

Chapter 1: The Emerald Brothers

“out of the fridge, into the fire”

Life was boring on the Apple Plains, from the dusty crop fields to the small dusty town. The only thing I could take solace in was the Apple Plains signature beer, “Golden Harp”. So there I sat, at the bar of the town’s local, The Paddock Pub, staring into the rich, black deliciousness before me.

“What’s got ya down Clover?” Taps, the blue earth pony stallion who tended the bar asked.

Oh right! That’s me, by the way. The name’s Clover (you could probably tell from the lucky four leafed clover upon my flank), just your average, run of the mill twenty year old earth pony, black mane, pale grey coat and emerald eyes. Nothing about me really stood out, well other than the fact I’ve got a reputation for being a lucky son of a bitch.

“Same old, same old. There’s just nothing to do since dad died and the NCR took the ranch. At least hey gave us some compensation. Even the shooting competitions Shamrock and I have are getting mundane.”

“When was the last time you had one?” asked Taps.

“Yesterday.” I sighed

“Who won?”

“Me.”

“As always....”

I suppose I was a better shot than Shamrock, but that was probably because I spent more time fixing up my rifle than he did. Good old *Longshot*, I had been using and customizing that rifle since dad gave it to me when I was fifteen. Why did he give me a rifle? I don’t know. I mean, who gives a colt a rifle? It’s just not logical but I loved him for it.

The door slammed open, followed by a stallion with a messy emerald mane and light orange coat.

“Shamrock, is that your idea of making a grand entrance?” I chuckled.

“Oh, in that case I won’t tell you what I just did.” he said with a smirk.

“What have you got yourself into this time?” He may have been the charismatic one but he certainly wasn’t the brightest bulb in the box, even if he did still retain the old Emerald Island accent.

“Oh, you know, just this, that, signing up at the new Apple Plains express courier office, the usual.”

“What courier office?” I asked as I turned around on my stool.

“Just opened today, we are the first people to be hired!

“Oh well that’s...we?” oh boy, here we go...

“Come on Clove, you always said you wanted to get out of this town.”

“Yeah but you could have asked first,” I said, “I just never expected to be a courier... when do we start?”

“Tomorrow, first thing in t’ morning.”

“Well then, a few more drinkies and then home methinks...”

“That’s the spirit!” Shamrock laughed, slapping me on the back. I don’t think he realizes it but I’m not as strong as him, just smarter and better at shooting... that made me feel so very smug. Marvelous!

So we spent the day drinking, playing darts, shooting pool, you know, pub stuff before heading back to the peeling, rust covered old cottage my family had lived in for the past 200 years.

My family came from a group of small islands off the coast of the newly annexed western territories of Equestria called the Emerald Isles, and when the megaspells hit, they survived in Stable 41 and after the Over...was it a mare...or a stallion... I forgot, anyway, once he/she/it found out that only one of the Emerald Islands had been hit, the Stable door opened and the

islanders went about their lives and eventually, when Sunny Sands had set up the New Canterlot Republic islanders started to immigrate to the mainland, my family included.

And there we were 200 years later, my brother and recently deceased dad still held onto the old Emerald Isle accent. Me? I lost mine a while back after reading “How to Speak like an Equestrian! The Patriotic Guide to Speech”. Obviously a wartime propaganda book...

Home sweet home. Somehow through the haze that is too much Golden Harp, it seemed decent and is a memory I still cherish of the peaceful times.

“I’m goin to bed,” Shamrock said through his drunken stupor, “G’night Clove.”

“Night.” I said but there was too much to do before we set out. So I got to packing the things we may need, canteens, food, ammo and rifles. Perfect.

“My name’s Stamps,” said the skinny blue mare behind the desk in front of us. She was a short unicorn, just taller than a filly. “I suppose I’m your boss! Anyway, to business, chaps! Your first job is a big one and it’s going to take you all the way up to the Long Fifteen.”

