

Friendship is Mercenaries

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Chapter One: It Begins

The castle looming over the horizon was at a level of intimidating that bordered on mind-consuming. The mere sight of the fortress and its unmistakably eldritch atmosphere was enough to compel anyone to investigate, where they would inevitably fall victim to the horrors contained within, never to resurface—that, or they would run away screaming. A castle of this description had no business being in the New Mexico desert, yet there it was, standing ominously at the peak of a plateau. It was a truly nonconventional location for the residence of a wizard, especially the only wizard left alive on Earth.

The RED Soldier and this wizard, who answered to the name Merasmus, had once been roommates who argued and bickered constantly. Though they had many disputes, the most spectacular ones tended to result in inter-dimensional turmoil. By way of example, a particularly nasty rent disagreement in December of '71 had gotten not only the Soldier, but the entire RED Team and their eternal rivals, the BLU Team, banished to the extra-dimensional nation of DeGroot, where they had become locked in a fierce medieval battle for the fate of the entire nation. The very next year, on Halloween, a seemingly trivial argument about dishes had resulted in the summoning of the dreaded Monoculous, which had in turn resulted in an extra-dimensional war between the forces of Earth and the eldritch denizens of the Underworld. The Soldier had many skills, but “people skills” were not among them.

So why was the Soldier currently en route to Merasmus's castle? Simply because the Administrator had decreed he should get the wizard to move his newly-constructed home to a plot of land that wasn't RED Team's property. And though the Soldier knew he was the worst possible choice for this mission, nobody in their right mind would dare defy the Administrator. After all, she did control their lives... and their paychecks.

The Soldier stepped as confidently as he could up to the large double doors of the castle. He took a deep breath and cracked his knuckles, mentally steeling himself for what was to come. After knocking thrice, he had only just enough time to secure his Viking helmet and brace for impact before the doors burst open.

“WHO DARES DISTURB MERASMUS THE MAGICIAN?! THIS IS AN ELDRITCH CASTLE O' DARK MAGICKE! NOT A PANCAKE 'OUSE!” The Soldier had been wise to brace himself; the sheer power of the voice was enough to blow lesser men backward.

“Hi, I'm selling Girl Scout cookies,” the Soldier deadpanned, reassuming a normal standing position. The wizard standing in the doorway glowered at the Soldier, clenching his nearly body-height staff tightly in one hand.

“Goddammit, not ye again,” Merasmus grumbled.

“Yeah, it's a real pleasure to see you again, too, old man,” the Soldier snarled, folding his arms. Merasmus didn't look *that* old—the age extension rituals he'd performed had kept him alive for the last century and a half, and in the physical condition of a man in his late thirties. The Soldier merely used the phrase to irk him. “And not that I care, but what's with the short shorts? Are you trying to scare off children, or something?” Merasmus sighed.

“Merasmus is livin' in the desert now,” he said. “E's gotta keep cool some'ow.”

"And the best way to do that is by wearing a black muscle shirt and short shorts, a tattered black magician's cloak, leather boots—also black—and the skull of a demonic ram monster. Your logic is bulletproof."

"Well, tha's one helluva way t' greet an old friend," Merasmus growled.

"Why would I want friends?" the Soldier shot back. "Friendships don't last. All they're gonna do is start crashing down around you. After six months, tops, you get offered a unique weapon and all of a sudden you have to fight to the death. Or you'll just be exploited by some snail-eating prick waiting to stab you in the back."

"I think yer lettin' yer pers'nal experiences get'n the way 'ere."

The Soldier clenched his fists. "The point is, I'm not your friend."

"Alright, fine. Fair enough." Merasmus raised an eyebrow. "What're ye doin' out 'ere?"

"I heard my old roommate had built himself an eldritch castle of dark magic out in the middle of the desert. I came out to see it for myself. And I'm—"

"—not gonna leave 'til Merasmus gives ye the tour."

"Affirmative."

Merasmus sighed deeply. "Fine. C'min."

As the Soldier and Merasmus crossed the foyer toward the large ornate staircase in the center, the Soldier glanced around. The foyer had a wooden floor with a large, once-green square carpet in its center, above which hung a decrepit chandelier. To his left was what looked like a dining area, and to the right was the grand library. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling, every ornate fixture was tarnished and splintered, and the floorboards creaked as though they would give out at any moment. The place looked every inch like a haunted mansion.

"So. Eldritch castle of dark magic," the Soldier began, stopping in the precise center of the foyer.

"Aye," Merasmus answered, coming to a stop a few moments after the Soldier did and turning around to face him. "Merasmus built it 'imself from the ground up."

"And it only took you...?"

"Five hours," Merasmus said, a hint of pride in his voice. "Five hours t' 'semble the thing, but over twen'y years t' gather the necessary ritual implements."

"A new personal best, I'm sure."

Merasmus chuckled softly. "Merasmus prefers it this way, with just 'im an' the Bombinomicon." He jerked a single thumb over his shoulder at the grand library.

"You *like* living with that dusty old book? It never shuts up," the Soldier grumbled.

"Merasmus is 'appy 'ere, Soldier. 'E 'asn't lived in a castle since tha' incident 'n the 30's with the kid's eye. 'E's missed it...a lot. Merasmus donnae wanna go back."

The Soldier scoffed and crossed his arms. He rolled his eyes, but under the cover of his Tyrant's Helm, Merasmus didn't notice. "Tough luck," he muttered.

"...Sorry?" Merasmus sounded more surprised than anything.

"This desert—the land you built your castle on. It belongs to RED. The Team's headquarters is five miles that way." The Soldier pointed back at the grand entrance. "The boss lady doesn't like the location." Merasmus was silent for a moment.

"Yer sayin'...yer gonna try an' make Merasmus leave?" he said softly, voice quivering with rage. "'E's only just gotten settled. It's taken 'im twen'y years t' build this castle...an' yer gonna try an' make 'im leave?" The Soldier had seen Merasmus angry before, and he knew what to expect. He merely shrugged.

"Hey, I'm just sayin'." The Soldier shrugged. "This can be a pretty bad neighborhood sometimes. I hear the locals can get..." The Soldier grinned maliciously. "...violent."

"Ye wouldn't," Merasmus murmured.

"No, I wouldn't," the Soldier answered, his hideous grin getting wider. "Why would I, when I can get a professional Demoman to do it instead?"

"*Merasmus innae leavin'*," Merasmus growled, gripping his staff tighter still.

"Merasmus is gonna have to," the Soldier said. "After all...this place isn't yours. No one invited you here, Merasmus."

"DONNAE ANGER MERASMUS! A WIZARD INVITES 'IMSELF!" This time, the Soldier had no time to brace himself and was blown off his feet. He tumbled backwards through the air and landed on his back. The force of Merasmus's voice continued to slide him back several feet after he hit the ground. After a few moments, the Soldier skidded to a stop. With a start, he noticed that Merasmus's voice had blown his Helm off his head and into the wall.

He was angry now.

After rescuing his hat from the cold embrace of the hardwood floor, the Soldier scrambled to his feet and growled like a rabid dog. *Two*, he thought. As if by magic, a pump-action shotgun appeared in his hands. It wasn't actually magic, of course; the weapon appeared courtesy of his Spytech-patented Hammerspace inventory. The Soldier didn't know or care how it worked. All he knew was that "two" meant his shotgun, and his shotgun meant one dead Merasmus.

