as he stood from his chair and gave his little sister a hug. “Have a good time out there, and I’ll see you later.” As he released her from the embrace he ruffled her mane to the point where it looked like she had just woken up.

“Really? Now I have to go brush it again.”

“Then don’t mess with my alarm again.” James said laughing as he headed back to his room.

By the time James had showered, shaved, and dressed Mary had already departed, leaving him a note telling him to be back by four. He locked up after retrieving his sidearm, he never left home without it, and took the elevator down to ground level. It was an absolutely beautiful day in New York; it was just cool enough for him to wear his jacket without sweating like a pig. He had found New York to be quite enjoyable, but then again he had only moved here after the bureaus opened so he had no idea how it was before that. James decided to walk to his destination rather than drive as walking typically helped him unwind better than driving. As he walked down the street the ponies milling about around him gave James a wide berth. Just like Mary using magic, the stares and general wariness that ponies gave him was something James had gotten used to.

He looked up into the sky as he headed towards his destination noting the large amount of pegasai flying among the towering buildings. The city had never appeared to be so full of life before, compared to the glum facade of an unemployed town of broken dreams that it had been prior to Equestrian contact. Funny that he should be thinking about that particular notion as he arrived at his destination, a graveyard situated between two large buildings. Before heading in he stopped at a flower store across the street and bought a simple wreath. He walked down the rows of graves already knowing where the one he sought was located even though it had been months since he was last here. James stopped in front of a fairly plain gravestone and spent a good ten minutes just staring at it lost in thought. Finally he knelt down and laid the wreath on the grave before turning to leave.

James arrived back at his home just as Mary was finishing up getting ready for their dinner. “Oh great you’re here.” She said as she continued to check her reflection. She turned back to James giving him a look down. “You’re planning on going out in that?”

“Says the one who spends ninety-nine percent of the time naked. It’s not like the dinner is super formal or anything, right?” James retorted with a slightly annoyed look on his face, even after being a pony for nearly a year and a half, his sister still thought she could give him fashion advice.

“Suit yourself.” Mary said nonchalantly. “So where were you for the last two hours?”

“Oh, you know, just walking around, thinking, nothing much. How was shopping with your friend?”

Mary’s face lit up at the question. “Oh it was FANTASTIC! There was a whole new line of saddles that we hadn’t heard about before that were unveiled! Rarity and I were just amazed at the new designs coming out of Equestria...”

James just continued to smile and nod at his sister’s story, letting the information wash over him while his mind concentrated on something else. It was this sort of mental multitasking that made him such a good intelligence officer and was one of the many reasons he had been recruited by Director Moore into the IDI. As his sister talked James noticed just how happy she was. She had been like this ever since she had undergone conversion, as if the process changed more than just her body. She had never been a melancholy person to begin with, but it was hard to still be human in the rapidly ponifying world and not be affected by it. Hell, most humans nowadays were either miserable or consumed with hate at their situation in life. Even James sometimes had trouble not feeling like an outcast in this town of thirteen million ponies. But now Mary had friends, a job she loved, and her older brother who she had always been close to. She had every right to be happy. James however, had only entertained the idea of conversion as a fantasy. Something that lay eternally out of reach, as he had decided long ago that such a thing was not meant for men like him. But now, with everything coming to a head so quickly the very real possibility of him finishing his work lay before him. And he had no idea what he would do should that happen. *Guess we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.* He thought to himself as his sister finished her story.

“So do you think I should go out with my new saddle?” She asked a hopeful expression adorning her face.

“Well if it’s good enough to impress your fashionista friend Rarity, then by all means go ahead and wear it. That’s what you bought it for right?”

“Thanks! I’ll be right back.” She said smiling as she headed off to her room.

James sighed as she left, picking up a bit that Mary had left on the table and examining the small coin. He had never quite figured out how they could use currency like this with hooves instead of hands, but so long as it worked it didn’t really matter. “So how do I look?” his sister’s voice piped up from behind him.