She opened her desk and pulled out a tiny black and white poker chip. “This thing needs to get to the Lucky Bucky casino on the New Neighgas strip, the owner of said casino is paying through the nose to get this out there and we’re talking thousands of Bits, not those pieces of junk bottle caps!”

“How can something so small be so valuable...” Shamrock pondered. I had to admit, I was pretty stumped too.

“I dunno, but if it’s that valuable, you’d better keep it hidden and protected.” She said, seemingly mesmerized by it.

“Right...” I said. I was a bit creeped out about how she was reacting to it, “we’d best be off then” She gave Shamrock the chip.

“Have a safe trip!”

The Long Fifteen. The longest stretch of road around and Shamrock and I were traversing it, along with a very nice caravaner called Packs.

“So Packs, where you from?” Shamrock asked, plodding along next to him as I talked to his 2 headed cow, which seemed nice even though his other head had the IQ of a cactus.

“Ah’m from way back west, Sunny Sands to be exact. Yep, got me a contract with the Red Wagon caravan agency.”

“Oh really? Well Clover and I are from the Apple Plains, born and raised! Where you headed?”

“Ponave Outpost, the eastern most part of NCR held territory, got some papers and supplies for ‘em, didn’t bother reading them though di’nt seem right. And you?”

“The New Neighgas strip.”

“Never been there myself, heard it’s like an Oasis in the desert.”

I had expected that sort of banter between those two, but I was having a much better conversation with Oscar, the brahmin.

“Well, in my opinion, the NCR really are quite good, their main downfall is the fact that they are too ambitious.” said Oscar.

“How so?” I asked, bewildered by how much he knew.

“You see, they are getting greedy and expanding east too quickly. If you ask me, they will be stretched too finely and will run out of resources unless they start reallocating them to the places that they already hold, then in about five to ten years they would have the strength to carry on east.”

“That’s interesting, so what you’re telling me is that the NCR are trying to take the Ponave desert with insufficient resources?”

“Precisely!” Oscar said through a smile.

This was an interesting turn of events, from what Oscar has told me, the NCR are fighting

something called Crusader's Legion, mostly over a dam, and all this is happening just east of the New Neighgas strip. I was sure we'd be fine; I mean we weren't heading that far east...

"So why are you headed to the Ponave?"

"Package delivery to a casino on the New Neighgas strip." I said as I looked up at Shamrock and Packs, "So tell me, what's it like back west?"

"Well, before the bombs dropped..."

"Wait, you were around before the bombs dropped?" I said, wide eyed.

"Yup, saw them rain down from the sky, got highly irradiated by them too but I was lucky, instead of dying, I grew an extra head and got a bit ugly. It's a fair trade off if you ask us, isn't it Bert?" he looked at his other head, but Bert was concentrated on a shiny spoon dangling from Pack's barding, "of course sometimes it can be annoying...but we do live a lot longer than natural."

"Oh shit. Clover, get up here!" called Shamrock as he interrupted our conversation. Up ahead was a group of travelers under attack by a group of large lizard looking creatures. One of the travellers had already been bitten and was lying on the ground clutching their leg. I pulled out *Longshot* and aimed down the sight. There were six lizard things and I had eight bullets in my rifle. I liked those odds. Shamrock and I shot in unison and two lizards went down from holes in their heads.

Unfortunately that got the other's attention. They started to run at us, their mouths were snapping as they ran.

"Uh oh." Packs said as he dove behind us. 'Uh oh' was right. I fired again and dropped another. I pulled back the bolt on my rifle to load another bullet while Shamrock had taken out another leaving two still running. Now they were a bit too close. The damn thing jumped on me, knocking me down before I could fire.

"Get this thing off of me!" The only thing between me and the gaping jaws of the lizard was my rifle pushing against its reptilian hide, while I desperately tried to keep it from biting me. Luckily for me, Shamrock hadn't missed his target and bucked the bastard off of me. It scrambled to its feet hissing at us before Shamrock shot it in the throat, blood flying as its head flew off.

“Ew.” I said as I got up. “That was nasty.”