"You wanna do this the hard way?!" he roared. He cocked his shotgun and pointed it straight at the wizard. "*We'll do this the hard way!*" Merasmus pointed his staff at the Soldier...and everything went brown.

"Not t'night," he snarled. As he lifted his staff into the air, the Soldier was yanked off the ground. He was surrounded by the unmistakable chocolate-brown aura of magic. Merasmus's staff gave off the stuff like healing gas,

emitting a deep otherworldly whirring noise.

"Ye not gonna get Merasmus t' leave, Soldier!" Merasmus bellowed with all the ferocity of the Soldier himself. "Maybe if ye'd been bloody *nice* about it, 'e woulda considered, but no, ye had t' threaten 'im! NOW ye've made 'im mad!"

"When I get over there, Merasmus, I am going to slap the magic out of your mouth!" the Soldier bellowed. He tried to charge forward, but he was still suspended in midair, and his feet found no purchase. He only succeeded in making himself look silly.

"Ye ain't comin' over 'ere, Soldier. Merasmus's gotta treat fer ye. It'll be more fun if 'e doesn't tell ye exactly wha' 'e's up to."

"You're gonna send me to another dimension again, aren't you?!" the Soldier spat. Merasmus let out a sinister chuckle.

"Oh, ye know Merasmus so well," he said. He stepped backwards up the wooden staircase, still pointing his staff directly at the Soldier. Never breaking eye contact, Merasmus reached back and pulled down on a concealed lever in the wall behind him. With a mighty mechanical whir, the hardwood floor sunk down and retracted into the walls. There was a deep pit beneath the floor, lined with sturdy-looking metal. The Soldier couldn't see the bottom.

"You can't have this kind of technology in your eldritch castle! You're a wizard, not a James Bond villain!" the Soldier shouted, failing to mask the fear in his voice as Merasmus dragged him over the pit.

"Salready in the middle o' New Mexico, whadda ye want?" Merasmus responded. He slowly lowered his staff, pointing it toward the pit. The Soldier didn't realize what was happening at first. A ball of swirling white light appeared in the center of the pit, several yards deep. It began to grow steadily larger and brighter, changing from the size of a pinhead to a golf ball to a human head in mere seconds. As it grew, the sound of roaring winds reached the Soldier's ears. After fifteen seconds, the sphere of light was too bright for the Soldier to look at directly, and the winds completely deafened him. He banished his shotgun with a mental cry of *zero* and shielded his eyes with his arms. The Soldier remained in that position, blind, for what felt like a very long time.

Then there was a monstrous blast of magic, and everything was still.

The Soldier opened his eyes again and blinked, temporarily blinded by the sudden change in lighting. Below him, the pit was pitch black, and now contained the most sinister-looking portal he'd ever seen. Portals into the Underworld had been a light purple, and portals into DeGroot had been sepia, but this one looked suspiciously like a black hole. Too terrified to remember he was supposed to be hiding his terror, he glanced up at Merasmus. Merasmus grinned maniacally at the Soldier and balanced his staff over his right shoulder, much like a hunter would a shotgun.

"Oh...sure...just cursing me or whatever's too good for me? Gotta throw me into a black hole?" The Soldier's voice wavered. "I'm not gonna relent, Merasmus! I will not rest until your staff is lodged firmly up your ass!"

Merasmus chuckled. "Ye'll 'ave t' get back first, won' ye?" he sneered. Without warning, his staff's magical glow vanished. The Soldier fell screaming into the pit, into the black hole...

...and right out the other end. After flying through the air for a moment, arms thrashing wildly, he slammed into a very large tree at what felt very much like terminal velocity.

"God...damn...wizard..." he slurred. It took him several minutes to regain his clarity of mind, climb to his feet, and get a proper look at his surroundings.

Merasmus had sent him to a dark forest. There were no immediate signs of habitation. There were, however, plenty of ominous-looking trees, an ominous-looking cave set into an ominous-looking cliff about ten yards to the Soldier's right, ominously large bones scattered around the general area, and an ominous-looking black hole hovering a few inches off the ground, letting off an ominous low whir. Wait... black hole?

The Soldier shook off his feelings of foreboding. "Oh hey! Portal's still open!" With a cry of triumph, he charged at the black hole, leapt purposefully...and bounced off, landing hard on the forest floor. "Ow! What the hell?!" he blurted out. Suddenly, he understood the situation.

"...Oh, that's just GREAT!" he bellowed, slamming a fist into the dirt. "I'm trapped in an unknown dimension with no idea where I am, I can't go back through the portal, and the portal's gonna stay open just to mock me!" He stood up. "Merasmus! I don't know if you can hear me, but when I get back, you'd better be ready for me! Your castle will be called GRAVELPIT TWO-POINT-OH when I'm done with it! Because there will be an EXPLOSION that will create a PIT where your castle USED to be, and the CASTLE ITSELF will be reduced to GRAVEL! *DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME??*" Merasmus did not respond. Instead, a deep growl echoed from behind him.

"You stay the hell out of this!" the Soldier snapped, spinning around to face whoever had growled at him. "This is between me and that..."

Not many things can shut the Soldier up mid-rant. That night, the sudden appearance of a lion with the tail of a scorpion and the wings of a bat was added to the list.

"...Oh, this is just the WORST day." The Soldier whipped his shotgun out of his inventory, silently cursing his decision to bring just his default rocket launcher, shotgun, and shovel with him to Merasmus's. As the lion-monster crouched as though to spring, the Soldier tensed, not moving from his spot. They stared each other down for a long, long moment.

With a fierce roar, the monster leapt at the Soldier. The Soldier dove forward and somersaulted under the monster with the reflexes of a samurai. He twisted himself around and fired his shotgun. The monster roared in pain, struggled to regain its footing, and stumbled toward the black hole...and into it.

"Oh, sweet! Portal's working again!" the Soldier cheered, leaping enthusiastically toward the portal. But as before, he bounced off harmlessly and skidded back along the ground.

"WHAT?!" he bellowed, returning his shotgun to his inventory. The Soldier jumped to his feet and stomped angrily up to the portal. "The lion-thing can go through, but I can't?! What the hell kinda bullshit is that?!" The portal seemed to realize how silly this was, and promptly returned the lion. Before the Soldier had time to react, the lion

pounced. With a few quick slashing motions of the lion's claws, the Soldier was no more.

Satisfied in the slaughter of its prey, the monster set about devouring it. For a few precious moments, the forest was silent except for the sound of flesh being consumed.

"Wow. You are disgusting, you know that?" The monster looked up from its meal. To its confusion, the Soldier was standing directly behind it, completely unharmed. The lion had a very expressive face, and the look of confused shock on it would have been incredibly amusing, had the Soldier been in the mood for such things. Instead, he merely shrugged.

"Yeah," he sighed, "this has happened every time I get sent to another dimension. At home, I'm set up to come back to life in certain designated safe-rooms if I die. But when I get sent to other dimensions—thanks, Merasmus—I respawn at the portal unless some magic lets me respawn somewhere else. Don't ask me how it works. I've got no idea."

He also had no idea why he was explaining respawning to a giant lion-thing. He crossed his arms. "But seriously, you are disgusting. I don't know how it works here, but in my dimension, we have these things called table manners. What, are you scared the corpse'll run away, or something?" The monster turned to face the Soldier with a feral growl. The Soldier decided to try the intimidation card.