He turned around to find her wearing a pale pink saddle with a short skirt that complimented her light green coat pretty well. “As a member of an entirely different species? Great.”

Mary stuck her tongue out at him. “You know there aren’t going to be too many human girls left around here soon James..” She smiled wickedly “Might as well start entertaining the idea.”

He rolled his eyes, “Yeah right, anyways we should get going.” He said as he picked up his keys from the counter.

The two exited their apartment building a few minutes later, walking together to the restaurant Mary had picked for tonight's dinner. She was admittedly a little nervous about her friends meeting James. The worry that he wouldn't like them or they wouldn't like him kept bouncing around her mind no matter how hard she tried to stop it. The nervous feeling must've worked its way onto her face as she suddenly felt James' hand on her shoulder. "Mary relax, I'm sure I'll love your friends. Now stop worrying, please."

Mary smiled slightly, James, as always knew exactly what to say to help assuage her fears, an ability born of many years of being there for her. "Thanks, I guess I'm still a little nervous about this whole thing."

"That just means that this dinner is important to you and you want it to go perfectly, nothing more, nothing less. Frankly, I'd be concerned if you weren't a little nervous about it." He removed his hand from her shoulder and the two resumed walking down the street "So what's the name of this place again?"

Mary looked away slightly embarrassed "Well, um it's called *The Big Horseapple*."

That got a raised eyebrow from James, he wasn't a pony and even he knew what that phrase meant. "You're serious?"

"Yeah, apparently it was opened by a couple of converts who had no idea what it meant. But by the time they found out the name had already stuck."

James had to laugh at that, some things never change.

In the sub-basement of IDI headquarters two men looked upon a large holographic screen that dominated almost an entire wall of the room. In the center of the room, hooked up to an interfacing unit sat an unassuming silver canister, the one that had been retrieved from the HLF. One of the men, who was sitting at a terminal in front of the screen began to type out commands at a pace that was typically inhuman. "You're sure about this?" asked the second one who stood behind him watching as he input commands.

"Of course director, I know a nanite containment capsule when I see one." The first one responded in a slightly insulted voice.

Director Moore picked up on the annoyance of his head technical expert, but decided to let it be for now. As the man typed the machinery that was connected to the canister began to function and started to drain the canister of its contents. "Well it's confirmed that thing was definitely holding nanomachines. Beginning AI analysis and interface with nanite governing protocols." The doctor typed in even more commands, bringing the processing power of the IDI's resident contender-II class AI to bear. The AI, codename: MERCURY served as the IDI's institutional mainframe and was primarily used to coordinate the logistics of the IDI and to monitor HLF

communications. Once MERCURY began its dictated task, commands and protocols began rolling up on the screen. As the commands streamed across the display the AI's voice began to drone from the speakers mounted above the console.

FOREIGN NANOMACHINES DETECTED...

INTERFACE INITIATED... SUCCESSFUL

NANO-FORM ANALYSIS UNDERWAY.....NANO-FORM PROFILING COMPLETE...

PROFILE CONSISTENT WITH ATTACK NANITES

COMPATIBILITY REGISTER ENABLED...

PROCESSING.....

NANO-CATALYST VIABILITY ASSESSMENT UNDERWAY...

ESTIMATED TIME TO COMPLETION: 6 HOURS- 25 MINUTES -35.4 SECONDS

The doctor turned from his console to look back the director, "And now we wait."

Moore nodded, "Good work doctor, inform me of any developments immediately, I'll be up in my office." And with that Director Moore exited the lab, leaving the doctor to sip coffee and monitor the AI for the next six hours.

James and Mary finally arrived at the restaurant, it was a quaint unassuming place, but according to his sister they had some of the best salads in town. *Guess we'll find out.* He thought to himself as they headed in.

In the entrance sat a blue earth pony who was currently manning the podium where customers were shown to their tables. She was looking down at something on the podium when James and Mary walked in. "Name?" she asked without looking up.

"Hi, my name's Radiant Dawn, I had a reservation for four at 5 o'clock." Mary answered striding up to the earth pony while she looked around the room for her friends.