We ran up to the travelers and Packs proceeded to wrap a healing bandage around the wounded mare’s leg, what ever the bandage was made of started to heal the leg. “Y’all gotta be careful out here. Most of the critters out here are dangerous. Always carry a firearm just in case the NCR patrols are too far away, never around when you need ‘em.” He said as he administered the bandage. The blood around the mare’s leg was making me queasy so I looked away. “Best git y’all up to Ponave Outpost lickity-split so we don’t git attacked again.”

The outpost wasn’t a very interesting place. There were two small buildings on the side of the road, a sniper perch, a lot of barbed wire, sandbags and some holding pens for brahmin. The only interesting thing around were the two large statues shaking hooves at the front of the outpost.

“What are they?” I asked myself, bewildered at their size.

“Well the one on the left is a desert ranger,” said a voice behind me, startling me. It was an earth pony wearing NCR military barding and helmet with a corkscrew strapped to the side. “And the one on the right is a NCR ranger and this marks the place they joined forces.” She clocked my look of surprise. “I’m Corporal Corks, sorry to just sneak up on you like that...”

“Uh...um...right, yes,” I said, shaking off my surprised stupor, “thanks Corporal. I’m Clover” I extended my hoof to the mare.

“That’s alright Clover,” she said as she shook my hoof with great enthusiasm, “least I can do for new comers, so where you headed? And more importantly, where did you get that rifle?”

“Well, me and my brother Shamrock...” I said, looking around for him, he was still chatting to Packs and the travelers, “...are delivering a package to the New Neighgas strip. My father gave me the rifle, and I’ve been customizing it for five years now,”

“Phew,” she said in admiration, scratching her purple mane, “well she’s a beaut, I’ll give you that...” Obviously a gun enthusiast.

“Thanks,” I said, just as Shamrock walked up.

“Well, Clover, aren’t you gonna introduce me to your new girlfriend?”

Say what?! I almost fell over with surprise and slight embarrassment.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I said, collecting my thoughts, “Shamrock, this is Corporal Corks, she was just telling me about the statues,”

“Pleased t’ meet you,” he said, shaking her hoof.

“That’s an interesting accent you’ve got there. Whoops, my shift just started, see you around *cutie!*” she laughed before galloping off to the first building,

“She was cute” Shamrock nickered, grinning at me before I kicked him. Hard. “Alright, alright! Anyway, we best get moving, try t’ close some distance between us and the strip”

The desert was vast and dry. Mountains formed a large spine through the middle of it and New Neighgas was miles away on the other side...this is going to be fun.

We were walking again, feeling the heat from the day being replaced by the cool night, the blue skies replaced with that of thousands of stars and the bright moon casting long shadows of cacti. We were about two kilometers away from Ponave Outpost and Shamrock was still teasing me about Cpl. Corks.

“No sense walking in the dark, eh?” said Shamrock, finally breaking from the teasing as he sat down beside a rock and rummaged through his bag, “dinner?” He pulled out a can of beans, a pot and two bowls. I got to work getting a fire started. I was in luck; there was a dried up tree a few meters from camp that provided ample fire wood and with a quick flick of a match the fire was lit. Within minutes, we were chomping down on our beans.

“Is it me or are the stars brighter out here?” Sham said, beans clinging to his mouth.

“You’re delirious.” I said, looking up. I didn’t notice anything different, “You’d better get some sleep”

“Fine, but I’m telling you, something’s different around here.” he said while unrolling his bedroll, “we gotta hit the trail early tomorrow to get anywhere near civilization, you’d best get some shut eye too”. It wasn’t until then that I noticed that I was exhausted. Walking the Long

Fifteen and then some really takes it out of you. At least tomorrow we should be at Lipton.

I snuggled down into my bedroll, “g’night Shamrock” I yawned before burying my face in the roll but Shamrock was already asleep, on a beautiful night like this, what could go wrong?

Shouting. Talk about your rude awakenings. To add to it, I couldn’t move or see. Shit.

“What’s going on?!” I tasted copper. That was bad. From what I gathered, I was bound, blindfolded and bleeding.