"Oh, you think that's a good idea, do you? Well, NO ONE SCREWS WITH ME!" He yanked his retractable trench shovel out of his inventory. Trying to make himself appear as large and immune to pain as possible, he screeched at the top of his lungs until he was out of air and smacked himself in the head with his shovel a few times to emphasize his point. Simultaneously, the lion-monster released an ear-shattering roar right in the Soldier's face.

Suddenly, a third, deafening roar tore its way out of the ominous-looking cave. The Soldier and the monster froze. As they stared, temporarily paralyzed, a colossal bear stalked out of the cave. Roughly twice as tall as the Soldier, likely taller, it looked less like an animal and more like an animate chunk of the night sky. Its yellow, bloodshot eyes darted around the clearing for a moment, before coming to rest on the Soldier and his opponent. The three creatures stared at each other for a long moment.

Then the bear roared again, and the other two creatures realized what they'd gotten themselves into.

"TACTICAL RETREAT!" the Soldier shrieked. Having nowhere in particular to go, he whirled around and fled for his life, screaming in terror. He didn't bother looking over his shoulder to see where the lion-monster fled to, but he heard it yelping like a dog as it charged away to somewhere unseen. The bear's roars ripped through the trees as both man and beast ran for their lives...

Chapter Two: Technicolor Ponies

After sprinting for what felt like hours, the Soldier couldn't hear the bear chasing him anymore. Daring to look over his shoulder, he saw that there was nothing behind him but trees. Maybe it had gone after the lion, or just wanted to scare him away. Relieved, he placed his hand on his heart and collapsed against a tree.

Recap, he thought, breathing heavily. I've been here...wherever here is...for about half an hour now...and I've already been attacked by two monsters. Not a good day. The portal's still open, but I can't go back through, which means I'm stuck here until I find some kind of magical authority who can open a new one. That's assuming there's even intelligent life in this dimension... The Soldier finally got his breathing under control, while the walls of his chest continued their valiant battle to contain his heart. *Okay. No reason to panic. Even if there aren't any civilized life-forms here, it's only a matter of time until my team notices I'm gone and sends someone after me. Then I can go back home and beat the crap out of Merasmus.* The Soldier allowed a sinister grin to cross his face. *Oh, I am so looking forward to destroying that castle.*

Once his heart slowed, he noticed what looked like a clearing in the distance. His face brightened, and his legs felt fresh and re-energized. *This looks promising, he thought. I can set up a perimeter here.* As he pushed his way through the thick trees, he could see a strange dwelling in the center of the glade.

It looked like a gnarled old tree, covered in ornamental tribal masks. Small bottles filled with suspiciously brightly colored liquids dangled from the branches and tinkled in the slight breeze. Someone had carved a door into the front of the tree which didn't even clear his chest.

Well, this is...arguably civilized. He started for the door, raising his hand with the intent to knock...then paused. His hand fell back to his side. *...No. I have a feeling that anyone living in a house like this isn't likely to even speak English, let alone know about inter-dimensional transportation.* The Soldier turned away from the tree and examined the clearing. His gaze fell on a worn dirt path leading deeper into the forest, in an entirely different direction.

Heh, that's more like it. Relieved to find what could be evidence of more... definitive civilization, he continued further into the forest, leaving the curious tree behind him.

After a few more hours of walking, the Soldier finally breached the boundaries of the forest. "Finally! I haven't done that much walking since the first time I got lost in Steel," he muttered.

Shoving his way through the trees, panting heavily, the Soldier found himself in a grassy meadow, dotted with flowers and bathed in moonlight. The whole surface of the meadow appeared to flow gently in the cool, nighttime breeze. The only sounds were the chirping of crickets, the calming rustle of plants, and the faint trickle of an unseen source of water. It was peaceful... too peaceful. It set the Soldier's teeth on edge.

As picturesque as the meadow was, the Soldier eyes were only drawn to a small village in the distance, nestled between a few trees and farms. *Oh, thank God. Civilization at last! If I ever see another forest in my life, it'll be too soon.* He determinedly set off across the meadow, trampling a few wildflowers in his haste. Not that the Soldier cared. He was almost home.

When the Soldier reached the town, it was deserted. Not entirely unexpected; it was about two in the morning by his watch. He roamed the streets for a few minutes, searching for a safe place to rest without drawing suspicion from the locals. However, he found nothing but small thatch roofed cottages, empty fruit and vegetable stands, and the occasional tumbleweed.

He eventually stumbled across a building with a basement window. Strangely, the structure was three stories high, and built to resemble some kind of giant pastry, complete with a gingerbread roof, decorative icing, and glowing candles atop a cupcakes-shaped tower. The Soldier paid no heed to this, though—it was the basement he was concerned with. He quickly pried the tiny window open and, after a few minutes of straining, somehow squeezed through. Squinting into the darkness, he scanned the room for danger. To his surprise, the room was filled from wall-to-wall with hundreds of wooden crates.

Wow. How much would it cost to open all these? Upon closer inspection, the Soldier noticed that the crates were unlocked, unlike the crates he was used to dealing with. They all were labeled with almost painfully bright pink lettering. From what he could tell, they all contained food, most of it non-perishable. After making sure there were no giant spectral bears or lion-things lurking behind a crate pile, he stood on top of a nearby crate and pulled the tiny window shut. With a sigh, he sat down and leaned against the crate. After walking through a dark forest for hours, it was easy for him to fall asleep.

After what seemed like just moments, the Soldier opened his eyes again. The basement was illuminated with soft, early-morning light. He got to his feet and stretched. The telltale sound of a chattering crowd flowed down through the window into the basement. Interestingly, he could also hear hundreds upon hundreds of hoofbeats.

Huh, sounds like there are animals everywhere, he said to himself, stifling a yawn. *Probably some kinda livestock—horses, cows, oxen. Livestock roaming freely in the town square could mean a medieval civilization, or at the very least, a civilization that still uses the horse-drawn carriage. Let's just have a look...* He clambered on top of the crate that had been his backrest and looked out the window. What he saw was almost beyond comprehension, even considering everything he'd been through last night. After a second or two of stunned stillness, he shook his head and blinked. Then he looked again.

Oh...great, he thought with little more than resigned acceptance. *I thought that bear thing was bad. Now there are strange Technicolor ponies everywhere.* He craned his neck, desperately trying to get a better view of the street through the basement window.

Are people...riding them...? ...No, I don't see any saddles, and I don't see any peoples' legs. Thoroughly confused, the Soldier hopped off the crate he was standing on. *Why can't I see any people? Where is everyone and why are the ponies walking free? For that matter, why are the ponies so brightly colored? What is going on here...?* The Soldier adjusted his Tyrant's Helm, trying to make sense of the situation. Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by an all-too familiar gurgling.

...Right...I haven't eaten today, he thought to himself. *Well...may as well see if there's any soup in these crates.* He bent down to examine the crate he'd stepped off of. Like the others, it bore a handwritten label in bright

pink ink: "BAKING CHOCOLATE."

Chocolate? The Soldier smiled fondly. *We haven't had chocolate in the base for ages. Not since Mann Co. started shipping us those disgusting fish cakes instead.* The Soldier rubbed his hands together eagerly, knelt down on one knee, and attempted to pry the lid off of the crate. Surprisingly, it came off almost effortlessly. The Soldier tossed it aside and peered into the crate, ignoring the loud clatter the lid made when it hit the floor. Gingerly, he removed a few precious squares of chocolate from the crate.