"Hang on one second.... Ah here we are. Apparently the rest your party arrived earlier with additional customers, so we've given you a table in our-"The earth pony had finally looked up and noticed James, who was trying his damndest not to be annoyed at the look the earth pony was giving him. "O-our private dining area. Can I help you sir?" she asked in a slightly afraid voice.

“He’s with me.” Mary said, her eyes narrowing slightly.

“Oh....” The earth pony said while she processed that tidbit of information. “....Well come with me then, your table is this way.” She said sheepishly as she led the two into an adjacent room, embarrassed at her behavior. The room she led them to contained a few large tables but only one was currently occupied, around it sat six ponies, all of whom had stopped talking and looked over at the newcomers.

“Dawn!” a purple unicorn shouted out and rose to greet her, closely followed by the rest of the group.

“Twilight! It’s so good to see you!” Mary said as the two hugged each other. She looked over Twilight’s shoulder at the rest of the group who were all smiling at their friend. “I thought the rest of you had all moved back to Equestria. When did you all get back?”

“Well they’re just visiting for a few days, and when they heard that I was having dinner with you, they all wanted to come.” Twilight said as she released her friend from the embrace. As she finished speaking she looked behind Mary at James who had been watching this whole exchange silently. “Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Oh, right!” Mary said and she scurried back to her brother’s side, she had gotten so caught up in the moment she had forgotten to introduce James. “Everypony, this is my older brother James. James these are my friends, Twilight, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie.” She said as she indicated each pony.

“Pleasure to meet you all.” He said as he extended a hand towards Twilight who happened to be the closest.

“Same here” she said shaking his hand with her hoof. “Dawn’s told us so much about you. She talks about you all the time.”

“I-I do not!” Mary said in the most unconvincing way possible.

“Oh come on dear, there’s no point in trying to deny it. Besides if I had an older brother like him, I’d be talking about him non-stop.” Rarity said looking James up and down.

James laughed “Well I can only hope I live up to the hype.”

Once James had finished speaking something pink, large, and smiling suddenly appeared from above him. Grinning at him upside down it suddenly shouted, “HIYA! I’m Pinkie, nice to meet ya!”

“Nice to meet you too.” He said returning the smile, *How the hell did she get above me?*

“Pinkie, get down from there!” Twilight shouted

The pink pony looked up from her perch on James' shoulders with a disappointed expression on her face, "Aw come on Twilight!" but after seeing the look Twilight was giving her, she jumped down reluctantly.

"Jeeze Pinkie, you are so random sometimes." Rainbow Dash piped up from the rest of the group.

"Random's a good thing, keeps life interesting." James said smiling down at the pink pony.

Pinkie immediately perked up at this, "I like you, I think we're going to be great friends!"

"I get that feeling too." He responded as he continued to smile. It always astounded him just how friendly Equestrians could be when you talked to them.

With the introductions finished the group of eight finally took their seats at the table. "So James," Rainbow Dash said as menus were brought out to them. "Dawn told us you work for the US government. What exactly do you do for them?" she was leaning forward, almost eager to hear the answer.

"I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you." He answered in a completely serious tone as he looked over the menu.

"R-really?" Fluttershy stammered out in a quiet voice, she was beginning to sink lower in her chair.

Mary shot James a look, and he immediately realized his mistake, "No not really, it's just a joke you know, spy games and all that stuff."

"O-oh, okay." Fluttershy said visibly relieved at his answer.

"So then what DO you do?" Dash pressed.

"Oh nothing much, I just try to make some sense out of the whole mess that is the world today." Technically, he wasn't lying by telling them this; a large part of his job was doing just that.

"Is it really that bad?" Twilight asked.

James smiled slightly as he looked up from the menu at her as their waiter approached. "The world's always been a complicated, chaotic place Twilight. Truth be told, Equestrian contact and the conversion bureaus that followed actually make things simpler, but not by much."