Judging by the sounds I was hearing, someone was getting the shit kicked out of them. “Shamrock?” I called out.

“Hey boss,” a deep voice said not too far from me. “Sleeping beauty here’s finally waking up.”

I knew I was a strapping young stallion but that’s pushing it.

“Who’s there?” I asked.

“Well, no need to keep secrets,” said another younger voice before my blindfold was lifted. I was right: I’m tied to a rock. How novel. Before me, also tied to a rock, was the twitching, groaning body of Shamrock, his light orange coat torn in patches and blood tricking down his coat obscuring his three leaf clover cutie mark.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” I shouted, I didn’t think my eyes could get any wider.

“Give me the chip” a well-dressed Stallion spat.

“Fine...check...the crevice...between your flanks.” Shamrock said before chuckling, blood spurting from his mouth with each movement. The Stallion moved towards him taking his cigarette out of his mouth.

“Wrong answer.” he said as he plunged the end of the cigarette into Shamrock’s face. The scent of singed flesh filled the crisp night air. I couldn’t watch. With each scream from Shamrock, I cringed a little more.

“Last chance, Greenie,” he said as he stepped away. Shamrock looked at me with one eye

closed. It was blue and swollen. Blood was pouring from his nose, mouth and head.

“Don’t tell them...a fucken thing!” he said before coughing up an unnatural amount of blood.

“I warned you kid.” fancy pants said as he reached into his coat.

“No.” I whispered.

“But did you listen?” as he pulled out a gun.

“Oh goddesses please, no” I said.

“No.” he said as he turned and pulled the trigger,

“NOOOO!” I shouted. Shamrocks body jolted, his head slamming back to smack against the rock, blood splashing on the ground in front of him while the rock behind him was painted crimson. Blood streaked down his ropes and body.

“YOU MONSTER!” I yelled, squirming to get free, “I’LL KILL YOU!”

“With what, kid? Those?” he pointed at one of his henchmen who was dressed in leathers, in fact all of them were, except Mr. Fancy Pants before me. Leathers over there had our rifles. I looked at the dark brown pony.

“How much is this bastard paying you to do this?”

“Enough to feed all of us for a very long time.” he said, in the voice I heard earlier.

“Now, you’re going to tell me where that chip is.” Fancy Pants said as he stepped closer, carefully avoiding Shamrock’s puddle of blood.

“Who the hell are you?” I spat, looking into his dark blue eyes.

“Where are my manners?” Fancy Pants said, “My name’s Double Down and you were just about to tell me where that chip of yours is.” This guy was full of himself, from his slicked back black mane to his well-maintained pale yellow coat and his black and white checkered suit. Hell, even his cutie mark screamed obnoxiousness. Two cards face up.

“You killed my brother, stole our stuff and now you’re playing nice? FUCK YOU!” I said as I head-butted him. It was at times like this I wish I was a unicorn. I would have impaled the fucker.

“Fucking cretin,” he was holding his nose. I hoped it was broken, “That’s it, no more Mr. Nice Guy!” He pulled out his knife. Bollocks.

“Tell me.” He shouted as he brought his knife down on my right foreleg, pushing it deep inside the muscle and twisting the blade.

“ARGH! Mother fucker!” I screamed as loud as I could.

He pulled out the knife just as one of his cronies found the chip on Shamrock. “Found it.” The mohawked bastard said in a high looney voice. If I wasn’t tied up and in immense pain, I would have laughed.

“Ah, so small...” Double Down began as he looked at the chip,

“Kinda like your dick then,” I laughed.

“Yeah, keep laughing kid,” he said as he turned to me and raised the barrel of his pistol, “you must be the lucky one around here, with your four leafed weed. But I gotta tell you...” he pointed the gun at my head, “your luck just ran out”

BANG

Footnote: Welcome to the desert, we’ve got fun and games.

New traits:

“Wild Wild Wasteland”: The desert wastes can get a bit wacky if you look in the right places

“Trigger Discipline”: You shoot 20% slower but are 20% more accurate.

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