Screw living healthy! I'm getting killed for a living! Smiling broadly, he popped the chocolate into his mouth. He chewed it thoroughly, trying to savor the delicacy he'd stumbled across. Within moments, he learned why baking chocolate wasn't supposed to be eaten raw. He gagged, swallowed quickly and began trying to blow the bitter taste off his tongue. *Okay... Note to self, get Mann Co. to ship Dalokohs Bars again.* Suddenly, he heard the sound of a door opening behind him.

Oh, crockets, he thought. He quickly dove behind a nearby row of crates for cover. After glancing around, he spotted an open, empty crate with a lid leaning against it. Drawing on years of experience hiding from victorious enemies, he slithered inside and yanked the lid over the top. He hardly dared to breathe. He knew that in these kinds of situations, the slightest motion or sound could mean his life...

...which was why he was so surprised to hear a girl's voice singing. He furrowed an unseen brow. With a great deal of effort, the Soldier twisted around in the tiny crate and peered out through a knothole in one of the boards. What he saw horrified him beyond belief.

Oh, shit! My hat! his mind blurted out. Indeed, his Tyrant's Helm had fallen off his head during his dive for shelter, and was lying discarded by the opened box of baking chocolate. With a start, he realized that the girl had stopped singing. He then saw a sight that confused him even further: a bright pink pony with a ridiculously poofy mane, disproportionately large blue eyes, and a tiny wooden box balanced on its back was happily trotting through the basement.

That's...one of those ponies from outside, the Soldier thought to himself. *...Why is it pink? Technicolor is one thing, but pink... What fresh hell have I been banished to this time?* To his alarm, the pony had reached the open crate. After staring inside the open crate for a moment, the pony turned around to face the basement at large. And then the pony did something that the Soldier probably should have seen coming: it spoke.

"Is somepony in here?" she said, speaking in a high, musical voice.

Oh, that's the girl from earlier, the Soldier noted dully. A brief moment of silence followed, after which the Soldier's eyes nearly broke from widening in surprise. *Wait... OH HOLY SHIT A TALKING HORSE* is the closest approximation to what he was thinking at the moment. Once the shock cleared, the Soldier stopped to think.

Wait... I could hear people talking, but I couldn't see any...there's a talking pony in the basement...I got attacked by a lion monster and a space bear last night... The Soldier suddenly realized what was going on. *...Oh, my God,* he thought to himself, *I'm trapped in another dimension inhabited by talking ponies.* He had to try very hard not to burst out of the crate screaming random obscenities. *Goddamn that wizard! It's not the Underworld, not DeGroot, not wherever the hell those rayguns come from—it's GODDAMN PONIES!* Suddenly, a horrifying thought occurred to

the Soldier. ...*At least, I hope this isn't where those rayguns come from...*

"Ooooh, what's this?" chirped the talking pony, snapping the Soldier out of his reverie. The Soldier peered back through the knothole. He saw that the pony was somehow holding his Tyrant's Helm in her hoof (despite the disadvantage of not having fingers). She stared at the hat for a moment. Then she placed it on her head. The hat was a few sizes too large for her, and covered up her eyes like it covered up the Soldier's. The odd pony giggled, turned around, and pranced off in the direction she had come. After a moment, the Soldier heard the sound of a door opening and closing.

The instant he heard the door close, the Soldier punched the lid of the crate he was hiding in, sending it flying into the air.

"That goddamn pony stole my hat!" he shouted, leaping out of the crate. Behind him, the crate lid hit the ground with a loud *clank*. After a moment, the Soldier regained his senses.

Wait...this is a pantry, he thought to himself. Whoever that pony was, if she lives in this building, she'll come back. And even if she doesn't live here, then some pony will show up here sooner or later. So if someone will be coming back..." The Soldier smirked evilly. *"Alright...I've got a plan."* The Soldier walked over to the opposite end of the basement. A rickety flight of stairs led up to a bright pink door, and there was a large pile of crates beside the door. The Soldier nodded. He knelt down behind the crates, most of which were labeled "cupcakes". He drew his shotgun out of his inventory, cocked it, and crept up to the side of the crates.

"Heeeeeere, horsie, horsie, horsie..." he crooned in a menacing singsong voice.

By the Soldier's reckoning, about half an hour had passed. No one had entered the pantry yet, and the Soldier had grown tired of standing at attention. He was, in fact, sitting down, leaning against the pile of crates he was taking shelter behind. Suddenly, he heard the sound of the door opening. The sudden noise snapped him back to attention. He didn't want to peek around the crates for risk of being spotted, but he did hear voices approaching him.

"And you're sure there's somepony in here?" said a concerned girl's voice. It wasn't the same voice as the one who had stolen the Soldier's hat—it was less squeaky, and seemed to convey a bit more maturity.

"Yes, Twilight!" answered the pony who'd stolen Soldier's hat. "Somepony got into the baking chocolate, and I found some kind of hat down here!" The Soldier risked a peek around the crates. The pink pony from before was back, and she was accompanied by a different pony. This one had a light purple coat and purple eyes. Her mane was a much darker purple with a pink highlight, and was worn straight. The Soldier also noticed that she had a purple horn growing out of her forehead.

Great, now there are unicorns, too, the Soldier grumbled to himself. Well, they've got bat-winged lions and giant space bears—I guess they can have unicorns too if they want to. He waited for the two horses to pass the crates he was hiding behind—first the unicorn, then the pink pony—then slowly and silently crept out from behind the crates. He walked slowly so as to make as little noise as possible, and kept as low to the ground as he could without

actually crawling.

"Pinkie, are you sure it's a good idea to just confront whoever's hiding in here?" the unicorn said, glancing around nervously but never looking behind her.

"Oh, come on, Twilight, it'll be fine!" replied the pink pony cheerfully. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"This." Both ponies stopped in their tracks. Before either of them had time to react, the Soldier raised himself up to his full height, lifted his leg, and brought his foot down on the pink pony's back. It was a lot harder than the Soldier had thought it would be, considering that the ponies' backs were at just about his crotch level. The pony's legs gave out beneath her, and she cried out in pain as she fell to the ground. The unicorn just barely had time to whirl around before the Soldier cocked his shotgun once more, just to be sure, and pointed it at her.

"PINKIE!" screamed the horrified unicorn.

"MOVE AND SHE DIES!" bellowed the Soldier. Silence reigned in the darkened basement.

"Alright, girls, listen up," snarled the Soldier after a brief pause. "I'm in control here, and if you both want to get out of this unharmed, you'll follow my instructions exactly. Got it?"

"Y-yes..." stammered the unicorn, very clearly terrified.

"Yep!" chirped the pink pony (Pinkie, as she apparently called herself), very clearly not scared at all. The Soldier disregarded his hostage's lack of respect for him.

"So. Unicorn. Miss... Twilight, was it?"

"Yes... Twilight Sparkle," the unicorn replied.

"Alright, then, Twilight. Here's how this is gonna go down. I'm a little lost right now. I need you to tell me where I am."

"Well, you're in the basement of Sugarcube Corner, silly!" said Pinkie, twisting her neck around to look at the Soldier.

"I'm talking to Twilight right now," growled the Soldier, looking down to meet his hostage's gaze. "You stay out of this." Having said that, he looked back up at Twilight. "I need something less specific."