After that, the waiter finally came to take their orders. James silently lamented the lack of alcohol and meat on the menu, but at least some of the items they offered sounded tasty enough to distract him from that glaring issue. He ended up ordering a Caesar salad, one of the few

things still sold in New York that he actually liked. Mary and the rest of the group got themselves an assortment of flowers and other plants.

Once their orders were placed conversation started up once more. Rainbow Dash and Applejack somehow started an argument over who was better, the Wonderbolts or some famous Equestrian rodeo team. Pinkie, Fluttershy, and Mary were talking about how things were going back in Ponyville, as that was where Mary had undergone her training after being converted. Fluttershy was trying to tell Mary about some new arrivals but Pinkie was doing a top notch job of derailing the whole conversation into a completely different topic. And Rarity and Twilight had involved James in a discussion about US- Equestrian politics and policies. While Rarity was fairly well spoken about most public matters, it was Twilight that really caught James' interest. Her points and opinions were incredibly well thought out and thorough, he was quite impressed with her.

"You know Twilight," he said as he took another drink of his coke, "I don't think I've ever met someone quite as intelligent on these matters as you."

"Thanks." She said looking away, embarrassed but pleased with the compliment.

"So Dawn, where's Velocity?" Pinkie pie piped up from the conversation next to them.

James' head swiveled around to them upon hearing the name, he had heard about everyone else many times beforehand but this one was new.

"Well he couldn't make it tonight Pinkie." Mary said quickly, as if she was trying her hardest to sweep the question under the rug.

"Oh well that's weird I would have figured your co-" was as far as Pinkie got before Mary shoved her hoof over her mouth.

"So who's this Velocity exactly?" James asked glaring directly at his sister.

Before Mary could even begin to respond Rainbow Dash interrupted her from across the table.

"Oh he's Dawn's coltfrien-OWWW!" She shouted clutching her lower left leg in pain as Rarity had kicked it in an attempt to shut her up.

James' eyes narrowed, "So you have a colt friend huh? Planning on letting me know anytime soon?"

Mary started doing her best impression of Fluttershy and began to sink lower and lower under the table all the while avoiding her brother's gaze. "Well you know I could never find the right time, and I didn't want to upset you the few times I do get to see you..." she said in a quiet voice.

Upon seeing just how upset his sister was, James' expression softened, "Look, Mary I'm not

angry at you.” At this she gave him a skeptical look, to which he just responded by smiling “I’m really not, actually I’m quite happy for you. But I would like to hear about him later.”

“O-okay.” Mary responded, her mood considerably brightened by this turn of events; she had feared the worst when James had found out about Velocity. But her brother had surprised her yet again, taking the information in stride.” Oh and James?”

“Yeah?”

“I thought you said you were going to call me by my Equestrian name tonight.” She said smiling.

James smiled back, “Sorry, my mistake.”

The rest of the dinner proceeded without incident, James actually found himself enjoying the food for once. Mary hadn’t been lying when she had said this place had some of the best salads in town. After everyone had finished eating the group spilt off into smaller segments, Rainbow Dash had challenged James to a hoof wrestling contest. Unfortunately the blue Pegasus couldn’t quite beat him one-on-one so Applejack got involved and the two both began to try and push the human’s arm over. Pinkie then came over and started cheering both sides on in equal measure, thoroughly confusing the participants as to whom she actually supported. Rarity and Fluttershy had moved off into a corner and were discussing something in hushed tones, probably something to do with Rarity’s fashion business. And finally Mary and Twilight sat together at the table watching Dash and Applejack try in vain to beat James, whose arm sat a half-inch over the surface of the table but refused to move any further even after Dash had resorted to jumping on it.

Mary smiled at the spectacle before them. “I sure hope they realize soon that the only way they’ll win is if he lets them. Otherwise we’re gonna have two completely exhausted ponies on our hooves.”

“Is he really that strong?”

Mary smiled thinly, “James is still mostly human, but he does have a few cybernetic implants, those two could yank on that arm all day and it’d only move if he wanted it to.”

“wow.” Was all Twilight could say in response.

A few moments went by in silence before Twilight finally broke it, “Dawn, why hasn’t James undergone conversion yet?”