"...Um...you're in Ponyville?" whimpered Twilight, still clearly nervous.

"Well, I would never have guessed that," said the Soldier, rolling his eyes. "Less specific."

"You're in the land of Equestria..." The Soldier furrowed his brow in thought.

"Okay, that's fair enough. Now, I'm not from Equestria. I'm from another dimension—specifically, a place called Mann's Land, in the country of America, on the planet Earth. The only reason I'm here is I..." The Soldier sighed, wondering how many times he'd said this. "...angered a magician. The portal that sent me here doesn't want

to send me back, so I need to open a new one. How would I go about doing that?"

"I-I...d-d-don't know..." stammered Twilight. The Soldier cocked his shotgun yet again, purely for dramatic effect, and pointed it down at the back of Pinkie's head.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked, glaring menacingly the unicorn.

"Wait! Don't!" she blurted out. "I don't know, but I could find out!"

"Oh, really, now?" the Soldier growled, still glaring menacingly at Twilight.

"Yes. Ponyville has a library. I don't think there's going to be any information in there about inter-dimensional travel, but I'll look!"

"Okay. That's fine. Of course, I have to ensure you're going to come back... Here's how it's going to work. I'll give you three hours to find a way to open a new portal."

"Okay...is that it?" Twilight asked.

"No. When your friend, Pinkie here, came down into the basement earlier today, she ended up stealing my hat."

"Oh, that was yours?" asked Pinkie with a beaming smile on her face.

"Shut it! I'm talking to Twilight!" barked the Soldier. He sighed softly, then continued. "Anyway. My hat was a bronze helmet. There was a metal band around the brim, and another band dividing the hat into two sections. These sections were painted red. There is also a single white horn on each of these sections, but the left horn has been broken in half. Pinkie, you can talk now. What did you do with my hat?"

"I gave it to Rarity," Pinkie giggled.

"Okay. Twilight, do you know this Rarity?"

"Yes, she's a friend of mine."

"Good. While you're out, I want you to stop by Rarity's place and get my hat back. I'll give you one hour to do that. So, in total, you've got a leisurely four hours to do what I've asked of you."

"Um, great! I'll just be going, then..." Twilight stepped to the side, intending to head towards the door.

"Hang on there, missy, I'm not done yet!" The Soldier smirked. This was his favorite part of taking hostages. "If you don't come back here in four hours, then Pinkie dies. If you don't come alone, Pinkie and whoever you brought with you will die. If you come back and you don't know how to open the portal, and you don't have a damn good explanation for why you don't know, then Pinkie dies. And if you come back without my hat, Pinkie dies AND you die too. Got all that?"

"Yes, sir..." murmured Twilight.

“Good. Your four hours starts...” The Soldier looked down at his wrist. Luckily for him, he’d decided to wear his watch today. He adjusted the cuff of his sleeve so he could look at it better. The clock read 0932 hours. “...Now!” Twilight charged off towards the staircase. The Soldier didn’t bother to look behind him. He heard the door open and shut.

“Okay, then, Pinkie. Looks like there’s nothing for us to do but wait.”

Chapter Three: Worst Hostage Ever

Rarity was very satisfied. The spell she'd just used had not existed prior to its having been cast today, but it had worked perfectly. Humming softly to herself, she trotted over to where her latest dress was being modeled on a mannequin. Now assured of the spell's effectiveness, she decided to try it on the dress. She shut her eyes and began to concentrate. Her snow white horn began to glow, and a light humming filled the room...

Suddenly, a huge bang sounded off throughout the room. Rarity leapt into the air and gasped in shock. Her eyes shot open, and her concentration was shattered.

"Rarity! I need to talk to you!" came the panicked voice of Twilight Sparkle from the doorway. Rarity turned to look, and sure enough, Twilight was standing in the doorway, panting heavily.

"Good heavens, Twilight, you scared me!" breathed Rarity, swishing her long, purple tail from side to side.

"Sorry, but this is really important!" Twilight responded.

"Fine, then, Twilight. I'm in the middle of something at the moment, though, so please be quick."

"I need the hat Pinkie Pie gave you this morning, and I need it right now!" Rarity simply stared blankly back, more than a little confused.

"That ugly old thing? Darling, even if it wasn't ludicrously heavy, broken, and several sizes too large for you, it would look ghastly on you! Red isn't your color at all!"

"I don't have time to explain, I just need the hat!" Rarity hesitated for a moment, then sighed.

"Well, if you insist, Twilight." Rarity turned to her shelf of dress-making supplies, scanning it for the helmet. "I was testing some magic on it earlier today. That's not going to be a problem, right?" Twilight appeared confused.

"What...kind of magic?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing too fancy," explained Rarity, magically lifting a roll of green cloth from its slot on the shelf. "I've actually invented a spell that would make even the most boring outfit a bit more entertaining to look at, and I needed something very ugly to test it on. Ah-ha, here we are!" The hat floated away from the shelf, supported by Rarity's magic. "I think this technique is quite the promising one, don't you?"

"It...um..." Inwardly, Twilight was horrified. Somehow, Rarity had made a tiny rainbow appear over the hat. It did make the hat look better, Twilight admitted to herself, but the monster that had taken Pinkie Pie hostage might not agree. He didn't seem to be the rainbow type.

"What is it, Twilight? Do you...not like it?" said Rarity, concerned.

"No, no, Rarity, it looks great!" said Twilight, taking hold of the hat with her own magic. "Well, um, thanks! That was all I needed, so I'll be going now." With that, Twilight turned around and bolted out the door without bothering to close it behind her. Rarity stared after her, confused.

Dear me...I've never seen Twilight look that scared before, Rarity said to herself. And she didn't even seem to register the fact that I invented a spell...I thought she'd be a lot more excited about that. What in the world could be so important? Rarity considered going after her, remembering the last time she had blown Twilight off. She shuddered. She didn't want to go through *that* again if she could help it. But eventually, she simply shook her head. *No, I don't think Twilight would appreciate my help in her current state. I'd likely just get in her way. I'm sure that whatever's going on, she can handle it on her own.*

Meanwhile, back in the basement, the Soldier was still pointing his shotgun at the back of Pinkie Pie's head. He checked his watch again. 0945 hours. Twilight had been gone for 13 minutes now, and Pinkie had spent most of that time talking. It was going to be a long four hours.

"...and then I realized I'd accidentally put in sugar instead of salt," she was saying, still showing absolutely no signs of fear, "but I decided to bake them anyway just to see how it turned out, and—"

"SHUT UP!" bellowed the Soldier. "I can't take any more of your yapping!"

"...Gee, you're kinda rude, you know that, mister?" said Pinkie Pie, rolling her eyes. The Soldier rolled his eyes, as well.

"I don't need to be nice," he answered. "I've got a shotgun. And I'm warning you...pony...if don't stop *talking*...well, my trigger finger gets itchy sometimes."

"Ooh! My tail gets twitchy sometimes!" Pinkie chirped. "That means something's gonna fall! What does it mean when your trigger finger itches?"

"Usually, that someone's about to die." Pinkie gasped, and her smile vanished. Good, she had enough sense to know that dying was bad.

"D-do you have time to save them?" she asked. The Soldier didn't respond for a long, long moment. His mind began showing him images of the alien technology of the Underworld and the apparent medieval stasis of the nation DeGroot.

"...Do you even know what a shotgun does?" he finally asked.

"Nope!"

"Should've expected that." Without further ado, the Soldier pointed his shotgun at a nearby wooden crate and pulled the trigger. The wooden boards of the crate splintered and cracked under the assault of the buckshot. The sound of splintering wood and shattering glass rang out over the room, intermingling with the percussive blast of the gunshot, and the crate began to leak a dark red liquid.

"What did you do to the hot sauce?!" Pinkie cried, starting to sound the slightest bit anxious.

"Is that what that was?" the Soldier said dismissively, loading two more shells and re-cocking his shotgun. "Anyway, the point is I've got thirty-eight tickets to hell and I'm not afraid to use 'em." He left out the fact that he'd

used two of them already.

"Ooh, you're so lucky!" Pinkie chirped, reverting to her cheerful self in less than a second. "You'll be able to invite all your friends! That way, nopony gets to feel left out! I mean, I remember this one time when Twilight could only invite one of us to—"

"SHUT! UP!" the Soldier shouted. "I will KILL YOU with a SHOTGUN if you don't shut up! That's what I was trying to say!"

"Kill me?" Pinkie said, sounding more perplexed than scared. "Why in the world would you want to kill me?"

"BECAUSE YOU'RE PISSING ME OFF!" the Soldier bellowed. He felt a vein nearly burst open in his neck. "You are allowed to say three more goddamn words before you get a bullet embedded in the back of your thick little pony skull!"

"Sic 'em, Gummy!" Before anything else could be said, something clamped down on the back of the Soldier's leg. He cried out in pain and lifted his leg before he realized it didn't actually hurt. That was all Pinkie needed. She leapt to her hooves, unbalancing the Soldier and sending him tumbling backwards. His shotgun flew out of his hands. Before he even realized what was happening, he was on the floor...and a baby alligator's mouth was clamped tightly to his nose.

"Whee! That was fun! Can we do it again? Huh huh can we can we can we?" Pinkie giggled, hopping excitedly around the Soldier.

"...What the hell just happened?" the Soldier groaned uncertainly, not moving.

"Good boy, Gummy!" Pinkie said cheerfully. The alligator released its vice grip on the Soldier's nose and waddled off him. The Soldier managed to get to his feet, still too dazed to be angry.

"Hey, we were never really introduced, were we?" Pinkie said cheerfully, zipping up to the Soldier. "I'm Pinkie Pie! It's nice to meet you!" Pinkie extended her hoof to the Soldier. The Soldier was still too dazed at being taken out by a baby alligator to refuse, and accepted the hoofshake.

"RED Soldier," he half-mumbled.

"It's nice to meet you, Red!" Pinkie chirped. "Hey! I could throw you a party! I mean, you're new in Ponyville, obviously, and whenever somepony new comes to Ponyville I always throw them a big Welcome-to-Ponyville party and invite everypony in Ponyville! Oh, but this one is gonna be so much fun! I've never thrown a party for a monster before! I'm gonna need some streamers down here, stat! Is red okay with you? I'll just run upstairs and get them!" That snapped the Soldier out of his reverie.

One.

"YOU ARE MY HOSTAGE AND YOU WILL GO NOWHERE WITHOUT MY PERMISSION!" he screeched, pointing his trusty rocket launcher at Pinkie.

"Okay, okay! You don't need to be so rude about it!" Pinkie giggled as Gummy waddled over to her. "But

come on, you don't know anypony here, right? How do you expect to make new friends if you don't talk to anypony?"

"I don't need friends! I have a goddamn rocket launcher!" Pinkie's smile faded.

"You don't need friends?" she echoed. "Red, everypony needs friends!"

"First of all, I'm not every pony! I'm a human being, and I do not need friends! Friends are only gonna betray you the moment your friendship stops being convenient! Secondly, my name is not Red! It's 'The RED Soldier' to you! Or just Soldier, but not Red! RED is the name of my employer!"

"You work for a color?" Pinkie giggled. The Soldier groaned, put his rocket launcher away again, and slapped himself in the face.

"I work for a *company*. Reliable and Efficient Demolition, R-E-D, RED."

"Ohhhhhhh! So you break things for a living! Why didn't you just say that?"

"I don't break things for a living! That's a Demoman's job! I'm a SOLDIER, for God's sake!" To emphasize his point, he pulled his rocket launcher back out. "What do you think this thing is?!"

"I don't know! Some kind of cannon, maybe?" That was the last straw.

"LET ME SHOW YOU, THEN!" And with that, he fired. The rocket soared through the air in a perfectly straight line, ignoring gravity as it did, and slammed into Pinkie's chest. The blast sent Pinkie and her pet alligator flying backwards and left a large scorch mark on the stone floor of the basement. Pinkie and Gummy slammed into the pile of crates the Soldier had once been hiding behind, knocking the pile over. Within moments, both of them were buried under a monstrous pile of crates.

"Got anything funny to say about *that*, funny girl?!" the Soldier spat. In response, Pinkie poked her upper body out of the pile of crates, Gummy's mouth clamped tightly to her mane. Both the pony and her pet were covered in soot like cartoon characters who'd been subjected to explosions.

"Hey! Be careful with that thing!" she said with the tone of a mother reprimanding a child. "Somepony could get hurt!" The Soldier dropped his rocket launcher...and his jaw. He couldn't even process what had just happened. Sure, rockets didn't normally kill with one hit, but she'd survived a rocket to the chest, and she wasn't even hurt. How did...

Then it hit him.

"DAMMIT!" he shouted, kicking a nearby crate labeled "MUFFINS." "I *had* to kidnap the pink one, didn't I? Why did I not think this through?!"

"What just happened, anyway?" Pinkie asked, hopping out of the pile of crates with an alligator clamped to her mane.

"Friendly fire, that's what happened!" the Soldier shouted, picking his rocket launcher back up and putting it back into his inventory. "I'm RED, you're pink! Apparently, that's close enough that I can't hurt you!" *That doesn't*

explain how the alligator survived, though... the Soldier noted.

"Wait—that thing was *supposed* to hurt?" Pinkie asked, shaking the soot off her body. "What do you do for a living, anyway?"

"I thought I already explained that! I'm a SOLDIER! I fight for a living!"

"Ohhh, so you're like a boxer, then? Except you can't really box with that thing, can you?"

"For the love of..." The Soldier growled with an incredible ferocity and pulled out his shovel. "If I can't kill you, can I at least *pretend* to beat the crap out of you?"

"Nope!" Pinkie giggled. "So if you're not a boxer, what do you do for a living?"

My God, it's like talking to a five-year old, the Soldier thought. With this critical piece of information in mind, he decided to try and dumb down the explanation as much as possible.

"There is a war where I come from over who rightfully owns some land: my company, RED, or their rival corporation, Builder's League United, or BLU. I am a member of a team of mercenaries employed by RED who wages bloody war over the land. Is that clear enough for you, you little pink numbskull?" Pinkie finally seemed to get it, and any trace of cheer was wiped from her face.

"...You...kill for a living?" she said softly.

"*Finally*, you get it!" the Soldier shouted, throwing his arms up into the air as though to praise some higher power. "Yes, I am paid to kill people, and those people are paid to kill me and my team!"

"But...but if you get paid to kill people, aren't you...afraid they'll kill you?" Pinkie asked.