Mary continued to watch her brother in front of them, “He has his reasons.”

Twilight wanted to know what they were but it was obvious that Mary wasn’t about to tell her so she let it go. In front of them both Rainbow Dash and Applejack had collapsed to the floor exhausted, still having failed to defeat James in the hoof wrestling competition. He leaned over

the table to look at where they lay panting, "Call it a draw?" he asked grinning.

"Fine, but next time I won't go so easy on you!" Rainbow shot back between breaths.

"I would sure hope not." He said as he walked over and helped the two ponies to their hooves.

Soon after Twilight and the others thought that it was getting late and decided it would be a good idea to head back to their homes. One by one they said their goodbyes and left the restaurant, soon it was just James, Mary, and Twilight.

"Well Dawn, I think it's time that I left too." Twilight said as she and Mary hugged each other. "And James it was really great to finally meet you, I hope I get to see you again soon." She said to the human extending a hoof once more.

James took it, smiling "I sure hope so too."

And with that James and Mary left, walking together back to their apartment. "So what did you think?" Mary asked her older brother almost the second they exited the building.

"I think you've got yourself a great group of friends Mary. I haven't had such an enjoyable night in a long time."

She smiled at this.

"But I would like to hear about this colt friend of yours." He said as they continued to walk.

Mary's smile faded a little "I met Velocity back in Ponyville right after I had gotten converted. He was there as a flying instructor for the freshly arrived newfoals and we ran into each other one day, literally. He offered to buy me lunch to make up for it and things just kinda took off from there." She looked over at James who was listening intently. "I never thought I'd see him again but then six months ago he moved to New York. We got in contact and then started seeing each other."

"So how long have you two been going out?"

Mary bit her lower lip as she looked at the ground, "A few months."

James' brow furrowed at the response and he looked forward once again.

Mary stopped walking "James please don't be angry with me I know I should have told you sooner its jus--"

James held up a hand silencing her. "I'm not angry Mary." She continued to stare him down, knowing otherwise. James sighed as he relented, "Ok, I'm angry, but not with you."

Mary's expression changed to one of genuine confusion

"Mary, I'm not angry with you, I'm angry with myself. I've been a horrible brother as of late; I haven't been there for you like I should have been. Instead I've been drowning myself in work while you worry about me. I mean you've had a coltfriend for the past three months and not only did I not notice, you were too nervous to tell me because you didn't want to ruin what little time I spend with you. We used to be so close and then I..I.." He was clenching his fists so tightly his knuckles started to turn white. "I fucked up... I'm sorry."

"No, no you didn't. I do think you work too much, that you're burning yourself out, but you're doing it because it's what you believe is right and there's no one else who can do your job. I should have told you about Velocity ages ago, you deserved to know more than anyone else. I was just so scared that you might freak out and push me away." She said quietly as she gazed at the ground "James, you're the best older brother I could ask for, don't ever forget that." With that Mary walked up to James and wrapped him up in a hug which he returned. "I love you big brother.."

"I love you too, sis."

Later that night, back at IDI headquarters, MERCURY was just finishing up its analysis of the HLF nanomachines. The doctor who had been intently monitoring the AI's progress watched as the last few commands were carried out and the results displayed.

COMPATIBILITY REGISTRATION COMPLETE...

NANO-CATALYST VIABILITY ASSESSMENT COMPLETE....

COMPATIBILITY WITH DNA PROFILE ONE.... SEVENTY-NINE PERCENT...

COMPATIBILITY WITH DNA PROFILE TWO.....ONE-HUNDRED PERCENT...

"Wait, this can't be right... that would mean this is..." The coffee cup he had been holding slipped from his nerveless fingers and shattered on the ground as his mind processed what the AI was telling him. Anyone else would have asked for a verification of these results but the doctor already knew that the AI had 99.9% accuracy in its calculations. He pushed a button on the console before him which gave him a direct, secure line to the director's office. "Director Moore? You might want to get down here sir; I think you're going to want to see..."