"Of course we're not afraid of death. We're not stupid," the Soldier answered. Pinkie blinked. She was positive the Soldier had just contradicted himself. "We're set up to respawn," he continued. "No one would fight a war in this day and age without the assurance that if they die, they'll just come back to life a few seconds later. It's all a lot of technobabble to me, but I don't really care how it works. So long as it works, I'm fine with it."

"That's...that's horrible!" cried Pinkie Pie, disgusted. "What kind of monster would want to kill his own kind for a living?!"

"Well, it's not like they're really dead," replied the Soldier. "The BLU Team's set up to respawn, too, so once I, or anyone on my team, for that matter, kill them, they're dead for a few seconds, then hey presto, they wake up back in their saferooms."

"Well...b-but still!" she said, still horrified. "Just because they don't stay dead doesn't mean you're not killing them! It's horrible!"

"It's a war! What were you expecting?"

"I know...but that doesn't make it any less horrible!" The Soldier sighed deeply.

"You know, Jonas Salk shared your opinion," he said.

"Who?" The Soldier couldn't hide a confused look here...then he remembered that he was in another dimension, and he sighed heavily.

"Take a seat," he said, "and I'll tell you." Pinkie did sit down, and the motion eased the sudden pinchiness in her knee.

Chapter Four: Mecha-Hitler

The door of the library burst open, and Twilight Sparkle charged in. Without wasting any time, she began pulling books off of the shelves, flipping through them quickly, and tossing them behind her.

"Twilight? What are you doing?" said a familiar voice behind her, sounding mildly concerned. Twilight didn't even need to turn around to know who it was. It was Spike the baby dragon, her childhood friend and assistant.

"Spike, good! I need you to take a letter!" Twilight said, continuing to search through the books.

"What? It's not time to—" Spike started.

"I don't have time to explain! Just help me!" Spike hesitated for a moment. Twilight was clearly in one of her moods again. Nothing would stop her until she found whatever it was she wanted. Spike decided to go along with it.

"Alright," he said. He zipped away for a moment and returned with a parchment and quill. "Ready." Still not looking away from the bookshelf she was going through, Twilight began to dictate to Spike.

"Dear Princess Celestia, though details are sketchy at the moment, I'm reasonably certain I've just established inter-dimensional contact."

"What," Spike said flatly.

"Don't interrupt me, Spike!" Twilight snapped. Spike started and quickly looked back to his letter. "I've met a bipedal creature who is clearly not equine in origin. It claimed to have, in its words, 'angered a magician,' and was subsequently banished to Equestria from its native dimension. It didn't occur to me at the time to gather more information, and unforeseen circumstances prevent me from returning to ask for it. The creature mentioned a portal between Equestria and its native land of 'Mann's Land.' Evidently, the portal is still open, but will not let the creature return for some reason." As Spike ducked under a thick novel hurled in his direction, Twilight moved on to the next bookcase and continued dictating. "The most logical solution to its mind was to open a new portal which would let it return, and subsequently, I am searching for any information I can on inter-dimensional travel. To my knowledge, however, this is a highly theoretical field, and I highly doubt my searching will turn up concrete information. This is where you come in. If you have any information about inter-dimensional transportation, I implore you to send it to me as fast as possible. Finally, as important as request this may seem, I urge you—no, I beg you not to send anypony out here to help."

"What? Why?" Spike asked, looking up from his parchment.

"I'm getting to that!" Spike looked back down quickly. "The creature is very..." Twilight hesitated. "...nervous by nature, and sending additional ponies to help may frighten it. Do not send anypony to assist my research efforts, and do not, under any circumstances, come here yourself. I assure you, I can handle this alone. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle." Twilight could barely bring herself to finish the letter. It pained her to lie to Spike and, by extension, the Princess, but if they knew the truth, they'd want to rush in and save Pinkie, which would only result in the monster killing them. They couldn't know the truth.

Spike finished scribbling not long after Twilight finished speaking, having remained only a few words behind

her through the entire dictation. This done, he curled the parchment into a scroll, took a deep breath, and exhaled a plume of green flame. The letter was engulfed and dissolved into a magical mist and sped off toward the capital city. "It's away," he said, crossing his arms.

"Good, now help me look through these!" Spike considered protesting, but his mind quickly flashed back to the last time Twilight was this intent on something. On that day, she had single-hoofedly brainwashed the entire town and nearly destroyed all of Ponyville in the ensuing riot. Spike decided that this time, it would be better (and less potentially catastrophic) if he stuck right by her side and made sure nothing like that happened.

"You got it," he said nervously, quickly making his way to the bookshelf opposite the one Twilight was looking through.

"You know, Pinkie, I never said war wasn't horrible," the Soldier began, sitting down on a nearby crate. "Jonas Salk knew about the horrors of war. He was one of the most brilliant men of the twentieth century. He invented the polio vaccine, sure, but he's also the man we have to thank for about 70 more uses for the peanut, several pet custody laws, the Global Credit System, and respawning. He was a brilliant man, but he also happened to be Jewish. And back in the '30s, that was a serious problem.

"You see, back in the '30s, the nation of Germany was ruled over by a very powerful man. This man's name was Adolf Hitler. Hitler's reign seemed like it was gonna go pretty well at first. Unfortunately, then he was involved in a horrible assassination attempt. He was having a meeting with some of the highest government officials in Germany. At the last second, however, this meeting was moved to an underground bunker. The meeting was going pretty well, and a lot of things were getting done. Then a bomb went off.

"Hitler, along with the rest of the government officials, was the victim of an assassination attempt carried out by a violent sect of anarchistic Jewish extremists. Every single man in that room died...except for Hitler. Some people think if the meeting had taken place in the aboveground room it was originally scheduled for, Hitler would've died as well. But the fact of the matter is Hitler survived that blast...but just barely.

"The blast injured both of his legs, completely shattered his right arm, and destroyed one of his balls, among other things. When the medics came to the scene, he was barely alive. They took him back to the hospital as fast as they could. They swore they would save Hitler's life by any means necessary.

"In order to save him, the doctors had to hook him up to all kinds of machines. Over half of his body was replaced with machinery after the operation. He became the world's first cyborg...Mecha-Hitler. Hitler was horrified by what the doctors had done to him. But he was equally horrified with why they'd had to do it.

"Something snapped in Hitler's brain that day. In his mind, Jews had just become the most evil bastards on the face of the Earth. He vowed that day that he would get revenge for what the Jews had done to him and to Germany. And this...this is where it gets messy.

"Hitler started rounding up Jews from all across Germany and stickin' 'em in concentration camps. Once a Jew was sent to a concentration camp, basically, they were dead. They were either killed right then, or tortured then killed, or used as guinea pigs in science experiments. And if they survived the experiments, guess what—they were

killed too. This was the beginning of Hitler's reign of terror, known across the world today as the Holocaust."

The Soldier stopped here and took a moment to build dramatic tension. He looked down at the crate he was sitting on and took a deep breath. He noticed a previously unseen label on the crate and shifted his right leg to examine it. The label read "STRUDEL." He furrowed his brow. Something was tugging at the very edge of his memory—something that had vanished long ago into the dark recesses of his mind. He racked his brain, searching for the tiniest detail that could help him...

But before he could fully reclaim his memory, he heard a sound like a balloon deflating, and glanced back up at his audience. The look on Pinkie's face was one of absolute horror. Tears were welling up in her eyes, her coat appeared darker than normal, and somehow, the Soldier had scared her poofy mane into straightening. In that instant, the Soldier was struck by an emotion he hadn't felt in a long time: pity.

"...I'm scaring you. I'm sorry. I could stop here if you want," he sighed.

"No," said Pinkie, with a lot less cheer in her voice than there had been before. "I want you to keep going." The Soldier paused for a moment, then sighed deeply and continued.

"Well, Germany kept on being the slaughterhouse of Europe for a few years. Then Hitler made a mistake. He captured a young Russian immigrant named Jonas Salk. Salk wasn't Jewish himself, but his parents were, and to Hitler, that was close enough. Salk was taken to a special concentration camp...Hitler's own. Hitler oversaw the operation of this camp personally, and it was spitting distance away from the capitol building of Germany. He kept Salk alive for three days, and in those three days, Salk saw more horrifying sights than most men see in their entire lives. Then Hitler made the biggest mistake of his life.

"Instead of killing Salk, they used him to test Germany's fledgling attempt at building a long-distance teleporter that didn't need an exit. But somehow, instead of sending him to the intended destination, he was teleported to the British Isles. He wound up right in the middle of the House of Parliament while they were having a meeting of their own.

"Up until this point, no one outside of Germany had any idea the Holocaust was going on. But when Salk showed up in the House of Parliament, Britain got what you could call a rude awakening. It was there that Salk met his lifelong friend, Winston Churchill. The two of them were able to convince Britain that the only way to end the Holocaust and Hitler's reign of terror was direct intervention...war.

"When Hitler realized he'd been found out, and that Britain was declaring war on Germany, he had no choice but to respond in kind. He declared war on pretty much the entire world, and soon enough everyone was taking sides. This was the beginning of World War II, the bloodiest war in human history. And that has a history all its own. I could go into that, but it's not important. This story is about Jonas Salk. Dr. Salk had seen enough horrors in Germany to drive ten men insane. He knew that war was the only way to stop Hitler, but to his mind, war was just as horrible as the Holocaust, if not worse. Either way, innocent people were dying left and right. Salk teamed up with some of the most powerful scientific minds in the world to find a way to end the horrors of war. Soon, with their combined efforts, they invented respawning.

"Soldiers not staying dead on the battlefield made all the difference. Soon enough, the battles began turning

conclusively in favor of Britain and the Allied forces. Finally, after years of war, Hitler was brought to justice. World War II finally ended.

"It was too late to stop the Holocaust. Millions of Jews had already been slaughtered. There was nothing that could have been done about that. But respawning had been invented. That was the best thing to come out of World War II—in fact, pretty much the only good thing. And since World War II, there's never been a single casualty of war." The Soldier took a deep breath and looked up. Pinkie Pie looked even sadder than before, and the tears welling up in her eyes had begun to escape, rolling down her face as tears are wont to do.

"So, Pinkie, this is what all this amounts to. I'm not saying war isn't horrible. I know about the horrors of war. In fact, I fought in World War II myself. I know about the horrors of war just as well as the next soldier. But war is unavoidable. It's unpleasant, and people get hurt all the time, sure. But as long as people disagree, there will always be war, and there will always be those who have to fight it." The Soldier stood up.

"I have not chosen an easy life, Pinkie Pie. But there will always be war, and as long as there is war to be fought, there must always be someone to fight it. If not me...who?" Silence fell over the basement once more. Pinkie and the Soldier stared at each other, neither saying a thing. Suddenly, Pinkie's legs gave out from under her once more. She collapsed to the ground and began to sob loudly.

As the Soldier stared at this pitiful sight, he felt a tear forming in his own eye. If he had felt pity for Pinkie before, it was nothing compared to what he felt now. Pinkie Pie had been cheerful and talkative while he was holding a shotgun to her head, and now he'd made her cry. Pinkie Pie was the kind of pony who should never be seen crying. Even in the...the Soldier checked his watch again. 1100 on the dot. Even in the hour and 28 minutes he'd known her, he could see that. Slowly, the Soldier walked over to where Pinkie lay. He knelt down and began to gently stroke her mane.

"Hey...it's okay," he said, trying to make his voice sound comforting. "The Holocaust was a tragedy. The story of the Holocaust brings tears to the eyes of even the most hardened veteran." The Soldier sniffed and wiped his eyes. "Hell, I even made myself cry while I was telling that story. But..." The Soldier stopped, trying to find some way to comfort the hysterical pony.

"...But nothing like that will ever happen again," he eventually decided on. "Respawning has been perfected since then, so no man will ever die in the pursuit of warfare again. And the world has learned from the reign of Mecha-Hitler. Up until the '30s, humans were total bastards. Hitler took that bastardry and turned it into a monster. Hitler was a horrible, horrible man...but he was human. When word of the Holocaust got out, people saw just a little bit of humanity in Hitler. He did what he did in the name of revenge. It's a perfectly decent motivator. But they also saw a little bit of Hitler's bastardry in themselves. We've learned since then. No catastrophe of that scale will ever happen again." Pinkie slowly stopped sobbing.

"You alright, kiddo?" the Soldier asked, softly patting Pinkie's back.

"I...I think so..." hiccupped Pinkie as she slowly got to her hooves.

"Great. Great..." Neither the Soldier nor Pinkie Pie spoke for a long time.

"You...you've met with a terrible fate, haven't you?" Pinkie finally asked. The Soldier sighed sadly.

"I've seen a lot of things," he responded. "Things nobody deserves to see."

"You mean nopony," Pinkie interjected. The Soldier hesitated for a moment, then shrugged.

"Sure, let's go with that," he said resignedly. "I've seen things nopony deserves to see. And I've been put through a lot. But...at the end of the day, it's just part of the job. I just go through it. I do what I have to do."

"You and your friends must...go through a lot..." The Soldier didn't know where that had come from. He didn't know how to respond, and eventually decided on the truth—the truth he'd told her earlier.

"In my line of work...I don't make a lot of friends."

"What about your team? Aren't they your friends?" The Soldier paused. Were they? He'd never thought about it like that before. But now that Pinkie had brought it up, the more he thought about it, the more his team started to seem like friends to him. Medic, Engy—they were both genuinely kind-hearted people, despite their professions, and they always had the best interests of the team at heart. Heavy, Pyro—both absolute psychopaths, but they'd give their left arms for the good of their team, on or off the battlefield. Sniper, Demoman, Scout—all three could be annoying at times, but they were a hell of a lot of fun during peacetimes. Even the Spy, cold-hearted, manipulative bastard that he was, was always one to share a smoke and lend an ear to a teammate in need.

"Yes, they are," the Soldier answered. *How the hell did I miss that?* Quick on the heels of this blunt realization came a much more powerful one. Unlike the last few times he'd been sent into an unfamiliar dimension with no idea how to get home, he was completely alone. He didn't have his team...his friends...to rely on. "...Dammit, I miss them..."

"I could be your friend, if you'd like..." The Soldier hesitated. There was a specific clause in his contract which forbade friendship. Now that he thought about it, though, it was only specifically there to forbid friendships between members of RED and members of BLU, and Pinkie was certainly neither. There was no clause to forbid friendship with extra-dimensional beings—just one to prevent him from sleeping with them, and *that* wasn't likely to be an issue. Shaken by the sudden realization that he was completely alone, the Soldier made an unconventional decision.

"Why not?"